

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

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Chapter 21: Event [3].

Fang Yuan paused, the soft rustle of silk and the murmur of conversation fading into a taut silence.

His gaze, cool and piercing, settled on Elder Fang Guo.

Then he laughed.

A deep, unhurried sound, smooth and resonant, echoing lightly across the courtyard like ripples on still water.

"Elder Guo," Fang Yuan said, his voice like polished jade sliding over steel, "how rare to hear you address me by position rather than by blood. Truly, tonight must be a night worth remembering."

There was a flicker—just a flicker—of irritation in the elder's eyes. His lips tightened ever so slightly, the crinkle at the corner of his mouth twitching in restrained displeasure.

But before any words could escape, Fang Yuan turned away with effortless grace, his midnight robe catching the lanternlight in streaks of silver.

He lifted a hand and addressed the gathering crowd, voice poised and welcoming.

"But forgive me. Matters of state and scroll tend to devour time like hungry ghosts." He gave a wry smile. "Let's not keep our honored guests waiting, shall we?"

His smile held, but there was a tightness in his jaw that hadn't been there a moment ago. A small warning, buried behind courtesy.

And elder Guo take a step back and let the guest pass.

Like the lifting of a spell, the guests stirred with new energy, stepping forward with a blend of excitement and deference.

One by one, they introduced themselves, some bowing deeply, others wearing smiles polished by years of trade and diplomacy.

"Lu Tian, grain merchant of the Northern Valley," said a broad-shouldered man in fine blue robes. "My stores supply three provinces. I seek partnership with the Fang Family for security and expansion."

"Wu Feiyan," offered a slender woman with an air of precision, "our family deals in beast hides and pill ingredients. It would be an honor to operate under the Fang Family's protection."

Then came a younger voice, a lot more confident and sharper.

"Cheng Bo. I'm not from the city, but I come bearing artifacts for trade, including ancient tools and talismans. I wish to offer exclusive terms... should the Family Head be interested."

Fang Yuan listened, head slightly tilted, the faintest smile at the corner of his lips.

His presence radiated calm authority, the kind born not from posturing, but from absolute control.

When the last voice fell silent, he stepped forward, hands folded neatly at his back.

"To all of you," he said, voice steady as flowing ink, "the Fang Family extends its full hospitality. Coldwind City may be a place of shifting winds, but we," his gaze swept across the crowd, "are the mountain beneath."

There was a hush. Then nods. Low murmurs of approval. A few sideways glances between rival merchants assessing one another anew under Fang Yuan's confident gaze.

He smiled—cool, reserved, but not without warmth.

"Let the wine flow," he said softly, "and we'll speak of alliances... after the cups are raised."

The banquet truly began then, music rising, the scent of roasted spirit beast and rare spices carried on the night breeze.

But just before the banquet could reached full swing, a hush rippled through the courtyard, subtle but unmistakable.

The servants paused mid-step while conversations quieted.

Even the music softened to a distant hum.

They had arrived.

The true powerhouses of Coldwind City.

One by one, the family heads of the Four Great Clans entered through the main gate, each with a small entourage trailing behind them, robes gleaming beneath the lanternlight.

First came Zhao Ming of the Zhao Clan. Aged but still upright, his snow-white beard neatly combed, eyes sharp beneath heavy brows.

His robe was crimson with golden embroidery in the pattern of phoenix fire.

Though his qi was restrained, a faint pressure followed his every step like the heat before a storm.

He offered a short nod as he approached Fang Yuan.

"Family Head Fang," he said, voice gravelly yet resonant. "A spirit pond is not just a fortune, but a legacy. The Zhao Clan extends its congratulations. May your roots grow deeper with this blessing."

Fang Yuan inclined his head in return. "Clan Head Zhao's words are weighty. We will strive to honor them."

Next was He Long, striding in with the gait of a battle-hardened general.

His tunic bore the mark of the war serpent, and his hands were calloused and scarred, rested behind his back like a man always ready for combat.

"Well now," he said with a smirk, "so the quiet Fang Family managed to fish out a spirit pond from under the city's nose. Heh. I admit I didn't see it coming."

Then, in a more formal tone, "The He Clan offers its respect. Let's hope this acquisition brings balance, not waves."

Fang Yuan smiled faintly. "Balance often follows strength, Patriarch He. Thank you."

Then, with barely a sound, Matriarch Lin Xi appeared, graceful, expression serene, her long robe an intricate weaving of ink-dyed silks that shimmered like falling rain.

"An auspicious find," she said, her voice as calm as moonlight. "The Lin Pavilion acknowledges your fortune and your rising tide. Congratulations, Family Head Fang."

Fang Yuan offered a respectful bow. "To be recognized by the Lin Pavilion is an honor in itself. May our knowledge prosper together."

Last came Wu Shun—tall, rigid, and armored even for a formal event.

His cloak swept the ground like a banner, and the crest of a roaring lion blazed across his chest.

"The Wu Family congratulates you," he said gruffly. "But remember, power draws not only respect... but challenge."

Fang Yuan met his eyes evenly. "And we welcome both."

The tension between them hung for a moment then Wu Shun gave a tight nod and moved on.

Yet just when Fang Yuan thought the last of the notable guests had arrived—

"The Crown Prince—Lukas von Avetide!"

The guest announcer's voice rang out, sharp and reverent, slicing through the growing murmur like a blade through silk.

A hush fell once more. Even the air seemed to pause.

So... they even dare bring in the royal family's help?

Fang Yuan's fingers tapped the arm of his chair, slow and steady, the sound a quiet drumbeat beneath the tension.

His gaze sharpened, the faint glint of amusement in his eyes cooling into something harder—warier.

His jaw tightened ever so slightly, and the corner of his mouth pulled taut in a line between contempt and calculation.

A flicker of anger, cold and quiet.

Chapter 22: Event [4].

As the guest announcer's voice faded into silence, the heavy wooden gates of the Fang estate creaked open with ceremonial grace.

A ripple of awe spread through the gathered crowd.

From beyond the gate came the sound of hooves—slow, deliberate, yet impossibly precise. A royal carriage rolled into view, its polished gold trim catching every flicker of lanternlight.

Twin banners bearing the Avetide crest—an azure dragon entwined with a silver sun—fluttered gently in the breeze.

Flanking the carriage were knights of the royal guard, clad in gleaming armor marked with the imperial seal.

Not merely for show as each bore the presence of seasoned cultivators.

Swordmasters, likely. Silent and sharp-eyed.

Then, the carriage came to a halt.

A figure stepped out.

Tall, composed, draped in a robe of imperial blue chased with starlight silver.

Crown Prince Lukas Von Avetide descended the steps slowly, each movement practiced, as though this moment had been rehearsed a hundred times.

His golden eyes swept across the assembly, cold yet smiling. His presence did not demand attention—it seized it.

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

Then—

Ding.

A chime echoed in his mind.

[QUEST: Prevent Your Own Impeachment]

Objective: Retain your position as Fang Family Head throughout the evening.

Reward: Access to the System Shop

+1,000 System Points (usable within the System Shop)

Status: ACTIVE

A beat of silence. Then:

"I knew it," Fang Yuan muttered under his breath, barely audible.

He didn't let the frustration reach his face.

Instead, he rose from his seat with composed grace, each movement precise, as fluid as ink on water.

His face bore a serene, welcoming smile.

As he stepped forward to greet the prince, he swept a quiet glance across the four family heads.

Zhao Ming, He Long, Lin Xi, Wu Shun.

Each stood like statues of stone and will.

None flinched.

He could see it in the stillness of their shoulders, in the way their attendants dared not breathe too loud.

They had their own reasons in this banquet.

For men and women of such power, of such legacy—there was no loyalty without leverage, no alliance without reward.

They could not be moved... unless a benefit was involved.

And so, Fang Yuan approached the Crown Prince beneath the soft sway of lanternlight with the mask he always wore.

A mask knitted with politeness and smiles on the surface yet calculating and measuring inside.

Crown Prince Lukas von Avetide stepped forward, a radiant smile playing across his lips—polished, princely, and just shy of sincere.

The lanternlight kissed his imperial robes, casting dancing reflections across the polished tiles of the courtyard.

His every step seemed rehearsed, timed to the rhythm of awe and ceremony.

"Clan Head Fang," Lukas said warmly, his voice rich and resonant. "It is truly an honor. Coldwind City has grown quite colorful after your family raised the standard to be the fifth great family."

Fang Yuan inclined his head with impeccable grace. "Your Highness honors our humble estate with his presence."

Lukas chuckled softly, the sound meant to disarm. "Humble? After acquiring a Spirit Pond? I daresay, your Fang Family is anything but."

He looked Fang Yuan over with casual admiration. "And so young, too. I believe we're of similar age. Quite refreshing. Most clan heads I meet have white in their beards and more politics than blood in their veins."

Fang Yuan's expression remained perfectly composed. Pleasant, even but distant, as though every word washed over him like rain on stone.

"I was merely entrusted with the role early," he said evenly. "Responsibility doesn't always wait for age."

Lukas raised an eyebrow, clearly hoping for more, but received nothing in return. The air between them remained polite but just shy of warm.

A flicker passed across the prince's face. Then he turned slightly.

"Teacher Ian," he said, tone light, "would you be so kind as to bring the gift?"

The grey-robed cultivator—calm, unreadable—stepped forward and produced a long lacquered box, sealed with a royal emblem.

Lukas took it into his own hands and turned back to Fang Yuan with an easy smile.

"I wanted to present this personally," he said. "A token of goodwill, from the capital to Coldwind City... and to the man who's been stirring quite a ripple here."

The box gleamed under the lanternlight, fine carvings etched with spiritual resonance.

The guests murmured softly behind their sleeves.

Still, Fang Yuan didn't reach for it.

He merely nodded, voice smooth and controlled. "The Crown Prince's generosity is noted."

Not "appreciated." Not "gratefully accepted." Just... noted.

The unspoken barrier lingered in the air.

Lukas tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing.

He wasn't offended by the attitude of Fang Yuan instead he was more curious.

He had offered warmth, familiarity, even status.

But Fang Yuan had not offered him a single crack.

No smile, no flicker of openness. Not even a sliver of vulnerability.

Stone wrapped in silk. That was what he faced.

The prince laughed softly, hiding a breath of irritation behind the sound.

"Well," he said, extending the gift fully now, "perhaps you'll indulge me... in time."

Fang Yuan reached out finally, his fingers brushing the royal box but his gaze never softened.

"I indulge many things, Your Highness," he said with quiet edge. "But rarely twice."

He took the gift without bowing. The gesture was respectful.

But it was not submission.

Just then, the silence shattered.

A chair scraped harshly against stone as one of the Fang Family elders abruptly stood.

It was Elder Fang Guo—his face red with indignation, eyes burning with suppressed rage.

"Is this how you act before the royal family?!" he snapped, voice ringing across the courtyard. "You dare show such coldness to a prince of the Empire? Are you trying to doom our entire clan, Fang Yuan?!"

Gasps and murmurs rippled through the gathered crowd like a wave.

Some guests drew back slightly, others leaned in with glimmering eyes—sensing drama as keenly as blood in the water.

Fang Yuan slowly lifted his head, still holding the ornate box the Crown Prince had handed him.

His midnight-black robe shimmered faintly as he straightened, the silver trim catching the lanternlight like moonlight on a blade.

Then—he smirked.

A faint curve of the lips, cold and deliberate. Like a chess master seeing a familiar gambit finally unfold.

Chapter 23: Event [5].

Fang Guo's fury only deepened at Fang Yuan's silence. He turned to the other seated elders.

"Will no one speak out?! Have we truly let a boy drag our family into reckless pride?"

And as if rehearsed, two more elders rose—Elder Han and Elder Moyin, long known to be close to Fang Guo.

"The Fang Family must not offend the royal line," one said grimly.

"He has overstepped, and he has endangered us all," the other added.

But even before the shock could settle, another voice rang out—sharp and scornful.

"Hypocrites!" came the cry.

It was Elder Chen, rising with a face like thunder, his fingers clenching the rim of the table.

"Only now you remember your loyalty to the Empire? When have any of you ever bowed so low until tonight?"

He turned to the others. "He has strengthened the clan, revived our treasury, unearthed the Spirit Pond. And this is how you repay him?"

"Unearthed the Spirit Pond?" Elder Moyin half-shouted, his voice pitching higher.

"That—That credit belongs to his brother!" He turned around sharply, as if seeking validation from the guests. "We all know it!"

Elder Chen turned to look at him slowly and sighed through his nose, then looked away.

There was no saving some people.

Then, Elder Jingyi stood too, her expression cold and disgusted as she glared at the dissenters.

"You show your backs like dogs sensing a larger bone to beg from. Do you think a Crown Prince will save you when your spine has already broken?"

The courtyard was suddenly alive with tension as elders divided, guests whispering, and the Crown Prince standing quietly, watching.

Still, Fang Yuan did not react with fury or panic.

He simply stood there with the box in hand, eyes calm, smile gone, but not rattled.

The weight of the moment pressed down like a drawn blade over fine silk.

And all the while, the system's prompt pulsed softly in his mind:

[QUEST: Prevent your own impeachment]

Reward: Access to the system shop

+1,000 System Points

Fang Yuan's gaze swept the courtyard, briefly touching on every elder that had risen against him and those still seated, eyes flickering with uncertainty.

Fang Yuan remained silent.

And silence, in moments like these, could be more dangerous than thunder.

But that silence only emboldened the opposition.

Elder Fang Guo stepped forward with fresh momentum, voice rising above the murmur of the crowd.

"You are still too young and immature!"

Elder Moyin shouted, "He hides behind accomplishments, but forgets—this family is not built on one man's work!"

And Elder Han added, "He acts without counsel, moves without warning. And now—" he gestured subtly toward the Crown Prince, "—he risks offending the royal family itself!"

The words echoed. Even some of the guests shifted uncomfortably.

A few began murmuring amongst themselves. The banquet's warmth had turned cold.

Then—

Step.

Step.

Four footsteps echoed in unison.

The family heads of Coldwind City's other great clans rose slowly from their seats, one by one.

Zhao Ming. He Long. Matriarch Lin Xi. Wu Shun.

Their expressions were unreadable. But their presence demanded silence.

Zhao Ming's voice, though old, carried weight like iron.

"Elders of the Fang Clan," he said, gaze level, "if not this man—Fang Yuan—then tell us..."

He Long stepped in, arms folded across his broad chest. "Do you have another candidate worthy of leading this family?"

A ripple passed through the crowd.

Matriarch Lin Xi's fan snapped open with a soft click. "Surely, with all your fervor, you've someone more capable in mind."

And Wu Shun, ever blunt, added, "Or is your opposition only noise, with no blade behind it?"

On the surface, their words seemed to defend Fang Yuan.

But Fang Yuan's eyes glinted; not with gratitude, but with dangerous clarity.

'So that's how they want to play it...' he thought.

The four family heads had not come to support him.

No, they were giving the dissenting elders a perfect excuse.

An invitation.

And sure enough, Elder Fang Guo stepped forward with barely restrained triumph.

"We do," he declared loudly, his voice sharp with rehearsed certainty. "There is one, born from Fang Shet, the grandfather of Fang Yuan. The first uncle of Fang Yuan, Fang Wei."

He turned, gesturing with a dramatic sweep toward the crowd.

And from among the guests, one figure rose, as he walked out.

An elderly man, tall and composed, with a faint deep violet sigil stitched into his inner robe.

Then another elder chimed in, speaking directly to the prince with a sweeping bow.

"Your Highness, please understand—we of the Fang Clan harbor no offense or disrespect. The behavior of our current Head was born from pride and haste, not hostility."

"Our loyalty to the Empire is unwavering," added another. "But if our leader acts rashly, should we not correct him before his pride brings danger upon us all?"

The implication hung heavy in the air: Fang Yuan's strength may be great, but it was also volatile and unchecked.

And with the Crown Prince here, the perfect chance had arrived—for the opposing faction to plead their case, cloak their ambition in loyalty, and wrap betrayal in silken diplomacy.

Fang Wei turned to Fang Yuan, his gaze heavy with the air of condescension dressed in concern.

"Cousin Yuan," he said, voice warm but heavy with performative sympathy. "You've carried the burden well... but you bear it like a sword, not a banner. It's time to pass it to steadier hands."

When Fang Yuan heard that he chuckled—soft, almost inaudible, but just enough for those watching closely to catch the glint of amusement in his eyes.

It wasn't out of outrage but simply due to amusement.

How generous, he thought silently, that they would try to gut him with such dulcet blades.

Yet his senses sharpened. His gaze swept Fang Wei subtly, and in the space of a breath, he felt it.

Peak Golden Core.

An oppressive presence cloaked in well-mannered robes. Refined, hidden but not invisible.

That's suspicious.

Fang Wei had never made waves in the past.

For someone supposedly inactive in the family's internal affairs for years, this sudden rise in cultivation and at such a pivotal time reeked of something deeper.

A flicker of cold amusement danced behind his gaze but beneath it, his instincts coiled tight.

Fang Wei's cultivation wasn't just suspicious—it was unnatural. It reeked of borrowed strength, or worse... sponsorship.

He didn't respond.

Instead, he turned his eyes slowly—deliberately—toward Lukas von Avetide.

And the Crown Prince simply smiled back.

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Chapter 24: Rite of Challenge.

Just as the air grew thick with tension—

A fresh commotion erupted at the courtyard gates.

"Elder Guo!" a voice rang out, breathless and panicked. "We caught this girl sneaking into the Spirit Pond!"

A group of Fang Family guards rushed forward, dragging a limp figure between them.

Her robes were wet, her face pale, her hair clinging to her cheeks.

It was Fang Mei.

Elder Chen surged to his feet, his chair scraping harshly behind him.

That was his daughter, adopted or not, his blood or not, he had raised her with love, protected her like blood, and cherished her as his own.

His fury surged like a wave breaking loose.

"Fang Guo!" he roared, voice shaking the courtyard, thick with rage and raw emotion.

But Fang Guo paid him no mind.

His eyes locked instead onto Fang Yuan, gleaming with the hunger of opportunity.

"Did you," he said slowly, "or did you not give this girl permission to enter the Spirit Pond without consulting the family elders?"

The accusation hung heavy, like a dagger suspended in air.

Meanwhile, somewhere off to the side, Elder He Song, the elder from the He family who had attended Fang Yuan's 30th birthday, covered his mouth, failing to hide a snort.

"Karma," he whispered giddily to the elder beside him. "That's what he gets. Calling me old—*hmph!*"

He hadn't forgotten. Not even a little.

All eyes turned to Fang Yuan.

His expression didn't shift.

"As the Family Head of the Fang," he said calmly, "I reserve every right to grant access to who can use the Spirit Pond. Her presence there was under my authority and I don't see any reason on why you act as you did."

With a flick of his hand, spiritual force lifted Fang Mei from the guards' rough grasp.

She floated gently across the courtyard and landed in Fang Chen's waiting arms. He clutched her tightly, eyes wet with relief.

At least she had not been hurt.

But that was obvious.

For tonight, the opposition still needed to play the role of the righteous side.

Too much cruelty would shatter the illusion.

But just as the situation began to settle, Fang Wei's voice joined the fray—syrupy smooth and drenched in mock concern.

"Oh, Cousin Yuan..." Fang Wei stepped forward, hands clasped behind his back. "And this is exactly why you cannot lead. You're swayed by emotion. You defend children in the middle of a power dispute. Leave politics to the elders and you go play lovemaking elsewhere."

He chuckled softly. "She's too young for you, isn't she? Leave her to your younger brother instead. He's... untalented, true, but I'm sure he'd appreciate the gesture."

Laughter exploded from the elders behind him—sharp, theatrical, mocking.

And then, as if insult could pile upon insult, Elder Fang Guo added with a wheezing laugh, "That foolish brother of his challenged the direct disciple of the Divine Ice Sect Master! A duel in three years, wasn't it?"

He held his stomach. "Absurd!"

More laughter. More smirks. The scene had turned into a mockery.

Fang Yuan didn't lose his composure.

His gaze was steady as he looked directly at Fang Wei, voice calm but cold as steel.

"Uncle," he said, each word deliberate, "do you dare? Do you dare say what gives you the right to challenge my authority as the Head of the Fang Family?"

But instead of answering, Fang Wei responded with a smooth question of his own—measured and designed to redirect.

"My dear cousin," he said with a thin smile, "what are your intentions for the Spirit Pond? Will you guard it... or do you intend to let the wolves come and take a sip?"

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed.

So that's the game.

A trap—carefully baited and set in public, before the other clan heads, the elders, and even the Crown Prince.

But Fang Yuan wasn't afraid, he believed he has what it takes to come out on top.

In fact, he even smiled.

He stepped forward and spoke, his voice ringing clear through the tension-stricken air like a judge's gavel.

"That Spirit Pond was unearthed by my brother," he declared. "It is the property of the Fang Family—and the Fang Family alone. It will not be shared... and it will never be fed to wolves."

His words cracked through the courtyard like thunder.

But that was exactly what Fang Wei had been waiting for.

He threw back his head and laughed, the sound rich and triumphant, the performance of a man who'd just seen his opponent walk willingly into the trap.

Then he turned, not to Fang Yuan but to the Crown Prince, and the four seated family heads.

"Did you all hear that?" he said, voice ringing with righteous fire. "He refuses to share even a portion. No honor to the Empire. No alliance with the rest of us. He will hoard it like a dragon with no thought for balance or peace."

He raised a hand dramatically.

"If I am made Head of the Fang Family, I will act justly. The Spirit Pond will be divided—half to the Imperial Family as tribute, and the remaining half divided equally among our five clans."

Then, Fang Wei straightened his back and, in a show of solemnity, turned toward the Crown Prince.

He bowed low with both hands clasped in front of him.

"I request permission to hold a Rite of Challenge," he said formally, his voice echoing through the courtyard.

"Between myself and my brother's first son—Fang Yuan. He is... stubborn. And, I fear, unfit to lead this family."

He lifted his gaze, eyes shining with practiced humility. "I ask His Highness to bear witness."

A silence fell.

Then a soft chuckle broke it.

It came from the Crown Prince.

Lukas von Avetide turned to the man seated beside him, his expression light, almost playful.

"What do you think, Teacher Ian?" he asked, voice laced with mock curiosity.

It was a trap in itself.

Everyone present knew it wasn't truly a question—it was an escape hatch. If anything went wrong, the blame could be pinned on the one offering counsel.

Teacher Ian, long-resigned to the intricacies of imperial theater, gave a faint sigh and nodded slowly.

"It's a good opportunity, Your Highness," he said evenly. "A proper rite—witnessed by nobles, blessed by tradition. And perhaps..." he glanced at the two Fang men across the courtyard, "...we'll be treated to a good fight."

He paused, then added casually, "Since Family Head Fang won't be using his seat, perhaps Your Highness might consider taking it in his place? It would be... fitting, would it not?"

The air grew tenser.

But Fang Yuan only smiled.

A cold, slow, wolfish smile.

So now... they bare their fangs.

But Lukas, ever the actor in the robes of nobility, kept his role well-played.

"Oh no, Teacher Ian," he said lightly, with an expression of innocent concern. "That would be far too disrespectful to Family Head Fang. We should sit... where they've prepared for us."

His tone was light, his words soft.

But every sentence was a move on the board.

Teacher Ian nodded with the faintest sigh of approval—or perhaps weariness—and the two turned to take their seats.

The challenge had been issued.

The knife had been drawn.

And all that remained now... was to see who it would cut.

Chapter 25: Uncle, Hit me here.

Fang Yuan didn't hesitate.

"I accept the challenge," he said.

And then, just as everyone braced for formality and tradition.

He offered the most outrageous counterproposal.

"Uncle," Fang Yuan said casually, "since you're the senior... and also the older one..."

A pause.

Somewhere off in the corner, Elder He Song nearly choked on his wine and hacked into his sleeve, drawing a few startled glances.

Fang Wei's eyes narrowed, his tone clipped. "Cousin, what is it you're trying to say? There's no need for veiled insults after you've already accepted the Rite of Challenge."

But Fang Yuan only tilted his head and offered a smile so polite it was practically mocking.

"Well, as the one receiving the challenge," he said, "don't I have the right to set the rules?"

He turned toward the Crown Prince, asking not out of doubt but to make the entire courtyard hear it.

The Crown Prince, still playing his role as the amused observer, returned the smile. "Teacher Ian?"

Teacher Ian gave a knowing nod. "It is customary, Your Highness. The challenged may set the terms, so long as they do not contradict ancestral rites."

The Crown Prince smiled and turned to Fang Yuan. "Well then, I wish to see what the great Fang Clan Head has to propose."

Fang Yuan grinned and turned to his side. "Aunt Jingyi," he said, holding out the ornate gift box he'd been carrying all this while.

"Would you mind keeping this safe for me? A token from the Crown Prince."

He didn't know if it held something or nothing.

Either way... in his mind, it was just another scapegoat—like the gift from the Divine Ice Sect.

Elder Jingyi took the box without a word.

Fang Yuan's grin widened as he turned to face Fang Wei once more.

"So, here's my rule," he said, his voice loud and clear. "Uncle, I'll let you strike me three times. If I don't move a single step after those three attacks, I'll return the favor with just one strike."

He paused, letting the silence stretch before finishing:

"We'll repeat this—one of us striking, the other standing still—until someone takes a step after being hit. Movement during the attack is allowed, but if you move while receiving a blow... you lose."

The words struck the courtyard like a thrown stone hitting still water as everyone stilled.

Mouths dropped open. Murmurs flared. Even the wind seemed to pause.

Fang Wei stared at him, visibly taken aback. "Cousin," he said slowly, "are you looking down on me?"

Fang Yuan shook his head lightly, his tone still playful. "Actually... quite the opposite. I hold you in such high regard, I'm giving you every advantage. Oh and to sweeten the deal..."

His eyes sparkled with amusement. "You may use a berserk potion. I won't use anything. If I do, I'll consider it an automatic defeat."

Gasps erupted.

Elder Moyin stood, face paling. "That's suicide!"

"Is he serious?"

"He must be bluffing—"

But Fang Yuan's smile remained steady, unfazed by the mounting disbelief.

The Crown Prince chuckled under his breath.

"Interesting," he murmured.

But it was Matriarch Lin Xi who drew the most attention.

She stood, her robes flowing like mist, her expression unreadable.

Then, in front of all four great family heads, she bowed slightly toward Fang Yuan.

"Clan Head Fang Yuan," she said, her voice like still water over steel, "the Lin Pavilion recognizes your strength and believes in your swift victory."

Her words fell like a hammer.

The entire courtyard was stunned.

Zhao Ming frowned. Wu Shun's jaw tightened. Even He Long shifted in his seat, eyes narrowing.

They had all made a tacit agreement to pressure the Fang Family to squeeze a share of the Spirit Pond out of them through soft force.

And now Lin Xi Pavilion... had just backed out.

No explanation. No warning.

Just open support.

The other clan heads stared at her in disbelief, but Matriarch Lin Xi simply returned to her seat and resumed sipping her tea—unhurried, serene.

Fang Wei's expression twisted ever so slightly. He understood what had just happened.

She had made her move not in confidence, but because he hesitated.

And she had bet on Fang Yuan instead.

He clenched his jaw.

"You're serious, then?" he asked. "I can use the berserk potion... and you won't?"

Fang Yuan nodded cheerfully. "That's the rule I made. And if I break it, I lose. Simple."

The grin he wore now was sharper than any blade. His entire posture relaxed, as if he'd already won.

The pressure shifted subtly but unmistakably.

For the first time, Fang Wei felt it: hesitation in the crowd, uncertainty among his allies.

If he refused now, he would look weak.

Cowardly. Even Elder Guo was glancing sideways, sensing the shift.

Fang Wei gritted his teeth.

"...I accept."

Fang Yuan stepped forward without hesitation, settling calmly into his stance.

He clasped his hands behind his back, his posture relaxed, almost inviting.

With an easy smile, he looked at his uncle and said, "Here. My stomach is wide open."

Gasps rippled through the courtyard.

A few elders burst into mocking laughter.

"Haha! Is this his strategy? To surrender through arrogance?"

"Foolish bravado," another scoffed. "He's asking to be crippled!"

Even the guests from the other families chuckled, thinking it a show of pride before the fall.

But not everyone laughed.

Elder Fang Guo stared at the scene in silence, brows furrowed.

Something about Fang Yuan's demeanor—it didn't feel like desperation.

It felt like control.

Like he had been orchestrating the tempo from the start.

No. He shook his head. That's impossible. It has to be.

Meanwhile, Fang Wei's expression twisted into fury.

Since his breakthrough, Fang Wei had been bowed to, praised, feared. In every room, his name carried weight.

But now he was being mocked and dismissed by a mere junior!

And it was none other than this nephew!

This boy stood there, hands behind his back, smiling.

Mocking.

Disrespecting everything he had earned.

A cold rage surged through him.

Without a word, Fang Wei uncorked a small flask and downed the berserk potion in one motion.

His spiritual energy erupted like a wildfire, his veins pulsing, eyes burning crimson with power.

Then he shouted: "Golden Punch!"

With a roar, he launched himself forward like a cannonball, fist blazing with golden light as he aimed straight for Fang Yuan's head.

The ground cracked beneath his feet from the force of the charge.

The air screamed with pressure.

Chapter 26: The first Strike!

Fang Yuan stood perfectly still, hands clasped behind his back, smiling casually as his uncle's fist roared toward his face like a comet.

Boom!

The impact rang out across the courtyard like a war drum.

But what followed... was silence.

Gasps rippled through the crowd.

Fang Wei stood frozen, his fist still pressed against Fang Yuan's cheek—unmoving.

Fang Yuan, on the other hand, looked... completely untouched.

He blinked once, slowly, then tilted his head with a playful grin.

"Oh my, Uncle," he said, voice light and amused. "You didn't have to go easy on me."

Fang Wei stared at him in disbelief.

There wasn't a single mark.

Not even a ripple of damage on Fang Yuan's robe.

The realization hit like a slap: his attack hadn't even pierced the spirit shield.

The spirit shield—the most basic layer of spiritual defense for cultivators.

It was naturally formed, invisible to the eye but present the moment one reached the Qi Transformation stage.

While not invincible, it could absorb moderate damage, and at higher cultivation realms, it was strong enough to block fatal blows altogether.

But to not even crack it?

A Peak Golden Core Realm cultivator... unable to dent the spirit shield of someone at half-step into Nascent Soul?

Impossible.

And yet—it had just happened.

The phoenix soul pavilion buzzed with murmurs and speculation.

"There must be an artifact..."

"No, I didn't sense any fluctuations."

"Is his cultivation deeper than we thought?"

Fang Guo stepped forward, his voice suspicious and sharp.

"Fang Yuan." He didn't even bother to use the title of Family Head anymore. "Do you have any protective artifacts on you right now?"

Fang Yuan smiled pleasantly. "I'm no fool, Elder Guo. But if you're truly worried... go ahead, inspect me."

Then his eyes glinted, and he added with a lazy grin, "Of course, to avoid any accidental planting of evidence, I'll have Aunt Jingyi inspect you first."

The corner of Elder Jingyi's mouth twitched upward ever so slightly. She didn't say a word, but the message was clear.

Fang Guo's face stiffened, and just as he was about to speak, Fang Wei cut in quickly.

"There's no need," he said firmly. "I've already confirmed—all Fang Clan artifacts remain untouched in the treasury."

The air shifted.

Oh?

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow, his voice dripping with irony. "How convenient. So even rogues can wander around our sacred grounds unsupervised now?"

His tone was light, but the implication was razor-sharp: Only the Family Head had access to the treasury.

That meant Fang Wei had been snooping—likely more than once. And that was legally punishable under the Fang family rules.

Fang Guo's face darkened, and though he returned to his seat without another word, his eyes stayed fixed on Fang Yuan.

He must be cheating. That thought clawed at his mind like a maddened beast.

There's no way that boy blocked the punch... unless... unless—

Meanwhile, Fang Yuan turned back to Fang Wei with the same infuriating smile.

"Uncle, ready for the second strike?" he asked cheerfully. "Please, no need to hold back this time."

He tapped his stomach lightly.

"Look here, the most vulnerable part of the human body. Completely exposed. My hands are still behind my back. Don't miss this golden opportunity."

Fang Wei's breath came ragged.

And in that silence, Fang Yuan's voice—mocking, melodic, full of cruel humor—felt like a cricket chirping in the dead of night.

It grated on his nerves.

"Shut up!" Fang Wei roared, his voice breaking with rage.

But Fang Yuan didn't flinch. He laughed softly, tilting his head.

"Oh, that's not very noble of you. Swearing in front of the elders? And to your junior? Is that how you plan to lead the Fang Family?"

More gasps.

The crowd was no longer laughing. They were watching.

And wondering.

How had a "half-step Nascent Soul" blocked a berserk-fueled, peak Golden Core attack... and smiled through it?

There had to be a trick.

There had to be something at play.

But only Fang Yuan knew the truth.

Inside, he chuckled to himself.

"Oh, I'm no half-step anything. I'm a peak Nascent Soul cultivator, and you're just a loud insect throwing tantrums at a mountain."

"Tell me—have you ever seen a single ant bite an elephant to death?"

Fang Wei clenched his fists, his fury mounting.

The embarrassment of his failed first strike still echoed in his bones, but now—now he was done holding back.

He began to charge up.

Fang Wei's aura exploded, golden arcs lashing the air like furious serpents. His rage no longer simmered—it boiled.

This second strike would not miss. It would not fail. It would not be mocked.

This time... he would crush that smug smile.

Above, in the elevated pavilion, the Crown Prince rested his chin on one hand, eyes locked on Fang Yuan.

His brows were slightly raised not in shock, but in interest.

"Teacher Ian," he said lightly, "how do you suppose he walked away unscathed?"

Ian's reply came with his usual stoic tone. "The spirit force blocked the attack."

The Crown Prince chuckled, his eyes still watching the figure below. "Then that raises the question—was Fang Yuan strong... or was Fang Wei weak?"

"I am unqualified to judge that," Ian replied softly, his gaze not on the fight, but on Fang Yuan himself.

Meanwhile, below the pavilion where the Four Great Families were seated, an argument quietly stirred among the clan heads.

He Long leaned in first, his eyes sharp and voice low. "Matriarch Lin Xi, what are you thinking? You would willingly give up your claim to the Spirit Pond?"

But Lin Xi only smiled, serene as always.

"No," she said simply.

Zhao Ming frowned. "Then why would you openly support Fang Yuan?"

She gave them a look of innocent confusion, her fan gently fluttering open.

"To have a share in the Spirit Pond, of course."

Her answer was so disarming, so casual, it nearly left them speechless.

Zhao Ming's brows furrowed deeper. He Long's lips thinned.

While the three of them muttered and schemed in low tones, Wu Shun sat further back in his seat, arms folded.

His eyes hadn't left Fang Yuan once.

With every passing moment, his annoyance deepened.

His gaze sharpened.

His jaw clenched.

Chapter 27: Three strikes and I hit back.

Boom!

Another thunderous strike; this one even fiercer, still aimed straight for Fang Yuan's head.

But the result... remained unchanged.

Fang Wei's fist slammed into the invisible barrier and stopped, as if hitting the sky itself.

Gasps erupted again.

Fang Wei stepped back, his breath ragged, his certainty shaken. He turned sharply toward Fang Guo.

And once more, Elder Guo stepped forward, face dark with suspicion.

"Fang Yuan," he said sternly, "it is forbidden to carry protective artifacts in a Rite of Challenge. Hand it over."

Fang Yuan's expression didn't flicker. He stood with his arms still behind his back and smiled.

"Check me."

Fang Guo faltered. He hadn't expected such a bold response.

Still, he pressed forward, unwilling to let Fang Yuan seize complete control of the moment.

"You definitely have a defensive artifact on you!" he snapped.

"Then check me," Fang Yuan repeated, his grin widening.

"Oh, I will," Fang Guo muttered. But as he stepped forward—

Fang Yuan's voice cut through the air, still calm, still smiling.

"But after Aunt Jingyi checks you first. Fair is fair."

Fang Guo froze mid-step.

A hush fell over the crowd.

His face twitched, and then he sneered. "Ahh... So that's your game. You do have something to hide. You're stalling. Hoping Elder Jingyi can distract me or interfere before I catch you red-handed. Clever."

Fang Yuan's laughter rang out—light, amused, but cold.

"Fang Guo," he said, eyes narrowing slightly, "if you wish for a swift death, I can guarantee you one."

The words weren't loud.

But the chill behind them silenced even the whispers.

And Fang Guo, of all people felt it directly down his spine.

He looked into Fang Yuan's eyes... and saw the promise behind those words.

It wasn't a threat nor fake words.

It was a fact.

A promise written in blood yet to be spilled.

Fang Yuan's smile returned. "I said: get checked before you check me. Is that so hard?"

Fang Guo's throat bobbed in a dry swallow.

Then, slowly, wordlessly, he turned and walked back to his seat.

Inside, he raged:

Fang Wei, you idiot! Make him move—even just a step! Even if it is only a freaking milimeter—make him move!

Meanwhile, Fang Yuan turned back to his uncle, still smiling.

"Uncle," he said gently, "this is your third chance. You know what that means, don't you?"

His voice lowered ever so slightly.

"If you fail now... you'll be the one who never moves again."

The words were soaked in calm threat.

Double-edged.

A promise of defeat and death.

Fang Wei's face paled. So did many in the audience.

No one had expected this.

No one had believed the gap could be so vast.

Could a half-step Nascent Soul realm truly stand untouched against a Peak Golden Core expert fueled by berserk potions?

It shouldn't be possible.

And yet...

Fang Wei grit his teeth.

He yanked out a second berserk pill.

Then a third.

The crowd gasped again.

His eyes turned bloodshot.

He bit down so hard on his lip it split open—and then tore off.

Blood gushed from his mouth, his fury boiling over as he rose into the air.

Golden-red energy crackled around him like a furious storm.

He raised both hands skyward, pulling every ounce of spiritual energy into a single massive sphere of golden hellfire.

Then—he dove.

"Divine Hell!" he screamed, descending like a meteor toward Fang Yuan.

Fang Yuan didn't move.

Didn't flinch.

He only looked up—calm, curious... almost entertained.

BOOM!

Dust and golden fire exploded across the platform.

Smoke spiraled in every direction.

But when it cleared—

Fang Yuan stood.

Untouched.

Not a single mark on him. Not a speck of dust.

He slowly took a step forward, hands still behind his back.

"Uncle," he said softly, "now it's my turn."

Above, Matriarch Lin Xi smiled knowingly and whispered, "I knew it."

Zhao Ming, He Long, and Wu Shun all turned sharply toward her.

"What is it that you know, matriach Lin?" Zhao asked, voice low.

Lin Xi looked at them, genuinely confused.

"How are you all so stupid?" she asked with an exasperated sigh. "Did none of you see it coming?"

And down below Fang Wei staggered back.

His body trembled, blood dripping from his mouth.

The berserk potion had burned through his meridians like fire through dry grass, but all of it—all of it—had done nothing.

He looked up, and what he saw was not a boy.

It was a shadow cast over a mountain. Calm. Silent. Unmoving.

His knees buckled, but pride alone kept him standing. That, and fear.

Fang Yuan took a single step forward.

Not hurried.

Not theatrical.

Just... steady.

That one step alone made the entire Phoenix soul Pavilion attendees leaned in.

He stopped a few paces away, still smiling, his hands still behind his back.

"You've had three chances, Uncle," he said gently. "Now, I'll take mine."

Fang Wei tried to speak, but his jaw locked.

Fang Yuan tilted his head.

"Don't worry. I won't use any techniques. No potions. No spiritual arts. Just... one strike."

And then—for the first time—he lifted his right arm.

The motion was slow. Deliberate. The smile never left his face.

But the moment his hand began to rise, the air changed.

The platform began to tremble.

Wind curled around him in strange spirals. Dust lifted.

Spirit essence in the air condensed—drawn, pulled, as if called by something ancient and overwhelming.

Fang Yuan's aura did not erupt.

It descended.

Heavy. Cold. Absolute.

Nascent Soul realm.

Those with sharp senses felt it first, the pressure, the certainty of it.

Then others saw it too.

"What...?"

"That's not... that's not half-step..."

"That's Nascent Soul!"

Gasps erupted again but no one spoke above a whisper.

Not anymore.

Above, the Crown Prince finally leaned forward in his seat, his folding fan halting mid-motion.

Beside him, Teacher Ian's brows rose ever so slightly.

"So," the Crown Prince murmured, "he was the Nascent Soul cultivator we sensed upon our arrival."

Ian said nothing, his gaze fixed intently on Fang Yuan.

A Nascent Soul realm... at just thirty years old? Even within the vast empire, that level of talent was nothing short of extraordinary.

Chapter 28: Perfect Ending.

Fang Yuan drew in a small breath. He extended a single finger.

But that one motion pulled in all the surrounding spiritual energy; dense and suffocating until it gathered silently at his fingertip.

Then... he pressed it forward.

"...N-Nephew..." Fang Wei's voice cracked. His eyes, wide with terror, locked onto the finger resting against his chest. "C-Cousin... I'm your uncle. Spare me."

Fang Yuan didn't blink.

Fang Wei's breath quickened, panic overtaking pride.

He stumbled back, hands raised, voice growing desperate.

"I-I was just following orders! This was all Fang Guo's plan—I was just a pawn! Listen to me!"

He turned, scrambling backward, stumbling over shattered stone as he screamed, "FANG GUO SET THIS UP! I WAS USED!"

He didn't want to die. Not like this. Not before proving himself. So he screamed as loud as he can.

But Fang Yuan's hand didn't retreat.

He followed slowly, one footstep at a time, as if giving his uncle a chance to run but never truly letting him go.

And then...

The smile having never left Fang Yuan's face, he whispered in his ears:

"It's already too late."

He tapped.

CRACK.

The sound was subtle.

The result... was not.

Fang Wei's upper body vanished in a red mist... gone, torn apart by the sheer force of condensed Nascent Soul energy.

Blood and bone exploded like fireworks across the courtyard. All that remained were his legs, still trembling, still upright.

Standing still.

The silence that followed was chilling.

Fang Yuan walked forward casually, brushing dust from his sleeve.

He glanced at the legs and chuckled. "Hm. Does this count as him still standing? Look at that... he didn't give up. Even in death. Something we can learn, ain't that right?"

No one laughed.

The elders of the Fang Family sat frozen in place, their faces pale as ash.

The air was thick with the iron scent of blood.

The earlier jeers, the smug smiles, the scorn, all of it had vanished.

What remained... was fear.

True, bone-deep, paralyzing fear.

Someone finally whispered it aloud, trembling:

"Nascent Soul realm..."

Another elder stood shakily. "That wasn't half-step. That's... he's... actually... nascent..."

Fang Guo's lips moved, but no words came out. His knees nearly buckled.

His mind was still trying to process what had just happened.

He wasn't bluffing.

He never was.

Fang Yuan turned toward the silent crowd and smiled once more.

But to those watching, that smile was no longer elegant.

It was terrifying.

Fang Yuan then turned toward the Crown Prince and offered a warm, gracious smile.

"Oh, Your Highness. Pardon the poor hospitality; it's been a rather eventful evening, don't you think so?"

He raised his hand casually.

"Servants, serve the food, a banquet can't go on with a hungry stomach."

The tension began to slowly dissipate from the pavilion, but the fear in many hearts lingered like an aftertaste.

Fang Yuan then turned his gaze to the group of Fang family elders, those who had prepared for rebellion, those who had silently supported Fang Wei, believing him the rightful heir.

He walked toward them with an easy pace, yet his presence pressed down on them like a mountain.

"You are all hereby banished," he said calmly. "You will leave by dawn."

His voice remained polite, but it was final.

"The women may choose between whether to leave with you, or leave you with the children. I will not interfere."

A few opened their mouths, but the words died in their throats.

There was no point in begging. Being allowed to walk away alive was mercy enough.

Fang Guo, face tight with humiliation, lowered his head and gave a stiff, formal bow. Then, without another word, he turned and walked away.

Several elders followed, those whose ambitions had been tied to Fang Wei's.

The only ones who remained were those who had stayed neutral... and those who had placed their faith in Fang Yuan.

Among them, Elder Fang Chen looked the most delighted.

He was already cradling Fang Mei in his arms, gently rocking her as he approached.

"Ahh, little Yuan!" he beamed, eyes wet with emotion. "When did you reach Nascent Soul realm? This is... this is such wonderful news for our clan!"

Fang Yuan laughed softly, the earlier chill in his demeanor melting away.

"Uncle Chen, take care of Fang Mei first. She needs you more than I do right now."

Elder Chen nodded, his expression softening as he looked at the unconscious girl in his arms.

Aunt Jingyi stepped forward next, her usual teasing smirk softened by the gravity of the moment. She offered her congratulations quietly, respectfully.

She didn't speak much in front of the crowd—no doubt choosing to hold back her usual jabs—but she didn't forget to flash Fang Yuan a playful wink before gently taking Fang Mei from her brother's arms.

"Brother," she said to Fang Chen, "Fang Mei will be safe with me."

Her tone was firm, almost maternal, but Fang Chen gave her a cautious glare as if unsure whether to trust her or guard Fang Mei from further harm.

She only rolled her eyes and walked off with the girl in her arms.

Meanwhile, Fang Yuan made his way back to the main seat and sat down, folding his hands calmly as the banquet resumed.

One by one, the heads of the Four Great Families came forward.

Their pride swallowed, their hands trembling ever so slightly, they raised their cups to toast the new; undeniable supreme power in Coldwind City.

There was no more argument.

No more power struggle.

A Nascent Soul cultivator was not a rival. He was a ruler.

Especially in a city where peak golden core realm masters used to rule supreme.

And now, Coldwind City no longer had five great families in balance.

It had one dragon...

...and four tamed beasts.

Fang Yuan was all smiles now.

With his overwhelming victory and unshakable display of power, he had firmly established himself as the absolute ruler of Coldwind City.

There were no challengers left, only submission and silence.

True, the Imperial Family could take action against him.

But they would need a just cause.

And greed over a mere Spirit Pond wasn't one.

Even the Empire needed excuses to justify war.

Above, Crown Prince Lukas von Avetide prepared to take his leave.

He descended the pavilion steps with Teacher Ian beside him, ready to offer a respectful nod toward Fang Yuan.

But just then, movement stirred at the edge of the courtyard.

A new group entered through the front gate—dressed in official robes, their banners high.

Gasps echoed across the crowd.

"Isn't that... the Alchemist Association's flag?"

"What are they doing here?"

"Did the Fang Family cause trouble? Or did trouble find them?"

Speculation rippled like wildfire.

Even the Crown Prince, who had been mid-step, paused and turned slightly—interested, amused.

"Well," he murmured to Ian, "perhaps the night isn't over."

The entourage came to a halt before the grand platform.

Their leader, a silver-robed youth with the association's sigil emblazoned across her huge chest, stepped forward and bowed deeply toward Fang Yuan.

Her voice rang out, clear and urgent:

"Clan Head Fang Yuan... please help us. The Alchemist Association requests your aid!"

Chapter 29: the new guest.

The crowd's gaze shifted to the girl at the front of the Alchemist Association entourage.

Whispers rose.

Even Matriarch Lin Xi, composed and reserved as always, suddenly stood from her seat, eyes widened in surprise.

She spoke first, her voice steady but touched with disbelief.

"Are you not Miss Xie Lin? The direct apprentice of Pill King Tushan?"

Her words struck the Phoenix Soul Pavilion like thunder.

"Pill king Tushan's disciple?"

The other clan heads; Zhao Ming, He Long, and Wu Shun glanced at each other with expressions flickering between astonishment and unease.

The Pill King's disciple appeared here?

How deep does Fang Yuan's reach go?

Meanwhile, the girl in question—Xie Lin—appeared taken aback herself as well.

Her brows furrowed slightly, mind racing as she glanced around the courtyard.

The Fang Family... is this clan truly so prestigious? she wondered as her gaze flicked toward the still-seated Crown Prince.

They even managed to invite the Crown Prince himself?

She didn't know about the Spirit Pond's existence.

So in her mind, the only explanation for such presence and grandeur had to be long-standing status and renown.

Still... she found that conclusion oddly reasonable.

And on the dais above, Fang Yuan—who had just finished flipping open his system interface, excited to explore the rewards of his newly completed quest—

[QUEST: Prevent Your Own Impeachment]

Objective: Retain your position as Fang Family Head throughout the evening.

Reward: Access to the System Shop

+1,000 System Points (usable within the System Shop)

Status: Completed

—was thoroughly annoyed.

Just when I was about to check the shop...

He sighed internally, suppressing his irritation. He had heard of Master Tushan. Who hadn't? A Pill King held the same level of reverence as a Nascent Soul powerhouse.

Even if a Nascent Soul could destroy mountains, a Pill King could bring dying cultivators back from death's door and command entire sects with a word.

Disrespecting someone from the Alchemist Association, especially one connected to a Pill King, was not an option.

Fang Yuan slowly rose to his feet, his demeanor calm but dignified.

His voice was steady, respectful.

"What is your name, lady? And what brings you here?"

The girl took a step forward and gave a graceful bow.

"I am Xie Lin," she introduced herself.

Fang Yuan took note of the name. Xie Lin... he repeated inwardly.

But just then, as his gaze brushed past Matriarch Lin Xi, he noticed something strange.

Her expression. The look she gave him, it wasn't of admiration or contempt.

It was pity.

Huh? Fang Yuan blinked. What was that? Why does she look like she's staring at a fool?

The confusion distracted him briefly, but Xie Lin did not notice.

She raised her voice slightly, so the entire gathering could hear.

"Family Head of the Fang Family. Our Master wishes to take in your younger brother, Fang Tian, as a disciple."

Silence.

And then, a wave of murmurs rippled outward.

The trash?

Fang Tian? Chosen to be an alchemist? By a Pill King?!

Gasps followed.

That boy... picked by Master Tushan?

All eyes turned to Fang Yuan, expecting the obvious.

Of course he would agree. What family head wouldn't?

And Fang Yuan, he stared in momentary disbelief.

My little brother? Blessed by the heavens?

His expression twitched.

Wait—don't tell me... am I living in a novel where my younger brother is the main protagonist?

He shook his head in disbelief.

Then calmly, almost too casually, he replied:

"My brother is not here. And I don't make decisions on his behalf."

That one sentence sent another wave of shock through the crowd.

He actually left it up to Fang Tian?

Even with a Pill King's offer?

He's not even trying to persuade him?

Xie Lin, on the other hand, didn't look disappointed at all. If anything, she seemed... unsurprised.

She smiled.

"Fang Family Head is as amazing as they say."

She paused briefly before continuing, this time with a small tilt of the head, her voice more relaxed.

"But asking the Fang Family's help to recruit a disciple..."

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes slightly.

He cut in, voice steady and probing.

"My brother rejected your master's offer, didn't he?"

She laughed softly and nodded.

"Yes, he did. Master saw lots of potential in the kid in passing and offered. I was surprised by Master's action but his direct refusal before Master even introduced himself surprised me even more."

Fang Yuan's brow furrowed.

Then, like a light suddenly clicked on, his expression sharpened.

Wait. Where?

Where did you see him?

That crucial detail... how could he forget?

His brother had left without a word. And now, finally, someone mentioned him again and he'd nearly let it slide?

Fang Yuan exhaled and quickly asked the question.

"Oh, wait. Fang Tian—where did you see him?"

The relief of finally remembering to ask was palpable in his voice.

Xie Lin responded easily.

"It was in the Capital. A week ago."

Now even the clan heads came forward one by one.

Zhao Ming, He Long, Wu Shun, and Lin Xi.

Each took turns offering a formal greeting.

"Zhao Ming of the Zhao Clan greets Miss Xie Lin. Your Master's name commands boundless respect in the north."

"He Long greets you as well. To meet a disciple of the Pill King Tushan, an honor."

"Wu Shun of the Wu Clan. Your association's legacy brings warmth to every city you pass."

Lin Xi smiled gently, adding only, "A pleasure."

And finally, the Crown Prince descended from his place.

He approached with a glimmer of intrigue in his tone.

"I never expected the Fang Family to be this amazing," he said, fan resting gently in one hand.

His eyes sparkled.

"Your strength impresses me... but your influence impresses me more.

Join me, Fang Yuan. Before you become an obstacle on my path."

The statement hung in the air like a boulder in still water.

Even Fang Yuan blinked.

That was... blunt.

The clan heads froze.

Even they weren't prepared for such an open threat from the prince himself.

Chapter 30: System Shop.

Lukas von Avetide chuckled, brushing aside the tension with an airy wave of his fan.

"Haha, don't be silly," he said with a bright laugh. "I was just joking. How could I say something like that during a celebration."

The laughter rang clear, but not everyone smiled.

Standing a pace behind him, Teacher Ian remained still—face unreadable, eyes laced with quiet exhaustion.

He nodded slowly, but said nothing. His silence spoke volumes: he had long since tired of the prince's games.

Across from them, Xie Lin curtsied with practiced elegance. She lifted her skirt slightly and bowed her head.

"Xie Lin greets His Highness, the Crown Prince."

The entire courtyard remained silent—holding its collective breath in reverence and calculation.

Fang Yuan's expression didn't shift. His lips tugged upward ever so slightly.

"Haha... That was a nice joke, Your Highness," he said, tone light, though no laughter reached his eyes.

Lukas turned toward him again, smiling that princely smile.

"Oh, I wasn't joking," he said casually. "At least... I hope I wasn't."

That hung in the air like a dagger balanced on a string.

Fang Yuan paused. Then nodded once, slow and sure.

"I see."

The prince held his gaze a moment longer—then returned the nod, almost cheerful in his withdrawal, before finally shifting his attention back to Xie Lin.

"Miss Xie," he began, voice warm and conversational, "I wonder... would your esteemed master be willing to attend my birthday banquet next month?"

Fang Yuan chuckled softly as he listened to the Crown Prince's invitation.

A birthday banquet, hm?

For a moment, he wondered if the prince would also invite him and asked him to gift him the Spirit Pond while he was at it.

His gaze swept lazily across the courtyard.

The request was posed lightly, almost offhanded—yet everyone present understood the weight behind it.

An invitation from the Crown Prince was no small matter.

An expectation from him... even less so.

Xie Lin's lashes lowered slightly as she offered a demure smile. She dipped her head in a respectful bow.

"Your Highness is too kind," she replied with a graceful smile.

"However, as you may know... my master seldom leaves seclusion. Once he begins a refinement session, not even the end of the world could draw him away."

Lukas's smile thinned for a fraction of a second. "Ah... a pity."

Xie Lin continued smoothly, her voice calm but careful. "However, if it pleases Your Highness, I can humbly extend your invitation. Whether he responds is, of course, up to him."

She said it beautifully.

Not a rejection. Not a promise.

A perfect deflection.

Still, Lukas seemed content with the answer, even if his eyes glimmered with disappointment.

"Haha, I suppose that's the best I can hope for," he said. "Tell your master that the Empire remembers those who attend... and those who decline."

The words were pleasant.

But everyone heard the warning woven beneath.

Xie Lin merely bowed again.

"I will convey your words exactly, Your Highness."

"Good," Lukas said, smiling once more like nothing had happened. He turned, his fan snapping open with a soft flick.

Lukas turned to Fang Yuan, folding his fan with a quiet snap.

"A shame, but I must take my leave," he said with a courteous bow. "Something urgent came up."

His tone was pleasant, but the glint in his eye still carried a trace of mischief, like a man who had tossed a firework into a pond just to watch the splash.

Fang Yuan returned the bow with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Of course, Your Highness. I'll be sure to save you a bottle of Coldwind's finest wine for your return."

Even if he had no interest in the Crown Prince's games, the empire's shadow stretched long and Lukas's favor could shift entire alliances with a smile.

The Crown Prince chuckled, giving a final nod to the gathered guests before turning on his heel.

Teacher Ian trailed behind him, his expression unreadable, the weight of royal nonsense clearly pressing heavily on his soul.

The moment the two vanished beyond the estate gates, the tension in the pavilion seemed to evaporate with them—like a collective exhale after holding one's breath too long.

Fang Yuan turned back toward the crowd, his sleeves brushing lightly at his sides.

"Now then," he said, loud enough for all to hear, "where were we?"

Musicians scrambled to resume their rhythm. Plates of steaming food reappeared like magic.

Wine flowed faster than gossip, and laughter began to return to the corners of the room.

And the banquet resumed once more.

Fang Yuan smiled faintly and sipped from his cup, eyes flicking toward the bloodstain they still hadn't quite scrubbed out.

He hummed, satisfied.

Yes.

Everything was exactly as it should be.

Fang Yuan leaned back in his chair, swirling the wine in his cup absently as the warm hum of the resumed banquet echoed in the distance.

With a thought, he opened the System Interface once more.

Host: Fang Yuan

Realm: Peak Nascent Soul

Talent: Heavenly Root

Martial Techniques:

- **Swift Step Footwork (Low-grade Black)**
- **Golden Shell Armor (Mid-grade Black)**

• **Tyrant's Light Sword (Low-grade Black)**

He flicked his gaze to the glowing tab pulsing softly in the corner.

[System Shop – Tap to Open.]

Tap.

The shop interface unfolded like a celestial scroll, clean lines and glowing icons appearing before him.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the glowing currency box at the top.

[System Points: 1,000]

Then came the items—listed neatly, rows of glowing pill icons arranged with elegant simplicity.

[Shop Inventory]

Bone Marrow Pill — 1,000 SP

Golden Core Pill — 500 SP

Qi Transformation Pill — 200 SP

Qi Condensation Pill — 100 SP

Qi Realization Pill — 50 SP

Fang Yuan scrolled further.

At the bottom of the list, two more items stood out like dragons among rabbits.

Nascent Soul Realm Pill — 5,000 SP

Hollow Spirit Pill — ??? SP

[UNLOCK REQUIREMENTS NOT MET]

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes at the Hollow Spirit Pill entry.

"...Hmm."

He tried tapping it but all that flashed was a message:

[Insufficient system authority to view this item.]

"Tch."