

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

#Chapter 31: Coldwind City Championships. - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 31: Coldwind City Championships.

Chapter 31: Coldwind City Championships.

Fang Yuan let out a soft breath and closed the glowing System Shop tab with a flick of his finger.

The interface dissolved into motes of light, vanishing from sight—though the lingering temptation of the **[Hollow Spirit Pill]** still hovered at the edge of his thoughts.

But before he could reflect further, a rustle of robes and the subtle clink of ceremonial accessories signaled the approach of the Five Great Family heads.

Zhao Ming stepped forward first, his smile rigid and eyes unreadable. "Family Head Fang, allow me to be the first to congratulate you on securing your rightful position. Coldwind City stands stronger with you in it."

"Indeed," He Long added, voice smooth but clearly strained. "It is a... great relief to see stability restored to the Fang Family."

Wu Shun offered a polite nod, his words more measured. "A strong Fang is a strong city. We look forward to continuing our... cooperation."

Fang Yuan greeted them all with a calm smile, offering only slight nods in return. "The strength of the city lies in its unity. I'm merely doing my part."

And then Matriarch Lin Xi stepped forward, her presence more refined than the others, a porcelain teacup still in hand.

"I offer not just congratulations," she said evenly, "but respect. You haven't only secured your place as Family Head... you've secured the Fang Family's future."

Her words, while simple, carried weight—and sincerity.

Fang Yuan inclined his head slightly, meeting her gaze with equal poise. "You honor me, Matriarch Lin."

As the group stood momentarily in civil silence, the other three family heads glanced subtly at one another.

Though none would dare speak ill of Fang Yuan to his face, the bitterness in their hearts couldn't be hidden from themselves.

They had come expecting to watch the Fang Family fracture. Instead, they had witnessed its ascent under a monster.

Yet just as resentment threatened to fester, their thoughts turned instinctively to the younger generation.

Yes, they thought. There was still hope.

Because while Fang Yuan had risen like a dragon above mortals, the rest of the Fang youths were... ordinary at best. Some even laughably behind in their cultivation stages.

It was almost uncanny. As though Fang Yuan's brilliance had cast a shadow so vast, it drained the light from the rest of his clan.

Wu Shun sipped his wine and muttered to himself, "It's as if all their potential was fed to him."

Zhao Ming grunted, half-agreeing. "That kind of talent... shouldn't even be born into a mid-tier family."

He Long didn't speak, but his eyes scanned the nearby Fang disciples—each one laughing, feasting without a care in the world as they let themselves lost in the pleasure.

If the Fang Family was to rise, it would rise on Fang Yuan's back alone.

And if he fell... it would collapse just as swiftly.

Fang Yuan naturally heard the murmurs between the clan heads—none of them subtle enough to escape a Nascent Soul cultivator's spiritual perception.

He didn't react though, there was no need.

They were competitors first, neighbors second. A little jealousy was healthy. Encouraging, even.

He would make good use of it.

If the other families' younger generations surpassed the Fang juniors, so be it. Let them gloat.

Nothing spurred improvement like rivalry. A few bruised egos now might birth the future pillars of the clan later.

Still seated at the head of the pavilion, Fang Yuan tilted his cup and glanced toward the guests.

His gaze landed on the silver-robed girl standing at the edge of the courtyard, ever graceful, her posture like that of a noble swan amidst restless koi.

"Miss Xie Lin," he called out casually. "Why don't you come and join us at the main table? It's not every day we get a disciple of Pill King Tushan among us."

There was a brief silence, followed by a few exchanged glances. Some servants even started preparing a place near him.

But Xie Lin offered a polite bow and gently declined.

"I appreciate the Family Head's generosity," she said with a faint smile, "but I must refuse. I am still underaged. My master forbids alcohol before a certain age, regardless of cultivation."

Fang Yuan blinked.

"You need to reach a certain age to drink?" he echoed, visibly puzzled. "I... didn't know that."

The surrounding elders chuckled quietly at his confusion, though no one dared explain. It was rare to see Fang Yuan caught off-guard by a mundane rule.

He gave a slow nod and chuckled faintly, waving the moment off. "Then I'll respect your master's wishes. Still, you are a guest of honor tonight. Make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you, Family Head," Xie Lin replied with another respectful nod.

As the banquet eased into a more comfortable rhythm, the heads of the Five Great Families remained near the main pavilion, sipping wine and engaging in the kind of conversation that was less about meaning and more about posturing.

Wu Shun, always the most direct, swirled his cup once and said, "Speaking of promising juniors... The Coldwind City Championship is coming up again, isn't it? Just under three months now."

His tone was casual, but the glance he shot at Fang Yuan was anything but idle.

"Ah yes," He Long chimed in smoothly, leaning slightly on his cane. "A tradition that reminds the youths to keep sharpening themselves. This year should be particularly exciting."

He raised his cup toward Zhao Ming with a half-smile.

"I heard your son Zhao Ren has already reached late Qi Transformation realm. That's... quite impressive for his age."

Zhao Ming chuckled modestly, though a hint of pride gleamed in his eyes. "Ren works hard, that's all. But I've also heard promising things about your nephew, He Yong. Late Qi Transformation as well, isn't he?"

He Long chuckled, brushing a hand over his beard. "He's not as elegant as Ren, but he's fierce in duels. If they meet in the ring this year, it might be the most exciting match we've had in a decade."

Wu Shun let out a short laugh. "Only if they don't get flattened by that girl from my clan—Wu Min. She's already refined her first battle technique to completion."

If she breaks through to Mid-Qi Transformation before the event, even boys like Ren and Yong will struggle."

"Mm," Zhao Ming grunted. "The Wu Clan does tend to produce aggressive ones."

Chapter 32: Banquet Ends.

Wu Shun turned, the corners of his mouth twitching as he debated whether Zhao Ming's jab about "aggressive ones" was a subtle insult or a backhanded compliment.

He chose not to comment, opting instead for a quiet sip of his wine.

Though the sharp glint in his eye said he had remember it.

Just then, He Long shifted the conversation with a more cordial tone, glancing toward Matriarch Lin Xi.

"Matriarch Lin," he said lightly, "I heard your eldest daughter has taken an interest in artifact refinement lately. That's a rare path among the younger generation. May I ask how far along is she now?"

The question was polite, even curious, but it also carried a subtle implication: combat cultivators usually earned more prestige at city tournaments.

Refiners, for all their value, did not win glory in arenas.

Lin Xi raised her brows slightly, lips curving into a smile that was both graceful and vaguely dangerous.

"Hoh?" she said. "I thought we were only counting combat capabilities tonight. Shall I go fetch her forge records instead of her cultivation ones?"

A chuckle rippled through the group.

Fang Yuan, still seated with a cup resting in one hand, allowed a small smile to form at the exchange. His eyes flicked between them, unreadable as ever.

Zhao Ming chuckled and nodded. "A fair response. Though talent in refinement is still talent and valuable to any family. It brings financial stability after all, one must learn to be productive in various ways and not be useless."

Wu Shun grunted, folding his arms. "As long as the kids aren't useless, I don't care if they grow herbs or refine swords."

Matriarch Lin Xi sipped delicately from her teacup. "She's already capable of refining second-grade artifacts under supervision. If your boys are lucky, they might be using one of her blades when they clash."

He Long chuckled good-naturedly, but a hint of competitive heat glinted in his eyes. "Then I hope she starts mass production soon. We'll need every edge we can get when the championship arrives."

Fang Yuan simply listened with an easy smile, not interrupting.

He could already see where this was going—one by one, each of them was subtly parading their clan's brightest in the hopes of overshadowing the others.

None of them mentioned the Fang juniors, of course. There was no need. Their silence said it all.

He Long turned toward Fang Yuan then, his eyes twinkling with feigned courtesy.

"And what of the Fang juniors, Family Head Fang? Will any of them be participating this year?"

There was no mockery in his tone but also no real expectation.

Fang Yuan lifted his cup and took a slow sip, letting the pause stretch just long enough to make the other three lean forward ever so slightly in anticipation.

Then he set the cup down with a soft clink and said, "Perhaps. If they don't embarrass themselves."

The honesty of it made Wu Shun snort, and even Lin Xi—silent until now—let out a soft breath of amusement.

Zhao Ming leaned in slightly, tone slightly more sincere. "Still, if any of them manage to surprise us, I imagine it'll be quite the upset."

Fang Yuan offered a faint smile, eyes half-lidded. "It would be... entertaining, wouldn't it?"

They all chuckled again, each one retreating politely behind their wine cups.

Matriarch Lin Xi finally spoke, voice calm as ever. "Talent matures differently for everyone. Some bloom early... others wait until the storm to take root."

She glanced sidelong at Fang Yuan, her meaning pointed.

And he nodded, raising his glass slightly. "I couldn't agree more."

But the night was growing old, and even posturing had its limits.

As the moon reached its zenith and the final notes of the guqin faded into the breeze, the once-rowdy banquet gradually gave way to a calmer hush.

Servants moved deftly, clearing away plates and extinguishing lanterns as guests began to rise and bid their farewells.

Near the edge of the pavilion, Xie Lin approached Fang Yuan once more, her silver robes catching the starlight like woven frost.

"Family Head Fang," she said softly, lowering her head in parting, "When your younger brother returns... I hope I'll be allowed to greet him properly this time."

Her words were calm and respectful but they stirred an unexpected reaction.

From a nearby seat, Fang Mei shot her a piercing glare, the kind a young girl might give a woman encroaching on territory she didn't know she had claimed.

Her chopsticks trembled just slightly.

Fang Yuan caught the look and suppressed a smile.

He offered Xie Lin a warm nod. "You're welcome here anytime, Miss Xie. Just send word ahead and I'll make sure you're received properly."

"Many thanks," she replied with a bow.

Then, without another word, she turned and walked away, vanishing into the shadows beyond the estate gate.

The night seemed to ripple faintly where she passed, as though her steps stirred the wind itself.

Fang Yuan watched until she disappeared, then turned his attention back to the departing guests.

He approached the gathered family heads; Zhao Ming, He Long, Wu Shun, and Lin Xi with a graceful bow.

"Tonight has been a chaotic time," he said plainly, "but I'm glad we could still share a meal. I hope Coldwind City continues to thrive... and that we'll cross cups again under better skies."

Zhao Ming nodded tightly. "You've made your point, Fang Yuan. Loud and clear."

He Long gave a half-smile. "May the next time we meet be less... eventful."

Wu Shun said nothing, but grunted in agreement.

Matriarch Lin Xi offered a serene smile. "Your house stands tall tonight. Let's see how well it weathers the seasons to come."

One by one, they departed into the night, each trailing their own thoughts and retinues behind them.

And at last, the Fang estate fell silent.

Only the wind remained, whispering softly over the blood-scrubbed stone.

Fang Yuan stood alone under the pale moon, watching the last of the lanterns dim.

Then he turned and summoned a servant. "Bring Elder Chen to my chambers."

Chapter 33: Divine Ice Sect gift.

In the quiet warmth of his private courtyard, Fang Yuan sat beneath the open rafters of the moonlit eaves, the last remnants of the banquet echoing faintly through the manor's distant halls.

The sound of approaching footsteps broke the stillness.

"Uncle," Fang Yuan said with a faint smile, rising politely. "Thank you for coming."

Fang Chen, tall and solemn in his long dark robes, gave a brief nod in return. "Family Head."

But there was no chill to the title. Only respect and a trace of familial warmth.

They took their seats across from each other at the stone table in the courtyard, moonlight glinting off its polished surface.

Fang Yuan turned to the servant girl nearby. "Felicia, prepare tea for us."

Felicia bowed and disappeared soundlessly into the inner halls.

And then the stillness returned.

Fang Yuan leaned forward slightly, hands clasped, voice quiet.

"Uncle," he said, softer this time. "May I ask you to guide me?"

Fang Chen raised a brow, faint surprise flickering in his normally unreadable eyes. "You've never needed guiding before, Yuan'er."

Fang Yuan gave a low chuckle. "Maybe not in battle and strategies. But with family..."

He exhaled softly, his gaze drifting toward the quiet corridor where the family portrait hung, an old painting of Fang Yuan, Fang Tian, and their parents, captured in a moment that felt like a lifetime ago.

"He left without saying a word," Fang Yuan finally said. "There was no message left behind or clue to know where he went."

Fang Chen remained silent, waiting.

"I've told myself he'll be fine," Fang Yuan continued, "and I know he has spirit in him. But everyone's worried. Fang Mei won't say it, but she hasn't slept soundly since. She's your daughter, you must have noticed it too."

He paused, then looked up, expression clear and calm.

"So tell me, Uncle. What should I do? As Family Head? As his brother?"

Fang Chen's answer came without hesitation.

"Act."

His voice was quiet, but firm.

"You're not just his brother anymore, Fang Yuan. You are the head of the Fang Clan. You don't have the luxury of waiting for news. The people are watching—wondering if you'll protect them, even from silence."

He leaned forward slightly.

"Even if you trust your brother, they need to see that you take his absence seriously. That his actions matter."

Fang Yuan nodded slowly, absorbing every word.

"So... find him and get him back?"

Fang Chen shook his head.

"Not yet. First, understand him. Send someone to track him and not to drag him back, but to learn where he is and what he's doing.

Whether he left in defiance or in hope. You must know what road he walks... before you decide whether to stop him or walk beside him."

Fang Yuan exhaled, a thin smile curling his lips.

"And here I thought you'd tell me to lock him in the pill room until he broke through Golden Core."

Fang Chen snorted softly. "That too. He needs to be strong enough to protect Mei'er after all."

Just then, Felicia returned with a jade tray and began pouring their tea, delicate fragrance wafting from the steaming pot.

Fang Yuan accepted the cup and raised it toward his uncle.

"To family, then," he said simply.

Fang Chen tapped his own cup to Fang Yuan's and nodded once.

"To clarity."

Fang Yuan sipped his tea in thoughtful silence, the steam curling between them like drifting clouds.

Fang Chen, ever composed, sat across from him with his usual stoic calm, eyes sharp beneath his lined brow.

"So," Fang Yuan said at last, setting his cup down gently. "We'll quietly send someone I trust to follow him. Not to interfere—just to understand."

Fang Chen nodded. "That's the best course. I'll prepare someone discreet. If he senses them, it'll be over."

"I figured as much," Fang Yuan murmured. "He's reckless, not stupid."

The matter of Fang Tian rested between them for a moment longer, heavy but settled. Then Fang Yuan's tone shifted, lightening like mist lifting from stone.

"On a lighter note," he said with a faint smile, "I've recently come into possession of something interesting. A set of seven formation flags."

Fang Chen raised an eyebrow, slightly intrigued. "Formation flags?"

Fang Yuan leaned back lazily. "Mm. Each marked with their respective orientation.

When placed according to the enclosed diagram, they form a complete high-grade spirit gathering formation. Top Black-grade, by my judgment."

Fang Chen's brow furrowed.

"That's no ordinary find. Where did you get them?"

Fang Yuan's smile deepened just slightly, a flicker of mischief flashing in his eyes.

"They were in the gift box from the Divine Ice Sect."

Fang Chen blinked. "That box...?"

He paused, mind drifting back to the scene.

The Divine Ice Sect had sent them a gift just a week ago... meant to accompany the formal announcement of the annulled engagement between Fang Tian and Gu Xin.

In front of all the guests, they had presented a small, ornate box alongside the news of the cancellation.

It was so small, in fact, that he had doubted it could hold anything more than a single pill.

And now Fang Yuan was saying it contained seven formation flags?

"That box was barely the size of a melon," Fang Chen said slowly. "You're saying it held seven formation flags?"

Fang Yuan's expression didn't change. "That's what I'm saying."

Fang Chen stared at him.

"...Were they paper flags?"

"No," Fang Yuan said mildly, "standard spiritual flags. Full length."

Fang Chen looked even more baffled.

He opened his mouth. Closed it.

Then frowned to himself and took another slow sip of tea.

"Maybe I'm overthinking it," he muttered. "They're from the Divine Ice Sect. Maybe they folded space inside the box. Or... sealed a storage ring inside the wood. Or..."

His voice trailed off.

Fang Yuan studied him quietly and then chuckled.

"You're taking it quite well, Uncle."

Fang Chen gave him a long look.

"I've decided," he said flatly, "that I'm too old to argue with you over spatial logic."

Fang Yuan laughed under his breath, eyes glinting like moonlight on black water.

"That's wise."

Chapter 34: Gathering.

Under the soft lantern light of his courtyard, Fang Yuan retrieved a lacquered wooden case from beneath the inner drawer of his desk.

He slid it across the table to his uncle with quiet ease.

"Here," Fang Yuan said, opening the lid to reveal seven formation flags, that shimmered faintly under moonlight. "Top-grade black, just as I said."

Fang Chen leaned forward slightly, inspecting one of the flags with narrowed eyes. He didn't touch it, just studied it for a moment, then nodded once, his expression unreadable.

Fang Yuan then pulled out a scroll from his inner sleeve and unrolled it flat on the table.

A hand-drawn diagram of the eastern ravine's Spirit Mine filled its surface—precise lines marking the natural leylines, spirit veins, and the concealed Spirit Pond at its heart.

He tapped several points marked in red.

"These are the placements. Follow the compass points—north, northeast, east, and so on.

Anchor the seventh one in the pond's center stone. Once the formation completes, it should double the spiritual density of that cavern."

Fang Chen absorbed the instructions in a single glance. "Understood."

He took both the case and the scroll and rose from his seat. There was no ceremony, no excess words between them; only familiarity, trust, and clarity of purpose.

"I'll handle it before sunrise," he said simply, then offered a parting nod. "Rest while you can."

Fang Yuan inclined his head. "I leave it to you."

Without another word, Fang Chen disappeared into the night, his robes whispering softly with every measured step as he vanished into the distant shadows.

The courtyard returned to silence.

Fang Yuan stood alone now, the soft breeze teasing the edges of his sleeves.

He looked around at his study, the shelves neatly aligned, every report dealt with, every petition filed.

His desk, so often covered in scrolls, was empty now, save for the still-warm teacups.

For once... there was nothing left to do.

He let out a soft breath, stepped away from the table, and walked out onto the moonlit tiles of his private training platform.

The air smelled of jasmine and night dew, cool and refreshing.

Folding his legs beneath him, he sat down cross-legged beneath the swaying bamboo, and slowly closed his eyes.

The moment his breathing stilled, a wave of warmth surged through his meridians.

It started at his dantian, a gentle coil of spiritual energy like a glowing ember and began to spread outward.

Slow and rhythmic.... Like the first ripples of water touching still shores.

Then came the cool icy strands of night-spirit qi drawn from the ambient mist around the manor.

They threaded through him like silk, balancing the heat with clarity, with calm.

Warm and cool.

Breath and silence.

His body, suspended between heaven and earth, gradually faded from awareness.

And in that serene night, beneath the waning moon, Fang Yuan entered quiet cultivation—no distractions, no burdens.

Only the silent heartbeat of the world pulsing gently through his soul.

The wind stirred the bamboo.

The stars watched quietly overhead.

And Fang Yuan, seated in silent cultivation, sank deeper into stillness, his breath slow, his pulse calm, his soul attuned to the quiet rhythm of the night.

Time passed without urgency.

Above, the constellations began their slow retreat, fading one by one as the horizon blushed with the first light of dawn.

Then, like a whisper turning to a voice, morning arrived as the sun rose.

A golden hush spilled over the Fang estate, soft and warm.

It stretched across the slate roofs and pale stone courtyards, chasing away the last shadows of night.

A low bell chimed once, deep and solemn, echoing through the halls.

By the third chime, every member of the Fang Clan, young and old had gathered beneath the great ceremonial canopy in the central courtyard.

Elders in long robes stood in quiet ranks along the stone steps, their faces solemn.

The younger generation formed a loose semi-circle below, standing straighter than usual, eyes filled with a mixture of curiosity, nervousness, and awe.

At the head of the gathering, Fang Yuan stood with hands behind his back, having just finished cultivating, his dark robes fluttering lightly in the morning breeze.

His presence alone quieted the last of the murmurs. The only one missing was Elder Chen.

Fang Yuan glanced once toward the east, toward the hidden ravine where the Spirit Pond lay sealed.

He's probably still setting the formation, he thought. Good.

He stepped forward, his voice calm but carrying across the entire courtyard without effort.

"Today," Fang Yuan began, "I have gathered all of you here not for punishment, nor for ceremony, but for a promise."

A ripple of surprise ran through the crowd.

"A promise that the Fang Clan... will rise."

There was no dramatic flare to his tone, just quiet conviction. And yet, it struck harder than any shout.

Many of the younger disciples glanced at one another, puzzled.

Fang Yuan seemed to sense their uncertainty.

He gave a faint smile, then raised a small, jade bottle with one hand and opened it for all to see.

Inside, resting atop lined velvet, were four pills—glowing faintly, like captured moonlight within porcelain shells.

The elders leaned forward slightly, brows lifting in curiosity.

"These," Fang Yuan said, "are Bone Marrow Tempering Pills. They are very rare and even more difficult to produce.

Each one, when used correctly, will strengthen your foundation, cleansing impurities from your meridians, improving your spiritual root quality... and increasing your chances of breaking through bottlenecks in the future."

The younger generation erupted. Not in loud cheering, but gasps and wide-eyed disbelief.

"Is that even possible...?"

"My root grade is too low... would that... could it actually help me?"

Fang Yuan raised one hand, and the murmurs quieted.

"This is only the first batch," he continued. "In time, I will acquire more. But these current pills will go to those who've trained the hardest, proven their discipline, and shown steady improvement, even without resources."

He let the words hang for a moment, letting every young disciple digest them.

"To those who think of the clan first. Who push forward not because of pride... but responsibility."

Excitement lit their faces. Some looked hopeful. Others stood straighter, as if silently pleading, Let it be me.

Even the usually reserved Fang Mei blinked, clearly startled by the generosity.

Fang Yuan closed the box and set it carefully onto the central table, locking his gaze on the rows of wide-eyed youths before him.

"We will rise together," he said simply. "But only if we earn it."

Then he turned away, walking slowly back toward the elder dais, cloak trailing behind him.

Bone Marrow Pills, Fang Yuan thought inwardly as the hopeful energy buzzed behind him. The System has them in bulk.

He had ten bottles in total—sixty pills, minus the two already given to Tian and Mei. It was more than enough, for now.

From the elder dais, Fang Yuan cast one last glance toward the eastern ravine, where the formation now quietly pulsed beneath the earth.

The Fang Clan's future would not rise from will alone but from roots buried deep and fed well.

"Our family will stand at the top in the upcoming Coldwind City Championship. Surprise the other four families a little."

Chapter 35: New Elder.

As the murmur of excitement slowly faded, Fang Yuan's expression grew colder, more composed.

His sharp gaze swept across the younger generation and then up toward the elders, pausing ever so briefly on the empty spots left behind by those who had been banished.

Since the banquet last night... too many seats had gone unfilled.

Too many voices silenced and it was not by battle, but by judgment.

Elders who had once stood proud beside the clan's banner, now gone. Their names stripped from the records for siding with his uncle in that bitter internal fracture.

Was it the right choice?

Their loyalty to his uncle had been unwavering—right to the bitter end.

Not a single one of those elders had come to beg forgiveness, nor had they asked for a second chance.

It was as if they were determined not to follow him, no matter the cost.

Fang Yuan shook his head.

Now that he had the system, his golden finger, what he needed wasn't empty legacy or sentiment.

He needed loyalty.

He'd rather nurture kindness and loyalty in those who might not shine brightest, but shine with a gentle warmth.

Rather than one who might have been an unparalleled genius but won't hesitate to betray the family at the blink of an eye.

And in hindsight, what happened last night seemed less like a crisis and more like a blessing in disguise.

Fang Yuan's stepped forward once more, his tone colder now—calm, but commanding.

"The Fang Clan suffered a loss last night," he said, voice clear and steady. "Not of buildings, nor wealth—but people."

A hush fell over the crowd. The older generation bowed their heads slightly. The younger ones looked uncertain.

"We lost guidance. We lost experience. And yet, we remain."

He let that truth hang in the air, then continued.

"In light of this shift, we will no longer rely on the old ways alone to determine your worth."

His eyes narrowed, and a sharp edge crept into his words.

"Starting today, we will implement a new system of merit and reward. Not based on favor. Not based on blood. Based on results."

Some of the elders exchanged glances. The younger ones straightened in nervous anticipation.

"There will be two categories. Those in the Qi Realisation Realm will compete among themselves. Those in the Qi Condensation Realm, the same."

"You will all be divided accordingly. And over the coming weeks, your efforts, your discipline, and your progress will be closely observed."

A few gasps rippled through the disciples. Even Fang Mei blinked, startled by the formal announcement.

Fang Yuan continued, face unreadable.

"At the end of each evaluation period, the top performers in both groups will be rewarded. Pill resources, manuals, and personal guidance will be made available to those who stand out."

"But do not misunderstand me, this is not favoritism."

His voice hardened now, like steel cooled in snow.

"This is a competition. And in this family, even those who lose will be rewarded. But those who excel... will be remembered."

A flicker of fire sparked in the eyes of some disciples. The weight of his words struck deep.

"And let me make one thing clear—'those who lose gets a reward' is not an invitation to slack off. It is a statement of fairness, not weakness. Those who earn more will receive more. Those who push harder will rise higher."

He took a final step forward, the morning sun glinting off his dark robes.

"If you want to stand proudly before the other clans... If you want your name spoken with awe at the next Coldwind City Championship..."

Fang Yuan's gaze burned through the crowd like a blade.

"Then we have to seize it."

Silence followed, heavy, tense, electric.

In that moment, every disciple felt the shift. The weight of responsibility. The chance for glory.

Just as Fang Yuan's words settled into the courtyard like stone in still water, a small hand rose from among the younger disciples.

"Brother..." Fang Mei's voice piped up, a little unsure. "Um... will there be no Qi Transformation category?"

Fang Yuan paused, his gaze drifting toward her with casual ease, until her words fully sank in.

"...Qi... what?"

He blinked. Slowly.

Then blinked again.

A rare flicker of genuine confusion crossed his otherwise stoic face.

"I figured I'd discuss that with the elders later," he said slowly. "Since... no one in your age group should even—"

His voice trailed off mid-sentence.

Silence stretched thin and awkward.

Fang Yuan stared at Fang Mei, eyes narrowing slightly, as if squinting would make her answer change.

Fang Mei looked away innocently, her fingers twisting at her sleeves.

She gave a soft nod, then mumbled, "I broke through two nights ago... I think."

The courtyard exploded.

"WHAT?!"

Fang Yuan practically choked on air.

"You're already in Qi Transformation?!"

Fang Yuan stared.

Qi Transformation Realm, within the Fang Clan was more than just a breakthrough.

It was a threshold. A declaration that one had the strength and maturity to shoulder the weight of the family's responsibilities.

Tradition held that reaching Qi Transformation qualified a cultivator to be considered for elder status.

He himself had stepped into that realm at seventeen... and became Clan Head shortly after.

Now, before him stood Fang Mei. Eighteen. Quiet, dutiful... and already standing where few her age even dreamed to reach.

A soft breath escaped him.

He remembered giving her the Bone Marrow Pill.

Remembered letting her cultivate uninterrupted for a week within the spirit pond, hoping to refine her foundation—not push her so far, so soon.

He should've expected this. But still, the excitement in his chest beat louder than reason could suppress.

Then, something clicked.

"Fang Mei," he said suddenly, voice firm but touched with warmth. "Come here."

She blinked, startled by the sudden call but stepped forward, cheeks still pink from earlier.

The other disciples her age watched in stunned silence, their emotions a whirlwind of jealousy and admiration..

Fang Mei came to stand beside Fang Yuan, straight-backed despite her nervous fidgeting.

Fang Yuan turned to face the gathered crowd.

"You all saw it for yourselves," he said, voice ringing clear across the courtyard.

"One of your own rose to Qi Transformation."

He let the moment linger.

"Her talent is real. Her effort even more so."

Then he raised a hand, gesturing broadly to the younger generation.

"As of today, each of you will be given one day to cultivate within the Spirit Pond."

The courtyard rippled with stunned gasps and wide eyes.

"That opportunity is not a gift," Fang Yuan continued, "but a test. Make the most of it, and your wings will soar."

He looked at Fang Mei then, pride gleaming beneath his steady composure.

"And now—greet your new elder."

A stunned silence held for half a heartbeat.

Then it broke.

One by one, disciples began to bow. Some slowly, others more deeply, hesitant at first, but sincere.

"Greetings, Elder Fang Mei."

Fang Mei blinked, utterly overwhelmed.

Her hands fluttered once like she might wave it off, but then she lowered her head and whispered, "I-I'll do my best..."

Fang Yuan's lips quirked into a rare, quiet smile.

She was a little awkward. A little soft.

But she had earned the title.

Chapter 36: Fang Tian [1]

One Week Later

The soft scratch of brush on parchment filled Fang Yuan's study.

Stacks of scrolls sat neatly on the edges of his desk, but the one in front of him kept drawing his eyes back.

The family finance report.

He frowned.

The numbers were bleeding red.

Ever since the purge during the banquet, too many elders had vanished.

With them went oversight of critical family businesses—storefronts, auction houses, even spirit herb contracts once secured by generations of negotiation.

But that wasn't the worst of it.

What made Fang Yuan's knuckles whiten as he held the brush was the discovery that some of those elders had looted their posts before leaving.

They took contracts, spirit stone vaults, private ledgers, even stripped some merchant caravans that bore the Fang family crest.

"Had they not given up?" he muttered. "Or are they just stupid?"

Loyalty shattered. Gold stolen.

And now, he was left to mend the family's bleeding treasury with string and willpower alone.

He exhaled, eyes narrowing on the deficit.

He needed to act and fast.

Either he came up with a new revenue stream or cut support to certain family branches.

Neither option pleased him.

Fang Yuan's jaw tightened.

He needed to fill the hole they had left—financially, operationally, politically—before the rival clans smelled blood.

Then—a knock.

Fang Yuan didn't look up.

"Enter."

The door opened with a creak, and the sound of familiar footsteps echoed lightly against the polished floor.

Fang Yuan looked up.

His brush froze mid-air.

"...You're back?"

Fang Tian stood there, smiling lazily, his travel robes dusty but intact. His sword hung by his hip like it had never left.

"I heard the family was in trouble," he said, scratching the back of his head with a sheepish grin.

"So I figured I should probably come help... before you go bald from stress."

"You left without a word," Fang Yuan said, voice flat. "And now you walk in with jokes?"

Fang Tian shrugged. "Would you believe I had an epiphany in the wilderness?"

"No."

"Well," Fang Tian grinned, "Then I'll just say this—my timing is perfect, and you look like hell. Need help?"

Fang Yuan stared for a moment, then let out a slow sigh.

"You better have brought solutions. Because all I've got are problems."

Fang Tian stepped in, shutting the door behind him. "You still brew that bitter tea?"

Fang Yuan's brow twitched.

"Sit down," he said dryly. "I'll make a pot."

Fang Yuan moved with quiet purpose, setting the clay teapot atop the brazier.

The coals within hissed faintly as they caught, heat blooming gently into the room.

As the water began to warm, he allowed his gaze to settle once more on Fang Tian—his younger brother, dust still clinging to the hems of his robe, posture casual, but eyes sharp as ever.

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes slightly.

Qi Condensation... peak stage.

The spiritual pressure around Fang Tian was faint but unmistakable.

Not newly acquired, but tempered and weathered by wind and road and battle.

A breakthrough earned outside these walls, not granted within.

Different from Fang Mei.

She had used the Bone Marrow Pill and cultivated in the Spirit Pond for a full week.

Fang Tian had been different.

When he had last stood in this room, he had barely stepped into early Qi Condensation.

Now, despite wandering outside, despite no access to the family's best resources... he had reached the very peak of the realm Fang Mei had only just surpassed.

Am I really in a novel where you are the protagonist? Fang Yuan thought. *I won't be surprised if that were the case, honestly.*

The kettle began to whistle softly.

He poured the steaming water into the teapot, letting the fragrance of roasted spirit-leaf tea drift into the air.

It smelled rich and earthy, faintly bitter—just the way Fang Tian liked it.

Fang Yuan placed the teacups down, and finally spoke again, voice quieter now.

"You've improved."

Fang Tian raised an eyebrow, accepting the cup with a casual nod. "A few bandits, some beasts, a couple of near-death moments... That'll do it."

Fang Yuan gave a snort, half amused.

"You went from early stage to peak in under a month. Don't pretend you just stumbled your way up a mountain."

Fang Tian grinned. "I might've tripped up a few, sure. But I climbed them too."

There was a beat of silence as both brothers sipped their tea.

Fang Yuan then immediately spat it out into the corner spittoon with practiced efficiency.

"Tch. I still can't get over the taste."

Fang Tian burst out laughing, the steam from his own cup fogging the edges of his smirk. "You're hilarious, brother. You're the one who brewed it!"

"And you're the one who asked for it."

"That's true," Fang Tian said cheerfully, taking another sip without flinching. "Terrible tea, though. Has character."

Fang Yuan shook his head, setting his cup aside like it had personally offended him.

"So?" he asked, voice settling into something sharper.

"How do you plan to help the family? Don't tell me you've got a stash of interspatial rings hidden up your sleeve filled with spirit stones and auction-grade artifacts?"

Fang Tian nearly choked. "Ha—ha... Brother, you've developed a sense of humor since I left. That's... that's good."

He scratched his cheek awkwardly, avoiding Fang Yuan's gaze for a second. "But, no. That's not it."

He straightened slightly, setting his cup down with a soft clack.

"I can refine pills."

Fang Yuan didn't speak right away. His gaze locked onto Fang Tian's face with the same calm intensity he used to measure cultivation breakthroughs and alliance treaties.

"I can refine pills for the clan," Fang Tian continued, a bit more seriously now. "And I can also take them out and sell them. I'm fast with my refinings."

Nothing really flashy. But it'll bring in steady income while we stabilize. I'm good at pill refining."

Fang Yuan leaned back slightly.

Of course, he already knew.

This brother of his had been personally courted by the Pill King, Tushan and failed!

"Hmm," Fang Yuan hummed aloud, though his mind was already working five steps ahead. "So the pill prodigy returns and wants to open shop for the family..."

Fang Tian chuckled. "Brother, pill refinement just happened to be something I was good at. Nothing too amazing."

Chapter 37: Fang Tian [2]

Fang Tian stepped out of the study, the door clicking softly shut behind him.

He wandered through the still courtyards of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, letting his feet carry him aimlessly beneath the soft hush of swaying silk lanterns and the rustle of wind through peach blossoms.

Eventually, he came to a stop beside the koi pond.

Servants were finishing their morning task, tossing small pinches of spirit feed into the water.

The koi darted beneath the surface, flashes of orange, white, and gold rippling like sunlight through glass.

Fang Tian stood in silence, hands behind his back, gaze fixed on the fish.

Then, without warning, he turned and briskly walked to a shaded corner behind the pavilion.

There, he doubled over and vomited.

It wasn't graceful.

When it was done, he wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, letting out a long exhale.

"Hah... brother surely knows how to concoct poison," he muttered to himself with a crooked grin. "What a truly unmatched talent..."

Just then, the simple iron ring tied around his neck pulsed faintly with light.

A voice echoed directly into his mind, wry, ancient, and unmistakably amused.

"Tian. Are you secretly a masochist?"

Fang Tian choked on the air and spun around, eyes wide.

He darted a glance left, then right. The koi-feeding servants had already departed, their footsteps fading down the stone path.

Luckily no one had heard the voice or seen him.

"...Teacher Qin Shi Huang?" he whispered, tugging the ring up slightly.

The ancient soul sealed within chuckled softly.

"You knew that tea was brewed with spiritual bitterness root and molten elderleaf bark. Your brother clearly despises it himself, and yet... you asked him to make it."

Fang Tian let out a defeated sigh and made his way back to the pond.

He sat down at the edge, feet dangling into the cool, clear water. The koi swam lazily around his legs, unfazed by his presence.

"Because that's just who he is..." Fang Tian said softly, resting his elbows on his knees. "That's what my brother's always been."

The smile that touched his lips then was quiet. Distant.

"When Mother and Father died... I was still a child and so was he. But he—he didn't cry."

He paused, watching the water ripple gently beneath his toes.

"He didn't even weep... not in front of anyone. The day Uncle Chen came back carrying their bodies, my brother came looking for me like the world was crumbling beneath his feet.

His face was pale, his hands shaking, but the moment he saw me, he straightened his back like he could hold up the sky if I needed him to.

He was hurting but he smiled at me anyway.

Like I was the one who needed protecting."

Fang Tian's voice dropped, barely above a whisper.

"That day... he became the wall I could lean on."

"He buried them with his own hands. He stood between the elders and me when they started whispering about who'd inherit what.

And then growing up, he cooked for me. He bathed me and even trained me. He never once told me or show me that he was tired."

A small laugh escaped him, dry and soft.

"I knew he was exhausted. But he never let it show. Not even once."

The ring was quiet for a moment, before speaking again, this time, more gently.

"You admire him deeply."

Fang Tian nodded. "I do."

He leaned back, arms sprawled behind him, face tilted toward the cloudless sky.

"He pretends to be cold on the outside. And he is damn good at it. But I've never known anyone more dependable than my brother."

He closed his eyes, letting the breeze rustle his hair.

"That's why... even if he handed me the worst tea on the continent, I'd still drink it again."

A soft chuckle escaped him—warm, a little self-mocking.

"Because that's the only kind he knows how to make. Bitter, clumsy... but brewed with that same tired care he's always had. The kind that hides everything he's feeling beneath a quiet routine."

He opened one eye, watching the koi swirl lazily in the pond.

"I grew up drinking that tea. Honestly, it's a miracle I haven't died of poisoning by now."

The koi stirred beneath the surface, gliding in lazy arcs.

Fang Tian smiled faintly.

"...Still tastes like death, though."

The koi stirred again beneath Fang Tian's feet, casting shimmering reflections onto the pavilion walls.

For a moment, only the wind replied.

Then the ancient voice returned, deeper now, edged with something more solemn.

"In all my centuries of watching emperors, generals, and geniuses rise and fall... I have seen many strong men."

The ring pulsed once, like a heartbeat of old memories.

"But rarely have I seen strength wielded with such restraint."

Fang Tian cracked one eye open, brow raised. "Huh?"

"Your brother," Qin Shi Huang said, tone even. "He does not lead through fear. Nor through grandeur. And yet... you follow him willingly. As do many."

Fang Tian gave a half-smile. "Of course I do."

"Most patriarchs I've known demanded loyalty," the voice continued.

"He earns it. Piece by piece. Burden by burden. Quietly."

There was a long pause then something unexpected.

A quiet hum, almost thoughtful.

"He reminds me of myself."

Fang Tian blinked, incredulous. "Teacher... are you comparing yourself to my brother?"

"Yes. And no." The voice that echoed from the ring held a glint of amusement now, tinged with something deeper—respect, perhaps.

"In my prime, I built empires through sword and decree. I conquered with strength and made sure the world knew it. I wore my achievements like armor—visible, undeniable.

But your brother... he hides his."

Fang Tian's brows knit slightly.

The koi stirred in the pond below, casting rippling gold patterns across his boots.

The voice in the ring continued, slower this time, as though each word carried weight forged in ancient fires.

"Your brother is already at the peak of the Nascent Soul Realm."

Fang Tian's head snapped up.

"Yes, Tian. Peak Nascent Soul. Likely for some time now."

A pause. The water stilled.

"Tell me—what do you think would've happened if he'd revealed that from the start?"

Fang Tian didn't answer.

"Would his life not be easier?" Qin Shi Huang went on, rhetorical now.

"If others knew, truly knew, that he stood at the summit of power, would they not tremble to defy him?"

Would rival clans dare plot against him? Would those treacherous elders have plotted so easily?"

Fang Tian's jaw tightened. "Then why hide it?"

The ancient emperor's voice grew quiet.

"Because fear demands obedience. But it does not build loyalty."

"Your brother chose the harder path." The voice dropped lower, more thoughtful. "He did not want subjects who cowered before him, but a family that rose with him.

He let others underestimate him so he could see who stood with him when they thought him vulnerable."

"And in doing so, he lost much." A long pause. "But what remains... may yet be unshakable."

Fang Tian sat in silence, the koi circling his submerged feet like flickers of gold in a quiet dream.

And then he chuckled, soft and warm as he leaned back fully, arms spread to the sky, letting the sunlight pour over his face.

"Guess I better work harder, huh? Don't want him carrying all of it alone."

The ring didn't respond immediately—but when it did, the voice was quieter.

"That is loyalty, Tian. And loyalty... is what gives kings peace."

Chapter 38: 'Yuan-ge.'

Fang Tian wandered through the east courtyard, his steps slowing as the familiar sight of the plum blossom trees came into view.

Their petals drifted gently in the breeze, and beneath them, exactly where he expected, sat Fang Mei.

She was perched on the stone bench, brushing ink across a scroll with practiced ease but her eyes were distant, her strokes slower than usual.

Fang Tian smiled softly. He took a breath.

"Mei'er."

She stopped writing.

Her brush froze mid-air. Her shoulders stiffened.

Slowly, she turned to look at him.

Fang Mei stood. Her gaze locked with his.

Then, without a word she stormed toward him.

Fang Tian opened his arms instinctively.

She didn't hug him.

She punched him in the chest. Not hard but hard enough to make a point.

"You were gone for a week, Tian," she said, voice trembling.

"I know. I'm sorry," he said, catching her hand gently. "I didn't mean to worry you. I just... needed time to clear my head."

Her lip quivered, and she tried to look away, but his other hand was already on her cheek.

"I didn't want to drag you into that chaos," he murmured. "But I missed you. Every day."

Fang Mei hesitated then stepped forward, leaning into his chest.

She rested her forehead against him, voice barely a whisper. "You're not allowed to disappear like that again."

"I won't."

"Swear it."

"I swear."

They stood there for a long moment, bodies pressed close, the scent of plum blossoms drifting around them like a curtain of spring.

Then Fang Mei looked up, her eyes wet but steady.

"Next time," she said, poking his chest, "if you need to clear your head, take me with you."

Fang Tian chuckled and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Deal."

Elsewhere, beneath a quieter sky...

Fang Yuan sat at his desk, the low creak of wood beneath his elbows the only sound in the room besides the occasional rustle of parchment.

He exhaled slowly.

Another report rested in his hands, this one not soaked in red.

His eyes scanned the neat lines of cultivation updates and performance summaries.

For once, something promising.

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

A handful of younger disciples had advanced. Some had stepped into mid-stage Qi Realisation.

One had reached early Qi Condensation. Modest progress, but real progress.

Hard-earned.

Fang Yuan leaned back, resting his head against the lacquered frame of the chair.

His fingers drummed the tabletop slowly.

The system hadn't been much help lately.

His SP balance was laughable.

No pills could be purchased, no cultivation manuals could be unlocked, and there was no shortcuts offered.

Only one thing gleamed in the quiet void of the system interface.

[Quest: Win the championship in the upcoming annual Coldwind City Championship]

Reward: 100,000 SP

Divine-grade Cultivation Manual

Divine-grade.

Fang Yuan stared at those words for a long moment.

That grade... didn't even exist in records he had read.

He had seen Yellow-grade.. Black, Earth, and even Heaven! But Divine?

He hadn't known if that was real or just a different name for Heaven Grade.

His gaze drifted to the window.

Outside the window, the sky had deepened into hues of violet and gold, dusk gently settling over the Fang estate.

Fang Yuan stared for a moment, letting the silence wash over him. The wind rustled the trees. A bird cried somewhere in the distance.

He exhaled.

Then nodded once, quietly.

"...I hope Fang Mei can win it," he murmured to himself. "For all of us."

Not just for the reward. Not for the prestige.

But for the family.

For their name.

Fang Yuan smiled faintly, pride warming his chest as he looked out over the desk.

...And then, a beat later—

"I mean, obviously not because I want the Divine-grade manual," he added with a perfectly straight face.

"That would be selfish."

A pause.

Then he cleared his throat.

"For the family."

He rose from his chair and stretched, rolling his shoulders with a faint crack.

The last of the reports had been signed and sealed. The last number double-checked.

Now, it was time for his daily visit to the Spirit Mine.

Ever since he had made his uncle combine the newly restored formation flags with the enhancements from the Spirit Pond, the eastern ravine's flow of spiritual energy had surged to unprecedented levels.

The very air shimmered with qi—dense, rich, wild like a current of thunder held just below the surface.

It was no longer just a mine.

It was a treasure trove.

And that, of course, had begun to draw attention.

He had already spotted signs foreign robes at the forest's edge, unfamiliar auras lingering just long enough to be noticed.

The five great families also knew something had changed.

Some of their cultivators even dared to wander close.

But so far, no one had crossed the boundary.

Not yet.

Fang Yuan stepped outside into the evening air, dark robes fluttering slightly in the breeze.

His gaze swept across the horizon where the mine lay nestled between jagged cliffs and thick mist.

He would make his rounds.

Just like always.

And if anyone tried to sneak in tonight...

They would find the patriarch of the Fang family wasn't as calm as he looked.

Fang Yuan was halfway to the Eastern Ravine when he stopped dead in his tracks.

Ahead, sprawled across the path like a scene ripped straight from a low-budget drama scroll, was a girl—bloodied, barely conscious, and dressed in a tattered robe that looked like it had lost a fight with a hungry beast.

Thankfully, the fabric still clung to the vital zones... barely.

A sword rested atop her head, sheathed.

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes.

He didn't move.

His gaze swept the scene again.

Still unmoving.

"...Hmph."

This was it. He had read about this in novels. A classic setup. Damsel in distress.

Hero walks by. Finds beautiful dying girl. Swoops in to rescue. She clutches his sleeve, bats her eyes, calls him "Big Brother" or worse, "Yuan-ge."

Then—*bam!* Wakes up tied to a tree with his spatial ring gone, reputation ruined, and possibly even missing a kidney.

"Nope," Fang Yuan muttered flatly, folding his arms.

He circled the girl for a while keeping his eyes both on her and the sword.

The sword didn't react. The girl didn't move.

Still, he narrowed his eyes.

"Is this one of those cursed swords that seals your cultivation if you pick it up? Or maybe she's the sword spirit in disguise. Is that a... formation seal under her leg?! No... just a rock."

He squatted down—still at a very safe distance.

Then paused.

"...Huh."

She wasn't... pretty.

Not in the enchanting, hero-baiting way novels liked to describe.

Her face was smudged, nose slightly crooked, and one eyebrow was shaved clean off.

Her lips were chapped, and what little of her hair wasn't matted with blood was tied in the world's saddest bun.

"Definitely not the honey-trap type."

That, more than anything, gave him pause.

"...Maybe she really is just unlucky."

She moaned faintly, barely lifting her head.

"Water..."

Fang Yuan didn't budge. He squinted harder.

"What kind of girl passes out perfectly diagonally across a trail? What kind of person collapses with a sword neatly on their head? That takes skill."

He looked around.

No assassins leapt out of the bushes.

No arrows flew from the trees.

No weird flute music played in the background.

"...Tch. Damn it. What if this one's real?"

Fang Yuan sighed deeply. The kind of sigh that said 'I'm too smart for this, and yet here I am.'

Chapter 39: Lin Feng.

Fang Yuan stared at the girl for a long moment more, then let out a low, irritable sigh.

"Alright, alright. If this turns out to be some grand scam, I'm punching someone," he muttered.

With a flick of his wrist, a slender porcelain bottle appeared in his hand, a mid-grade healing elixir from his interspatial ring.

This elixir was not cheap nor was it common but it was renowned to be effective.

He knelt down carefully, still watching her face for any signs of deception.

"Open your mouth," he said.

She didn't respond.

Her lips were cracked. Her breathing shallow. One eye was swollen shut, and the other fluttered faintly as if she barely registered he was even there.

"...Tch."

Fang Yuan clicked his tongue and gently tilted her head back.

With practiced care, he pulled the stopper from the bottle and poured a small stream of the elixir into her mouth.

It dribbled out the side.

She wasn't even conscious enough to swallow.

Fang Yuan's jaw tensed.

He muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like a curse, then used two fingers to gently pinch her jaw open, and with his other hand, coaxed another slow pour of the elixir between her lips.

"Swallow, dammit. Don't waste spirit stones..."

This time, reflex took over, her throat twitched, and the medicine went down.

Not all of it, but enough.

Fang Yuan watched her breathing for a few seconds. It steadied a little. Her brow, tight with pain, eased just a fraction.

"Stubborn girl," he muttered, corking the bottle and slipping it away. "You'd better not die. That bottle cost more than this entire mountain path."

He stood back up, dusting his hands on his robe, glancing at the sword still resting across her.

"...Right. Now let's deal with you."

He eyed the sword warily, still half-convinced it might fly up and talk at any moment.

Fang Yuan slowly reached out toward the sword balanced atop her head.

"Alright," he muttered, eyes narrowed. "If you're cursed, enchanted, or secretly a talking blade from the ancient era... now's the time to speak."

Nothing happened.

He hovered his hand over it for a few seconds longer then grabbed the hilt in one swift motion.

Silence.

There was no thunderclap. Nor a surge of demonic aura. And definitely not sudden spike in spiritual resistance.

Just... metal.

He gave the sword an experimental tug, lifting it free from the girl's tangled hair and setting it down beside him. His brows furrowed.

The thing was—well, pathetic.

The blade was chipped in three places, the edge so dull it might've been used to spread butter, and the scabbard had more cracks than lacquer.

The entire weapon looked like it had been dragged behind a carriage for ten miles and then forgotten in a rice field for a decade.

"...Are you kidding me?" Fang Yuan said flatly, giving it a light shake. "This is just an old piece of scrap."

He held it at eye level, tilting it under the moonlight. The surface barely reflected anything.

There was no inscription, no hidden mechanism, not even a faint qi resonance.

It was just an old, beat-up sword.

"Tch. And here I thought maybe it was sealed or disguised. But no... it's just trash."

Still, something about the fact that she had held onto it—even as wounded as she was—gave him pause.

He glanced down at the girl again.

Her hand, even now, twitched faintly toward where the sword had been.

"...Huh."

Fang Yuan sighed. "Of course. Sentimental attachment. Classic."

He slung the sword carefully over his back with a bit of cloth to avoid touching the filthy grip directly.

Then, kneeling again beside the unconscious girl, he took a moment to reinforce the medicine's effect with a bit of gentle qi.

Her injuries weren't life-threatening anymore, but they would take time.

He muttered under his breath, "I'm curious what makes a nascent soul realm reduced to this state, you're coming with me..."

And with that, Fang Yuan scooped her up—sword and all—and began heading back toward the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, robes fluttering behind him as the stars blinked quietly above.

Fang Yuan strode through the pavilion grounds, the bloodied girl cradled in his arms like an awkward bundle of trouble.

Her weight wasn't the issue—it was the looks.

Dozens of servants and disciples along the path froze mid-step, jaws dropping as they witnessed the normally aloof, terrifying patriarch carrying a girl.

A girl.

Not a scroll. Not a sword. A girl.

One servant tripped over a broom.

Another quietly dropped a spirit herb tray.

Fang Yuan didn't break stride.

His expression was neutral, dignified even, as the mutterings began to rise like cicadas in heat.

He arrived at the main residence and stepped through the side corridor, where the ever-efficient housemaid Felicia was arranging medicinal incense by the doorway.

"Felicia," he said evenly.

She turned, eyes widening slightly when she saw the mess of robes, blood, and limbs in his arms. "Master Fang Yuan... is she...?"

"She's alive," he said. "Barely. Get her cleaned, treated, and put in a quiet room. Something with wards."

Felicia nodded briskly. "Understood, Master."

Fang Yuan carefully lowered the girl onto a side bench and dusted off his sleeves like he'd just delivered a log of firewood. "I'm going to fetch a doctor from the outer court. Keep an eye on her."

"Yes, sir."

He turned to leave, but paused as he passed the corner of the hallway.

There were voices, low at first but they grew clearer with every step he took toward the side garden.

"Did you see that?! He was carrying a girl!"

"No way, our patriarch?! I thought he was married to his sword!"

"I told you he wasn't a monk—"

"No no, listen, I always thought he was... y'know... into *men*. You saw how close he is with Lin Feng."

"I thought he liked him too."

"What if she's his secret wife?! Maybe she was injured protecting him from assassins!"

"That's so romantic—wait, you don't think he was the one who hurt her, do you?"

"Idiot! He's not like that!"

Fang Yuan stopped mid-step, his left eye twitching as he slowly turned toward the voices.

When the servants made eye contact with him, their faces froze mid-whisper—like children caught stealing peaches from the kitchen.

Panic rippled through their expressions.

Their backs straightened in a snap, and they bowed so quickly it looked more like they were dodging a blow than giving a greeting.

"G-Greetings, Patriarch!"

Then, like startled rabbits, they turned on their heels and sprinted in the opposite direction.

One even tripped over a broom, scrambled back to their feet, and kept running without looking back.

Fang Yuan blinked once. Then twice.

"..."

He turned back to the hall, walking slowly, mind churning.

The whole house thought I was gay?!

He looked up at the ceiling as if searching for divine confirmation.

"...I've been living here since I was an infant."

A pause.

"I've literally raised my younger brother here."

Another pause.

"Just because I haven't married yet—"

He stopped himself, taking a long, slow inhale through his nose.

"...I shouldn't care."

Then again... everyone?

He stared off into the distance, expression blank.

"...Is that why Uncle Chen stopped looking for a suitor for me?... Is that it?"

He turned away. "Tch. I don't owe anyone an explanation."

Chapter 40: A Love Triangle.

The fading sun cast long shadows across the garden stones as Fang Yuan made his way down the winding path that led beyond the inner walls.

The hush of evening had settled in, broken only by the chirping of crickets and the occasional soft flutter of a lantern ribbon caught in the breeze.

He had done all he could for the girl, for now.

What remained... was in the hands of someone far humbler, but no less vital.

Past the arched gate, nestled beside a grove of jade bamboo, stood a small tiled building, a modest structure surrounded by flowering herbs and drying medicinal roots strung neatly along a wooden rack.

The scent of crushed leaves and spirit bark lingered thick in the air.

Fang Yuan approached the front step and lifted a hand to knock but the door opened before his fingers touched the wood.

An old man with a snow-white beard and slightly hunched back stood in the doorway, eyes sharp beneath his bushy brows.

Despite his age, his gaze remained clear, his aura completely mundane, unadorned by qi, yet grounded by decades of experience.

"Patriarch Fang," the old doctor greeted with a respectful nod. "It's been a while."

Fang Yuan inclined his head slightly. "Doctor Mu. I need your skills. It's urgent."

Before the doctor could reply, a girl stepped out from behind him, young, no older than eighteen, in a simple white robe.

Her hair was tied back in a ribbon of soft green silk, her hands dusted with dried petals and ink-stains from grinding herbs. Her gaze met Fang Yuan's, and she quickly bowed.

"Family Head Fang," she greeted politely, but her voice had a quiet flutter to it, like a lantern caught in uncertain wind.

Then, hesitantly, almost in passing—

"...Is Senior Brother Fang Tian well?"

Fang Yuan's expression didn't shift.

Stillness.

Then a slow, measured nod. "He's doing fine."

The girl's eyes lit for the briefest of moments, an involuntary flicker of joy and then dimmed again just as quickly, her gaze dropping to the floor.

"Oh," she said. "That's good."

She busied her hands immediately, adjusting the herb pouch at her waist, brushing nonexistent dust from her sleeves, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

Movements too quick. Too precise.

Fang Yuan watched silently, his gaze softening a fraction.

He had known for a long time.

The way her eyes lingered just a moment too long whenever Fang Tian visited.

The way she offered him the freshest tea leaves from her own supply, pretending they were part of Doctor Mu's standard store.

How she always seemed to find a reason to come into the room when Fang Tian laughed.

Now, she stood there with her shoulders held carefully still, back straight, posture perfect, like she had practiced how not to care.

But her fingers fidgeted behind her back.

And her lip trembled slightly when she thought no one saw.

Fang Yuan didn't say anything.

He could have said he's taken. He could have said don't wait. But what purpose would it serve? She already knew that.

So instead, he simply offered a small nod of gratitude.

"Your master's help is needed at the pavilion," he said gently.

Doctor Mu stepped forward, already packing up his tools with quiet efficiency. "A patient?"

"Yes. A young woman. She's stable for now, but in poor condition."

"I see. Then we'll go at once," Doctor Mu said, stroking his beard with mild intrigue. "I must admit, I'm curious to meet the woman who warranted a personal visit from the esteemed family head himself."

His gaze flicked to the girl beside him. "Lian'er, come along."

She nodded quickly, gathering a satchel of clean bandages and prepared tinctures, wrapping the leather ties around her wrist with practiced ease.

But when she looked at Fang Yuan again, there was a new stillness in her eyes, one of effortful calm.

The three walked side by side through the garden paths, moonlight beginning to spill softly over the walkways.

Lian'er said nothing during the walk. Her gaze never once drifted toward Fang Yuan again, nor did she ask more about Fang Tian.

But she walked a little faster.

As if trying to get through the moment before her thoughts caught up.

Fang Yuan glanced toward the night sky, the stars above just beginning to blink into view.

The path back to the Phoenix Soul Pavilion wound gently beneath the plum trees, their white blossoms glowing faintly under the moonlight.

The three of them, Fang Yuan, Doctor Mu, and Fang Lian walked in calm silence.

The only sound was the soft crunch of gravel beneath their feet and the faint chime of Lian'er's medicine pouch swinging at her side.

Fang Yuan walked with his usual calm, hands folded behind his back, his gaze level but distant.

Lian'er kept her head slightly lowered, walking half a pace behind the doctor.

Her face was composed, the corners of her lips gently curved in that polite expression she always wore in public but her hands were wound tightly around the strap of her satchel.

A faint murmur of laughter drifted down the path ahead, light, warm, and familiar.

Lian'er's steps faltered. Then, around the bend...

Two silhouettes turned a bend in the path and came into view, illuminated by the lantern light.

Fang Tian and Fang Mei walked side by side, their hands loosely intertwined, fingers brushing now and then as they spoke in low voices.

The mood between them was light, and Fang Tian was mid-laugh as if whatever weight had burdened him had finally lifted just a little.

Lian'er's steps faltered only slightly.

Just a breath.

Fang Mei noticed them first.

Her eyes flicked up, gaze sharpening ever so subtly when she saw who approached.

Her fingers remained laced with Fang Tian's, but her posture straightened, and the hand that held his tightened just a little more.

Fang Tian looked up a moment later.

His face broke into an easy grin.

"Lian'er!"

He stepped forward slightly, releasing Mei's hand out of instinct and raising his own in a friendly wave.

"It's been years! Look at you—you've grown a head taller!" he laughed warmly. "Still helping old Mu keep us cultivators alive, huh?"

Lian'er returned the smile effortlessly, bowing with a calm that belied the little shake in her breath. "Senior Brother Tian. You look well."

Fang Tian didn't notice the pause.

"Of course I do! Life's good. And hey—Fang Mei, you remember Lian'er, right?"

Fang Mei stepped beside him again, her smile smooth, almost serene. "Of course. We met once, years ago. The other adopted girl... though I don't think we ever got to speak properly."

Lian'er nodded. "That's right. It's nice to see you again, Sister Fang Mei."

"Likewise," Mei said, though her gaze lingered on her for a heartbeat longer than necessary.

Fang Tian clapped his hands together. "Ah, I remember how Uncle Chen used to say you two were like plum blossoms grown apart—both picked by the same hand."

"Picked, yes," Fang Mei said quietly, her fingers subtly reclaiming Fang Tian's hand again. "But not meant for the same vase."

He blinked, confused for a moment as he blinked, "Huh?"

He scratched his head. "Poetic as ever, Mei'er."

Lian'er's eyes flickered to their hands then back to his face. Her expression didn't change.

That same calm, well-mannered smile remained in place.

But her fingers gripped the satchel tighter.

Fang Yuan stood off to the side, silent. Watching.

He didn't say a word. Not when Tian greeted her with casual warmth.

Not when Lian'er smiled with heartbreak in her eyes. Not when Mei said nothing but made her meaning clear.

Doctor Mu finally stepped in, clearing his throat as he tapped his cane lightly against the ground.

"Ahem. As much as I enjoy blooming sentiment and old reunions, we've a patient waiting, Patriarch Fang."

Fang Yuan nodded, his voice level. "Of course. This way."

Doctor Mu bowed politely to Fang Tian and Fang Mei, then resumed walking, his cane tapping rhythmically against the stones.

Lian'er gave a parting bow. "Senior Brother. Sister Fang Mei."

And then she followed.

Her steps were steady. Measured. Quiet.

She didn't look back.

Fang Yuan lingered a moment longer. Just enough to see Fang Tian turn to Mei with a puzzled look as if trying to figure out what he'd missed.

Mei only leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder with deliberate tenderness.

Fang Yuan's eyes flicked away.

Then he turned to walk after the others.

Love, it seemed, demanded no fewer sacrifices than war.

