

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

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Blue. A blue colour root.

Fang Yuan stared at the confused girl, the glow of the spirit stone painting her face in soft celestial hues.

Yellow, that was the most common root known to mankind, and it was the weakest.

Cultivators born with it rarely made it past Qi Condensation.

Maybe Qi Transformation if they were stubborn and lucky enough.

Hard work could beat talent, sure but not when talent started with a broken foundation.

He had never seen a yellow root cross into true power.

Then black, respectable enough.

With black, one could reach Golden Core if they worked hard. Many did. It was the most stable of roots, dependable and balanced.

Brown followed, most commonly called as Earth Grade. It was freakishly rare.

A sign of potential that could even touch the Nascent Soul realm. He'd seen one or two succeed with it. Most didn't.

As for white... white was heavenly root.

He had that himself too.

White was a root blessed by fate. It shone with purity and balance, aligning seamlessly with nearly all attributes.

He himself had soared to the peak of the Nascent Soul Realm by the prime age of thirty with that root and he knew that wasn't even his limit.

Given enough resources, he would breach Hollow Spirit. Maybe even beyond.

But this.

Hers wasn't even white.

The stone's final hue shimmered into a calm, crystalline blue.

Fang Yuan's breath caught.

It really was blue...

His mind whirled.

Divine Root?

No. That was too absurd. A divine root girl left behind by Fang Guo?

That scheming rat hadn't even thought to check her roots?

How... how had no one noticed her talent before?

He stared at her in utter disbelief, still reeling as his thoughts spiraled.

Fang Lian blinked, clearly overwhelmed.

She didn't know what the colors meant, only that her family head looked at her like she'd just murdered someone.

The silence stretched. A moment became several.

Then her lip trembled.

"...Did I do something wrong...?"

A tear welled in the corner of her eye, threatening to fall.

Fang Yuan blinked hard, mentally kicking himself.

Right—right! Say something, do something!

He straightened abruptly, clearing his throat.

"Ahem."

But even as he opened his mouth, his thoughts spun fast and ruthless.

This girl... she has a divine root. That's beyond rare. If I don't tie her to the clan now, someone else will.

The sects, the empires, hell, even immortals might fight over someone like this.

He shook his head slowly, forcing himself to remain composed.

I need to bind her fate with the Fang Clan before it's too late. She can be our future... no, she is the Fang Clan's future. My trump card. I feel like a villain, but that's me alright.

He inhaled deeply, let it out in one slow breath, and fixed his gaze on her.

Fang Lian looked up at him, uncertain, cheeks pink with embarrassment.

Then he spoke.

"All right," he said firmly, voice level but resolute. "I will personally train you."

Fang Lian gasped.

"R-Really?!"

Fang Yuan nodded with weight.

"Yes. From this day forward, you'll learn under me. Directly."

Her eyes widened, and she nodded with such enthusiasm that her hair bounced.

She looked like a small chick ready to imprint on the first warm figure she could find.

"Then... do I call you Master?" she asked, eyes sparkling.

Fang Yuan raised a brow, then gave a half-smile.

"I am your Master now," he said. "And the bond between a master and disciple... it's as strong as that between father and child."

He paused, trying to sound sagely and poetic.

"In your case... I am like the blood flowing in your veins."

Fang Lian, starry-eyed, nodded deeply, clearly inspired by the gravity of those words.

...Despite how unbelievably cringeworthy they sounded to Fang Yuan the moment they left his mouth.

Why did I say that? Blood flowing in her veins? Hah. If doctor Mu heard that, he'd prescribe me something for my brain.

But thankfully, she didn't notice.

She was too excited and too eager.

Too ready to prove herself.

Fang Yuan sighed inwardly in relief.

Well. That's one thing handled.

Fang Yuan smiled faintly, brushing a hand behind his back.

"Come," he said, turning toward the hallway.

Fang Lian lit up like a lantern.

"Yes!"

She followed without hesitation, no, not just followed. This time, she walked right beside him, her steps almost skipping in excitement.

Fang Yuan noticed the shift. From quiet and timid to bold and trusting. She was already warming up to him.

Good, he thought. The bond is forming faster than expected.

But as they walked, his mind couldn't help drifting.

She doesn't know how rare her root is right now.... she doesn't know what that talent could mean out in the wider world. But what if later she realised it later? Is this... technically scamming?

He winced inwardly.

No, no. I'm not taking anything from her. In fact, I'm giving her everything, guidance, resources, protection. And if she grows into a powerhouse in the future...

He glanced sideways at her, at the bright eyes and unfiltered enthusiasm.

...Then maybe she'll be the type of person who returns kindness tenfold. Like one of those novel protagonists. The loyal kind.

He looked up, half lost in thought only to realize they were already at the door.

He blinked.

Oh. We're already here.

Without missing a beat, he opened the door to his office and stepped aside.

"Go ahead," he said.

Fang Lian stepped in with barely restrained glee, like a chick being welcomed into the inner nest.

He gestured to a chair near the center table.

"Have a seat," he said, closing the door behind them.

She sat obediently, hands folded, posture straight, waiting like a disciple before her great master.

Fang Yuan watched her settle in, sitting with a straight back and sparkling eyes, like a student presented before a sage.

The reverence was... a bit much, but also endearing.

Without a word, he walked to one of the tall shelves lining his office wall and pulled out a sealed scroll.

The wax bore the Fang clan's lightning-wrapped raven sigil.

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He returned, placed the scroll gently on the table in front of her, and tapped it once.

"Memorize this. It's our Fang family's core cultivation manual. Low Heaven Grade, it's incredibly stable and sharpens foundational qi perfectly.

But if anyone asks, you're practicing a mid Earth Grade manual. Understood?"

Fang Lian's eyes widened. "Yes, Family Head!"

Her hands trembled slightly as she touched the scroll, as though it were some sacred relic.

Was this the privilege of learning directly under the clan head? She felt like she had stepped into a dream.

Fang Yuan wasn't done.

He turned again, this time to a hidden compartment behind his desk.

With practiced ease, he withdrew a jade box and a small, glowing ring.

One by one, he laid out the items before her:

- A Bone Marrow Pill, glimmering faintly gold.
- A jade bottle of Qi Realisation Pills, still cool to the touch.
- Twenty pristine high grade spirit stones, dense with energy.
- And lastly, a small spatial ring.

"These are your initial supplies," Fang Yuan said, his voice calm but commanding.

"Tonight, take the Bone Marrow Pill. Ask Doctor Mu to prepare a proper medicinal bath, you'll need it."

He tapped the jade bottle lightly. "These Qi Realisation Pills will support your early cultivation. Use them well. When you run out, come back to me."

Fang Lian nodded quickly, lips parted in awe. "Y-yes! Thank you!"

Fang Yuan looked at her again, expression neutral but his tone gentler. "Take them."

She reached forward slowly, reverently, hands cupping the items as though they were priceless treasures, which, in a way, they were.

As she held them close, Fang Yuan pulled one last item from within his sleeve: a carved wooden access token, shaped like a tiny raven with a lightning pattern etched in gold.

"This," he said, placing it carefully on the table, "is your access pass to the Spirit Pond. You may enter freely. Cultivate there, Lian'er."

Her hands shook.

Then, without a word, she dropped to her knees, tears pooling in her eyes.

She kowtowed once.

Twice.

A third time.

"Thank you... thank you, Family Head. I will never forget this kindness. I swear it."

Fang Yuan sat quietly, watching her with unreadable eyes.

But inwardly?

He couldn't help but nod.

A divine root, loyal, sincere, with drive... and a damn good head on her shoulders.

He couldn't have asked for more.

Fang Lian bowed one last time, her arms full with the scroll, pills, stones, and the carved wooden token nestled safely in her hand.

"I'll do my best!" she promised, her voice soft but radiant with conviction.

Fang Yuan gave a quiet nod. "Go on then. Cultivate well, Lian'er."

She turned and left, walking briskly, her steps light and filled with purpose, like someone who had just glimpsed a new future for the first time.

The door clicked shut behind her, and silence returned, familiar and heavy.

Fang Yuan let out a long breath.

He leaned back in his chair, eyes tracing the lines of the wooden ceiling, the dim lanternlight flickering across his features.

"Tonight, huh..." he murmured, voice low.

He rose from his seat, stepped toward the window, and pushed it open.

The breeze outside was cool, brushing against his skin with the faint scent of river mist and distant lotuses.

The sun had dipped just enough to paint the sky in hues of amber and violet.

He looked out toward the distant horizon.

"Riverlight Bridge..."

His gaze darkened slightly.

"...Lake Frost."

That cursed name brought with it old memories, bitter, jagged, and buried deep.

The lake where his parents had died.

The night when the family had almost splintered completely.

Fang Yuan clenched his jaw, fingers tightening slightly on the window ledge.

"So we've come to this again, Lanyue," he whispered. "I suppose we can't avoid the inevitable."

He stood there in silence for a while longer, letting the wind pass through him, brushing aside the weight in his chest, if only just a little.

Then, with a deep breath, under the soft silver gleam of the moon, Fang Yuan stepped out of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, robes swaying lightly with each measured step.

The night was crisp and windless, and the stars scattered across the sky like spilled jade fragments.

A perfect night for flying or maybe... a fight.

With a flick of his sleeve, a sharp whistle split the air as a streak of light surged beneath his feet.

His sword, elegant and deadly, hovered into place, and Fang Yuan stepped onto it without pause.

He ascended smoothly, his sword gliding through the night sky like a silent phantom, trailing faint ripples of spiritual energy in its wake.

The wind whispered past, cool and clear beneath the stars, but even the purity of the night couldn't ease the weight pressing against his thoughts.

He was heading for River Light Bridge, the agreed meeting point.

A place etched with old blood and older memories.

And waiting for him there was a name that soured his mood.

Gu Lanyue.

The grandfather of Gu Xin.

The man who had, long ago, thundered his disapproval of the engagement between Fang Tian and Gu Xin.

Despite his protests, the engagement was finalized, paperwork signed by Gu Jian and Fang Wei, sworn brothers who had stood side by side for years.

But everything changed when Fang Yuan's father died.

With Fang Wei's death, the Fang clan's prestige plummeted out of the five Great families, and it was Fang Yuan, barely in his twenties who picked up the shattered mantle.

The Gu family suddenly disappeared.

They made no mention of the wedding nor their alliance.

Just silence without an ounce of support when the Fang family was at its lowest.

Until years later, on his thirtieth birthday, Gu Xin came herself to formally cancel the marriage pact with the help of the Divine Ice Sect.

With that, all formal ties with the Gu clan should have ended.

After all, Gu Jian had been sworn to his father, not the clan.

Yet the moment Gu Lanyue stepped into the Nascent Soul Realm, he had immediately sought out the Fang family.

...The Gu clan had left when they were needed most. Yet somehow, they returned now when they were not wanted at all.

Chapter 53: Nascent Fight. [1]

The letter Gu Lanyue had sent was anything but courteous.

Laced with barely-veiled contempt, it demanded a hefty sum in reparations, for the so-called "damage" to the Gu family's reputation.

And this meeting today wasn't about reconciliation.

It was about humiliation.

A stage set to disgrace the Fang family, and to dictate just how far they would be allowed to crawl.

Fang Yuan chuckled under his breath as the ground approached.

"If I have to make the entire empire understand that I'm a threat," he muttered to himself, "then so be it."

"No one will get away with belittling the family I protect. And no one... will be spared if they dare threaten them in front of me."

He descended slowly over the stone path of River Light Bridge, letting his presence ripple just enough to be felt but not enough to be called arrogant.

There, on the River Light Bridge, Fang Yuan spotted the Gu family entourage and mixed among them, cultivators from several other clans.

Uninvited spectators, no doubt, a tactic from the Gu family to escalate the situation even.

Two figures stood out from the rest.

One was tall and imposing, his beard streaked with silver, his brow locked in a permanent scowl—Gu Lanyue.

The other stood quietly at his side, head slightly bowed, eyes shadowed with guilt or shame—Gu Jian.

The air was taut.

Tighter than a drawn bowstring. One breath too loud might have set the world ablaze.

"You're late," Gu Lanyue said, voice like rusted iron dragged across steel, sharp, scraping, and utterly devoid of courtesy.

Gu Jian remained silent beside him, his eyes not daring to meet Fang Yuan's.

Fang Yuan landed gracefully on the bridge, robe fluttering once as his feet touched stone. His expression didn't change.

He met Gu Lanyue's glare head-on and said calmly,

"I'm pretty sure I'm on time."

His voice echoed across the bridge, quiet, composed, and utterly unbothered.

Gu Lanyue's gaze narrowed.

"So... when are the others arriving?"

Fang Yuan didn't even blink. "Others?"

He let out a short breath, almost a laugh, and casually lowered himself onto a nearby stone bench. "There are no others. It's just me."

The sheer leisure in his tone sent a ripple through the gathering.

A blatant act of disrespect.

Gu Lanyue's jaw tightened, his eyes flashing with restrained fury.

He exchanged a glance with Gu Jian before the two silently took their seats as well.

The other elders of the Gu family followed suit, forming a semicircle around the meeting table.

Fang Yuan's eyes swept over the assembly and he noticed them immediately.

Three elders.

Their qi was subtle, restrained, but not quite native to the Gu family's style.

The rhythm of their breath, the way their auras pulsed, it was clear.

They practiced foreign techniques.

From other families.

So the Gu family had invited outside forces, even for something as petty as a "discussion."

Fang Yuan smiled thinly as he settled deeper into his seat, eyes glinting coldly beneath the moonlight.

So this is the stage they've chosen.

Gu Lanyue leaned forward, his voice oily with condescension. "Fang Yuan, you're young. This sort of matter is best left to adults. I'm willing to wait."

Fang Yuan met his gaze, unflinching.

"There's no need, old man. I'm a dictator in the Fang family," he said flatly. "If I say the Fang family must attack, they will. If I command them to kill those they love most, they won't hesitate. They have no choice."

A ripple of shock swept through the gathered cultivators.

Gasps. Murmurs. One elder's hand even twitched toward his storage pouch.

Of course, none of that was true.

But how would these guests, these spies even know that?

Gu Jian finally spoke, voice low, almost pleading. "Nephew... on account of your late father, I don't wish to hurt you. Show some respect to the elders."

Fang Yuan turned his head slowly, eyes sharp.

"Nephew?" he echoed coldly. "Who are you to say such words? Do I know you? Are we related? I don't think so."

Gu Jian looked at Fang Yuan, not with anger, but regret. He saw too much of Fang Wei in him.

Gu Lanyue's laughter broke the tension, high, harsh, and theatrical.

"This is why adults should speak, not arrogant brats. You think a little cultivation gives you the right to bark?"

Then, like thunder rolling across the bridge, he moved.

Gu Jian followed a breath behind him, two Nascent Soul cultivators striking in perfect coordination, a twin assault meant to overwhelm.

But Fang Yuan was already in the air, having leapt back the instant they moved.

Their strikes exploded against the stone bridge, but found nothing but wind.

Fang Yuan hovered high, robes billowing, spiritual energy crackling at his feet.

He looked down at the two elders below, expression calm.

Then he laughed.

"Come," he said, voice echoing over the river. "Both of you."

His eyes gleamed.

"Let's see if your so-called experience can stop a dictator."

Gu Jian stood tall, the refined pressure of a mid-stage Nascent Soul cultivator rolling off his body in steady waves.

Beside him, Gu Lanyue's qi surged, less refined, slightly unstable, but still formidable as an early-stage Nascent Soul cultivator.

And yet, standing before them in midair with hands behind his back was Fang Yuan.

To the outside world, his cultivation was known as early-stage Nascent Soul.

But in truth...

He had already reached the peak.

Far beyond what either Gu Lanyue or Gu Jian suspected.

Below him, Gu Lanyue narrowed his eyes and glanced sideways at Gu Jian.

"It would be shameful," he muttered, voice loud enough for all to hear, "if we both attacked a junior together."

Fang Yuan didn't respond. Outwardly, his expression remained unreadable.

Inwardly, he sneered.

Shameful? As if you both didn't just try to cripple me with that little sneak attack. Hypocrite.

But he kept the thought to himself. He said nothing.

He was going to let the old man dance to his own drama.

Chapter 54: Nascent Fight. [2]

Fang Yuan didn't respond. Outwardly, his expression remained unreadable.

Inwardly, he sneered.

Shameful? As if you both didn't just try to cripple me with that little sneak attack. Hypocrite.

But he kept the thought to himself. He said nothing.

He was going to let the old man dance to his own drama.

Gu Jian, at least, seemed to take the old man's comment to heart.

With a quiet sigh, he stepped back, hands folded behind him as he retreated to the edge of the bridge, moving in together with the crowd.

Signaling that the fight, at least for now would be one-on-one.

Fang Yuan's gaze dropped lazily to Gu Lanyue.

He offered a faint, mocking smile.

"Old man," he said, tone mild but laced with disdain, "Are you sure you can handle me alone? I don't mind facing the two of you alone. I don't want to accidentally hurt a 'senior' after all."

Gasps echoed among the crowd.

The words were arrogant and disrespectful.

But more than that, they sounded so confident to their ears.

Fang Yuan raised his hand.

With a subtle flick of his fingers, his sword shot into the air, spinning once before coming to a perfect halt, hovering at his side, trembling with restrained power.

Then, without even drawing it, he vanished from the sky with the sword in hand.

In a blur of motion he swooped in like a flash of lightning, striking directly at Gu Lanyue.

Gu Lanyue reacted to it fast.

His left hand snapped out and caught the sword by the tip mid-air, stopping it just as Fang Yuan reached him.

At the same moment, his right arm swept forward, intercepting Fang Yuan's strike with the side of his palm.

Clang!

Spirit force exploded between them, rippling the air and cracking the stone tiles beneath the bridge.

Fang Yuan's foot barely touched the ground before he twisted, using the momentum to flip backward into the air again, grinning as his sword returned to his hand with a sharp whirl of wind.

Gu Lanyue's eyes narrowed.

That wasn't the movement of someone at early-stage Nascent Soul. No, it reminded him more of his spars with his son.

Fang Yuan darted forward again, this time with his sword glowing, its blade humming with pale golden radiance that shimmered like a blade forged from sunlight itself.

"Tyrant Light Sword—First Strike: Divine Line."

He slashed.

A razor-thin beam of light erupted from the blade, a luminous line that cut through the air like divine judgment itself, aimed squarely at Gu Lanyue.

The light strike roared forward, a blinding lance of energy tearing through the air with impossible speed.

Gu Lanyue's eyes narrowed to slits.

In a breath, he brought his hands together before him, palms meeting in a sharp clap as spiritual energy surged between them.

Threads of qi coiled along his arms, weaving into a defensive lattice as he braced to intercept the blow.

He stood firm, arms locked in position like a mountain daring the heavens to strike it down.

And the heavens did.

BOOM!

The beam crashed into him.

The crowd gasped as Gu Lanyue was sent skidding backward, his boots grinding across stone, sparks flaring beneath his heels.

Cracks spread along the bridge beneath his feet.

Gu Lanyue eyes widened slightly.

I couldn't blocked it?

I lost in a contest of raw strength?

"This brat..." he muttered, gritting his teeth. "I've underestimated him deeply."

His arms trembled slightly, and his spiritual aura flickered out of rhythm for a split second.

His gaze grew sharper now, every ounce of mockery vanished from his face.

Now wary, Gu Lanyue's pupils narrowed. He threw his right palm forward and shouted,

"Poison Silk!"

From sleeves to fingertips, hundreds of gossamer threads surged into the air, nearly invisible, laced with venomous qi, and gone in a blink.

A trap laid in silence.

They scattered in all directions and disappeared from sight, forming a web of spiritual traps in the sky.

To the untrained eye, they had disappeared.

But Fang Yuan felt it, his divine sense touched the net, each thread vibrating faintly with a corrosive, soul-piercing aura.

Invisible tripwires.

A web waiting to ensnare the reckless.

From where he hovered above the bridge, Fang Yuan inhaled, golden light pouring from his blade like an aura of divine flame.

"Tyrant Light Sword—Second Strike: Star Form."

He raised the blade overhead and slashed downward.

A new formation burst from his blade.

This time, it wasn't a single line, but five streaks of radiant qi, spiraling and condensing into a star-shaped construct, burning bright, humming with suppressed fury.

The very air warped around it.

The watching crowd stared wide-eyed.

None had ever seen a Nascent Soul battle this close before.

Even from afar, the light scorched their vision. The crowd shielded their eyes with trembling hands.

They could feel the weight of that strike in their chests.

None dared move except Gu Jian, who silently raised a barrier to protect the crowd.

His brows furrowed as he watched closely.

This wasn't just a talented junior.

No...

This was a real threat.

Up above, Gu Lanyue narrowed his eyes at the incoming star and let out a cold chuckle.

"Foolish junior."

He stood firm, not even attempting to dodge.

The star slammed into him like a falling celestial body—

CRASH!

Light exploded in all directions, and the air twisted with force.

The bridge trembled under the sheer energy released.

As the light died down, Gu Lanyue stood tall, part of his robe scorched, his skin glowing faintly with defensive qi but mostly unharmed.

The star construct had shattered but not without a result.

A jagged edge of light had pierced through his defense.

Gu Lanyue's eyes widened in surprise when he saw his defenses had been cracked.

"—?!"

And then he looked again at Fang Yuan.

High above, Fang Yuan hovered in midair, panting.

Blood ran from the corner of his mouth, soaking into his robes. The color drained from his cheeks.

He was bleeding, profusely.

"What...?" Gu Jian whispered from below, brows furrowed in confusion.

Fang Yuan let out a low chuckle, wiping the blood from his mouth.

"Heh.... Damage reflection?" he muttered, now understanding. "So that's your trick."

He coughed violently, blood staining his robes.

His lips curved upward, blood glistening on his teeth.

"That... was new."

Below, the crowd stirred.

What kind of technique was that?

What kind of cultivator was Fang Yuan, to still smile after that?

Even battered, he looked like a sovereign dragon above the battlefield, drenched in blood, but defiant.

For the first time, Gu Lanyue's smirk faltered, thinning into a tight, unreadable line.

He hadn't expected the Second Strike of Tyrant Light to pierce his Poison Silk Defense, a technique known to rebound force at twice its strength.

Nor had he expected the same junior, bloodied but still smiling to remain standing after enduring double the power of his own attack.

His Poison Silk, famed for its resilience, had withstood the full-force blow of a mid-stage Nascent Soul cultivator without faltering in the past.

And yet, here it was... cracked.

And there he was, Fang Yuan hovering in the air, lips stained red, robe fluttering in the starlight, eyes gleaming with cold defiance.

Chapter 55: Nascent Fight. [3]

"You're not at the early stage of Nascent Soul realm. No, you are at the peak of Nascent Soul realm," Gu Lanyue said quietly.

His voice had lost its edge, now low, wary, and tight with disbelief.

He stood amid the fading sparks of his shattered defense, face pale, brows knit.

Though his body remained unscathed, there was no denying the tremble in his hands.

The Poison Silk technique, brilliant and deadly, came at a heavy cost.

His vast ocean of qi had receded to a pitiful tide.

He clenched his fists at his sides, breath steadying. *That boy...*

Gu Jian stepped forward, robes fluttering in the wind, the barrier behind him fading into motes of light.

His face was drawn with realization.

He had sensed it too, the weight behind Fang Yuan's strikes, the effortless control, the terrifying speed.

He spoke softly, almost to himself.

"What a prodigy..."

In the air above them, Fang Yuan hovered still, blood on his robes, a faint tremor in his limbs but that smile...

That maddening, unshakable smile.

His blade glinted beside him like a silent guardian, and his presence, even injured remained oppressive, almost sovereign.

Gu Jian narrowed his eyes.

That boy got hit with a reflected strike equivalent to twice of a peak Nascent Soul realm's full-force blow... and he's still standing?

He felt a chill rise along his spine.

One wrong move, just one and this entire bridge would have been a bloodstained ruin with no survivors.

Fang Yuan unaware of the thoughts in Gu Jian's head tilted his head slightly, eyes gleaming with amusement beneath half-lidded lashes.

"Gu Jian. Gu Lanyue," he said, voice calm and unhurried despite the blood trailing down his chin.

"Do you two wish to continue?"

There was no mockery in his tone, just a dangerous stillness. Like a predator offering mercy, to see what his prey would choose.

Gu Lanyue's jaw tightened.

He was unharmed, yes. But also powerless.

His Poison Silk had consumed too much, he had qi enough for one technique, maybe two.

But against this devil, what would that accomplish?

Gu Jian's lips pressed into a thin line.

His cultivation being mid-stage Nascent Soul, gave him a chance. He was still in pristine condition.

But was it worth the risk?

His eyes flicked to Fang Yuan again and for just a moment, he saw it.

The fracture behind the smile.

The way his fingers tightened briefly around his sword hilt. The faint shudder in his knees.

He was holding himself together with pure will.

Now or never, he thought.

But then another thought followed, colder and more dangerous:

If I try and fail... I'll die.

And worse, so does the prestige of the Gu family.

He turned to Gu Lanyue, their gazes meeting, silent understanding passing between them in an instant.

Lanyue's eyes narrowed, lips pressing together in a reluctant grimace.

Then Gu Jian stepped forward and bowed slightly.

"We concede... for today."

The words fell like a stone in a still lake.

Fang Yuan's eyes sparkled. He chuckled low in his throat.

"Today, huh?"

He didn't need to say more.

Everyone heard it, the meaning behind the words. *I'll be back, I'm surrendering just for today.*

That was fine.

He would be ready.

With that, Fang Yuan raised his sword, the blade humming as it responded to his command.

He stepped lightly onto it, blood trailing down his torn sleeve, but his posture never faltered.

He cast one last glance at the crowd at the stunned elders, at Gu Lanyue's clenched fists, at Gu Jian's grim expression.

Then he rose into the air like a sovereign leaving the battlefield, the wind parting before him as though it, too, bowed in reverence.

A single stroke of the sword and he was gone.

The moonlight shimmered behind him.

And on River Light Bridge, no one dared speak for a long, long time.

Fang Yuan flew in silence.

The sword beneath his feet glided as if drawn along moonlight itself, its edge singing faintly with the last remnants of spiritual force.

He remained upright, shoulders square, spine straight his posture regal and proud despite the searing pain wracking his insides.

The moon still hung in the sky, pale and indifferent, casting its silver light over the quiet rooftops of Phoenix Soul Pavilion.

No one stirred.

All slept, unaware of the battle their clan head had endured alone.

As he descended onto the courtyard outside his office, his boots barely touched the ground before his knees buckled.

Thud.

Fang Yuan collapsed forward onto the cold stone floor. Blood erupted from his mouth, splattering the steps.

He coughed again, red dripping between his fingers as he pressed them to his lips.

His vision blurred, his knees trembled but he gritted his teeth and forced himself upright against the doorframe.

His eyes were bloodshot, veins spiderwebbing out from their corners.

His breathing came in shallow, ragged bursts.

But after a few deep, controlled inhalations, he calmed the chaos within his dantian, enough to suppress the worst of the backlash.

I can't let anyone see me like this, he thought.

But fate was unkind.

The door burst open.

"Clan Head!"

Felicia.

One of the family servants, her usually calm face now frozen in horror. She rushed forward, skirts sweeping, panic in her eyes.

"You're hurt!"

Fang Yuan gave a faint nod, wiping the corner of his mouth with the sleeve of his robe.

"Go call Doctor Mu," he said, voice hoarse but firm. "Tell him... it can't be delayed."

Felicia stepped forward instinctively to help him, but he raised one hand to stop her.

"I'll walk to my chamber myself."

"But—!"

"I said I'll be fine," he said again, more gently this time. "If you delay for my sake, the damage might settle deeper."

Felicia hesitated, biting her lip, but she finally nodded.

She bowed swiftly and turned on her heels, bolting down the hall like a blur of blue robes.

Doctor Mu's quarters are near the outer pavilion, Fang Yuan thought grimly.

Even with her speed, it should take some time.

Alone now, he braced himself against the wall and began walking.

Each step was agony.

His insides churned, he could feel internal bleeding across several meridians.

The backlash from the Poison Silk reflection hadn't just harmed his body; it had disturbed his soul sea as well.

But... this pain, he thought, is still manageable.

By the time he reached his chamber, he was drenched in sweat, his white robes soaked through and clinging to his back.

He pushed the door open and staggered in.

The room was dark, lit only by the moonlight pouring through the open lattice window.

Just as Fang Yuan stepped into his chamber, the door clicking shut behind him, a ripple of golden light shimmered in front of him.

Ding—

A soft chime echoed in his mind, low and metallic, like the tolling of a distant bell submerged in water.

A golden screen flickered into existence before his weary eyes.

His breath caught.

The pain in his chest seemed to fade for a moment.

The screen pulsed once, then vanished into dust, leaving only silence in its wake.

Fang Yuan stood there, still soaked in sweat and blood, and slowly, very slowly he smiled.

Chapter 56: The New Fang Family.

Two months had passed since that night.

The Fang family was in quiet turmoil.

The patriarch had not emerged from seclusion since. Not even once.

Two months ago, Fang Yuan had made a declaration so shocking that it still echoed through every corridor of the clan.

Without warning, he had summoned the family together and distributed bone marrow pills to every member of the younger generation, one for each.

As for the elders, he handed out the remaining pills with a casual grace, assuring those who didn't receive one that their needs would still be provided for.

Somehow, the way he said it made even those who missed out nod in silent trust.

Then, before disappearing from sight, he left something behind.

A treasure hoard.

Nine jade bottles of Qi Realisation Pills.

Ten jade bottles of Qi Condensation Pills.

Two bottles of Qi Transformation Pills.

And then the truly insane part—

Ten full jade bottles of Golden Core Pills.

The elders had stared.

The juniors had nearly fainted.

When Fang Chen, his uncle, stammered and asked where it all came from, Fang Yuan simply replied:

"It was in the gift box sent by the Divine Ice Sect."

Fang Chen's face had turned the color of a steamed tomato.

And then, just like that, Fang Yuan vanished into closed-door cultivation.

He hadn't been seen since.

Now, back to the present...

The family hall was currently packed.

The handful of Fang family elders stood along the outer edges, solemn in expression.

Juniors sat on the lower steps in neat lines, all wearing clean robes, some clutching pill bottles or cultivation slips.

They all appeared to be waiting.

And then the side doors opened with a creak and through the door, Fang Chen emerged.

His face looked drawn from the stress of the past weeks, but he carried himself with authority.

After all, for now, he was the acting head of the Fang clan.

Behind him walked his younger sister, Fang Jingyi, practically bouncing with excitement.

A radiant smile lit up her features as she waved to a few of the juniors.

Fang Chen sighed as he stepped onto the main dais. He looked over the gathered clan and gave a small nod.

"Everyone's here?" he asked the family servant beside him.

The family servant bowed. "Yes, Acting Patriarch. All lineages are present."

Fang Chen rubbed his temple, feeling another headache settle in.

He cleared his throat.

"Let's begin," he said.

Fang Chen stepped forward, clearing his throat as the chatter in the hall died down.

His voice echoed with calm authority.

"We have been preparing for this day over the last two months.

The Coldwind City Championship Tournament is to be held in two days and our clan will not just participate, we will take the championship title home."

A quiet murmur of anticipation ran through the crowd.

Fang Chen raised a hand.

"We've selected a group of promising juniors, cultivators who will represent the Fang Clan with honor. So those whose names I call out, please step forward."

He unfurled a scroll and began reading.

"Fang Yang. Age 19. Cultivation: Early Stage Qi Transformation."

The hall broke into polite applause as a young man stood up with pride in his eyes and fire in his heart.

Qi Transformation, in the Fang family, reaching this stage had always signified that a cultivator was qualified to be considered for eldership.

It marked the threshold where one's strength could no longer be ignored, where their voice could carry weight in family affairs.

But despite this, no formal promotions had been granted.

Not yet.

With the true patriarch, Fang Yuan, still in seclusion, no one dared disrupt the natural order.

Even Fang Chen, acting as the interim head, refrained from overstepping. He knew his place, not as a ruler, but a steward.

To appoint new elders now, without Fang Yuan's presence, would be presumptuous.

And so, for all their achievements, the newly risen talents stood just shy of the threshold... waiting for the day their patriarch returned.

Fang Yang bowed once, neatly, then made his way toward the stage with steady steps. His face brimmed with joy.

Fang Chen nodded. "Next."

"Fang Bo. Age 19. Also at Early Stage Qi Transformation."

A slightly shorter youth jumped to his feet, smiling ear to ear.

He gave his elder brother a quick fist bump on the way to the stage.

The clan clapped again, louder this time.

"Fang Ruì," Fang Chen read on. "Age 18. Early Stage Qi Transformation."

A pretty girl in pale blue robes stood gracefully. The applause swelled, not just for her cultivation, but for her demeanor.

She was poised, calm, and radiant.

She walked up the steps and waved modestly to the crowd before taking her seat with the other two.

Then Fang Chen looked up.

"Now, we have one of our current elder, Fang Mei. Age 18. Cultivation: Late Stage Qi Transformation."

The hall erupted.

Even those already on stage clapped for her, their smiles turning admiring.

Late Stage at eighteen was an achievement worthy of pride.

Fang Mei, dressed in simple white with a raven lightning motif at her collar, walked up with a faint nod.

Her gaze was quiet but confident. She sat at the center of the formation, shoulders straight.

Fang Chen paused.

A faint smile tugged at his lips before he glanced down at the scroll again.

"And finally... our dark horse."

The room quieted.

Not a breath could be heard.

The air felt charged.

And Fang Chen looked up slowly.

"Fang Tian. Age 20. Cultivation: Early Stage Golden Core."

The silence held, stretched taut like a drawn bowstring.

And then, the hall erupted.

A thunder of claps, stunned gasps, whispers and disbelief echoed together.

Even the elders leaned forward in their seats, expressions shifting from curiosity to disbelief.

Golden Core? At twenty? Did that not place him the same as his brother, the patriarch?

Fang Tian's name was known but not as a prodigy.

If memory served them right, not long ago, he had barely reached the Qi Condensation stage.

Just a few short months prior, he was dismissed by many as one with low talent, a youth whose prospects were limited at best.

No one had placed their hopes on him.

And yet now... he stood on stage, calm and composed, bearing the cultivation of an Early Stage Golden Core realm cultivator.

The realization hit like thunder across the room.

Was this even natural? What kind of fortuitous encounter... or what terrifying training... could make such a thing possible?

Shock gripped the hall, because they all understood:

This wasn't just a leap.

It was a defiance of cultivation logic!

Fang Tian was no longer someone they could overlook.

Fang Tian stood slowly from the back of the hall, long black robes trailing behind him, his expression calm.

He walked forward, step by step, like a quiet storm.

And when he reached the dais, he bowed only slightly before sitting beside Fang Mei.

None of the others on stage dared speak.

Not out of fear.

But out of awe.

Fang Chen let the room settle.

Then he spoke again, voice solemn:

"These five will carry the Fang Clan's name into the Coldwind City Tournament. Let's show our support for them and also learn from them."

His gaze swept across the hall, hardening just slightly.

"For in this era, talent alone is not enough. We will need unity. Strength. And absolute loyalty."

He closed the scroll with a quiet snap.

"May the heavens watch over them."

The hall erupted again in applause.

Chapter 57: Tournament [1]

The day of the Coldwind City Championship dawned with crisp wind and cloudless skies.

From early morning, the streets were already filled with bustle.

Market stalls overflowed with food and trinkets, street performers gathered crowds at every corner, and merchant caravans from outlying towns poured into the city gates.

Coldwind City, second in influence only to Snowveil City within the Eastern Region had become the epicenter of anticipation.

The tournament was more than just a contest between juniors.

It was a stage of power.

And so, to triumph in Coldwind was to send ripples across the Eastern Region itself.

A symbol of which family's light would shine brightest for the coming year.

Representatives from nearby villages and subordinate towns made their way toward the Coldwind City Arena, eager to witness the spectacle.

At the main entrance, flags of various families flapped proudly in the wind.

And at the heart of it all stood the towering Coldwind Arena, an ancient coliseum carved from snow-white stone and reinforced with spiritual formations.

Thousands gathered in the stands, their voices rising in waves of chatter and excitement.

Fang Chen, acting patriarch, led the group as they arrived in the area.

He wore ceremonial robes bearing the Lightning raven crest of the Fang Clan and walked with calm composure.

His face bore a pleasant smile, though his eyes were ever-watchful.

Behind him were the five chosen competitors, Fang Yang, Fang Bo, Fang Rui, Fang Mei, and finally... Fang Tian.

Fang Chen's group walked straight into the VIP sector, where the heads of other noble families awaited.

There, standing in formal reception, were the four most prominent family leaders of Coldwind City:

Zhao Ming of the Zhao Clan, dignified in his black-gold robes, white beard immaculate, eyes sharp beneath heavy brows.

He Long, burly and broad-shouldered, bore the aura of a battle-hardened general. The War Serpent sigil on his chest glinted faintly as he clasped his hands behind his back.

Matriarch Lin Xi, elegant and cold, moved like a drifting snowflake. Her ink-dyed robes shimmered as if woven from morning mist.

And lastly, Wu Shun, tall and quiet, arrived in formal armor with a lion crest glowing on his chest. He said little, but the sharp glint behind his glasses missed nothing.

As Fang Chen approached, the four rose to greet him.

"Brother Fang," Zhao Lin said first, offering a cupped fist salute. "It's an honor to see the Fang Clan take part again this year."

"Especially with such... gifted juniors," He Long added with a smile.

Wu Shun said nothing, but his eyes flicked to each of the Fang disciples as if memorizing their qi signatures.

Lin Xi tilted her head slightly. "Acting Patriarch Fang," she said coolly, "Let us hope this year's games remain civil."

Fang Chen returned the greetings with grace, smiling warmly but saying little.

He knew what they were thinking.

The Fang Clan was now backed by a Nascent Soul cultivator.

And none of them were.

Their greetings were warm on the surface, but it wasn't hard to see the veiled tension beneath.

Even among the Five Great Families, the Fang family's influence now loomed like a silent mountain.

None of them dared offend Fang Yuan, not when the memory of what happened at River Light Bridge was still whispered about in private circles.

The other family heads didn't know all the details, but they knew enough: Gu Lanyue and Gu Jian had returned defeated... and silent.

And since that day, the Gu family had shut its doors.

Yes.

No one would provoke the Fang family today.

Not openly.

Fang Chen gave a shallow bow. "May the best disciples win."

Then, without another word, he and his group moved to their designated seating.

As the families settled into their designated VIP sector overlooking the grand Coldwind Arena, the atmosphere shifted subtly.

With polite smiles and warm tea served by attendants, the real contest had already begun, not between the juniors, but between the clan heads.

Boasts disguised as casual conversation floated through the air like drifting petals, each sentence laced with quiet pride and competitive edge.

Patriarch Zhao Ming was the first to open the game.

He chuckled lightly, stroking his immaculate white beard. "My son Zhao Ren has made some progress recently. He just broke through to the peak of Qi Transformation last week."

His words were calm, but the glint in his eyes betrayed the pride he felt. A 21-year-old at peak Qi Transformation was nothing to scoff at. Especially in a generation so recently considered lackluster.

There were murmurs of approval from a few seated elders nearby.

He Long grinned, arms still crossed behind his back. "Not bad, Brother Zhao. But my nephew He Yong isn't far behind. He's 20 this year and also stands at the peak of Qi Transformation."

His tone was loud, jovial even, but his eyes slid toward Fang Chen with a trace of provocation.

Another round of polite nods rippled through the section.

Wu Shun adjusted his glasses, face unreadable as ever. "My niece, Wu Min, is only 18... but she has already stepped into the mid-stage of Qi Transformation. I imagine she'll surprise a few people today."

His voice was quiet and clipped, but every word was precise, meant to highlight how early their talents had matured.

Matriarch Lin Xi remained silent throughout. She sat gracefully, sipping her tea as if none of this interested her.

Only a faint smile curved her lips. An expression of amused detachment or perhaps quiet confidence.

Fang Chen gave a small, courteous nod at each revelation, offering no comment of his own.

Inside, however, he could feel the pressure mounting.

Zhao Ren, He Yong, Wu Min... all were talented. All strong contenders.

And yet, they still had no idea what the Fang Clan had prepared.

That was their greatest advantage.

Fang Chen forced a smile and sat back. He could feel sweat at the base of his neck despite the cool breeze drifting through the arena.

He was the acting patriarch of the Fang Clan but he wasn't a Golden Core expert.

At most, a Peak Qi Transformation cultivator, a realm these giants had long since eclipsed.

Zhao Ming, He Long, and Wu Shun, each was at peak Golden Core cultivator.

Their qi was vast and dense, restrained behind iron-like spiritual discipline.

Even sitting beside them made Fang Chen feel like a frog among tigers.

Chapter 58: Tournament [2]

A clear chime echoed through the Coldwind Arena, silencing the crowd like the sudden hush before a storm.

A woman in flowing lavender robes stood at the center of the announcer's platform.

Her voice, imbued with spiritual resonance, carried effortlessly across the massive coliseum.

"Welcome, one and all, to the opening round of the Coldwind City Championship!" she called, her tone bright and commanding.

"Today marks the beginning of a contest between proud heirs and hidden talents, a clash of conviction, cultivation, and destiny!"

The crowd roared in response, cheers rising like crashing waves.

Banners rippled in the wind, and excitement churned the air like a brewing storm.

The host raised one hand and called, "First match, step forward, Cultivator Ma Zhen, outer city rogue practitioner!"

From the waiting area, a young man in brown and faded grey robes stepped onto the stage.

His expression was calm, eyes sharp. Qi flared briefly around him, solid, dense, peaking at the upper end of Qi Condensation realm.

Among the spectators, murmurs followed.

"Rogue cultivator, huh?"

"Still, peak of Qi Condensation... that's no joke."

"Without one of the great five family backing, making it to this level alone is impressive..."

The host's voice rang again. "And his opponent... representing the Wu Clan—Wu Min!"

The shift in the crowd was immediate.

Whispers turned into breathless hush. Even the elders leaned forward.

From the Wu Clan box, a girl stepped forward.

Eighteen. Slender, graceful. Her robes were pale jade embroidered with a subtle lion crest.

She moved with an almost lazy elegance, long sleeves swaying like drifting clouds.

Her expression was serene, almost bored, as if none of this mattered.

She stepped onto the stage and stopped exactly three paces from Ma Zhen.

They stared at each other.

Ma Zhen bowed politely. "I look forward to a good fight."

Wu Min just tilted her head slightly. "You should give up."

Her voice was soft. Almost kind.

Ma Zhen blinked. Then frowned. "I appreciate the concern, but—"

A sigh escaped her lips.

Before he could finish, she raised her hand.

What followed was... strange.

To many, it looked as if she hadn't moved at all.

And yet—

Pa!

A sharp sound exploded through the air. Ma Zhen's head snapped violently to the side, his body spinning midair from the sheer force of the strike.

He hit the ground several meters away, sliding like a ragdoll across the marble platform before coming to a stop near the edge, unconscious.

One hit.

The entire stadium fell silent.

Even the announcer stared, mouth open slightly.

In the viewing stand, Zhao Ming winced. "That's... the Mirage Slap?"

He turned to Wu Shun with narrowed eyes. "You taught that to your junior?"

Wu Shun simply smirked. "She figured out the basics herself. I just corrected the angles."

On stage, Wu Min adjusted her sleeve and turned without fanfare, walking off as if she'd just stretched her legs.

Only after she'd descended the steps did the referee blink back to life.

"Uh... W-Winner! Wu Min of the Wu Clan!"

The crowd erupted.

"What just happened?!"

"Did anyone even see her move?!"

"That was insane—!"

Fang Chen, watching from the Fang box, narrowed his eyes.

"She's strong," he muttered.

The next match in the arena drew little interest.

The crowd, once roaring, had settled into idle chatter, barely paying attention as two mid-stage Qi Condensation cultivators exchanged sluggish blows that wouldn't even ruffle a robe.

In the stands, whispers stirred like leaves in a breeze.

"So... this is the match after that Mirage Slap?" someone yawned.

"Bit of a spiritual comedown, huh?"

A bearded man in scholar's robes leaned forward, lowering his voice as he spoke to the merchant beside him.

"You know... I remember the Fang family being quite impressive in the old days."

The merchant snorted, swirling the tea in his cup. "Oh, they were, no doubt. But those days are long gone. They haven't made a splash in this tournament for nearly a decade."

"Really?" the scholar raised a brow. "You don't mean their younger generation is...?"

"Trash," the merchant said bluntly, sipping his tea. "Absolute trash. Last year, not a single one of their juniors made it into the top ten."

"Oof. That bad?"

"Worse," the merchant leaned in. "One of them fainted before the second round even began."

"Ah," the scholar winced. "That's rough."

"They were lucky the Fang name still carries weight," the merchant said with a chuckle. "Otherwise, they'd be seated with the outer city sects."

The scholar nodded slowly. "Well, maybe this year will be different?"

The merchant shrugged. "Unless their patriarch personally steps onto the stage, I wouldn't bet on it."

A younger cultivator nearby piped up. "Wait—weren't the Fang family once unbeatable? Didn't they dominate for a while?"

One old auntie turned around, nostrils flaring. "Dominate? Boy, back then we didn't say 'dominate'—we said obliterate! Fang Yuan was the plague of Coldwind!"

The younger cultivator blinked. "Seriously? Wasn't he the current clan head?"

"Damn right he is," another added with a knowing nod. "Back then, he was already at Golden Core before his 20th birthday!"

Someone gasped. "That's so young!"

"He couldn't even enter anymore after becoming the clan head," the merchant said with a sigh.

"Around here we say he became clan head just so the rest of the kids could have a chance at breathing."

"I heard the age limit is 25?" the young man asked.

"Exactly," said the scholar, adjusting his sleeves. "If fate hadn't intervened, Fang Yuan would've steamrolled the tournament for five more years. They'd have to rename it the 'Fang Yuan Farewell Festival.'"

That drew laughter.

"Oh! Remember when he joined at age twelve?" another chipped in.

"Qi Condensation back then. And the boy still placed in the top five!"

"Against Qi Transformation cultivators twice his age!" the auntie clapped her hands.

"A little demon, that one."

"By the time he hit seventeen, he stopped bothering with placements and just started winning. Every year."

"Che—" someone snorted. "I remember watching one of his fights. His opponent tried to give a speech about honor and hard work. He slapped him mid-sentence. Mid-sentence!"

"Oh, the Fang Yuan era," another sighed nostalgically. "Good times. Broken jaws and shattered pride, getting beaten up by a kid."

As laughter rippled through the stands, the match in the arena finally ended with a half-hearted surrender.

The crowd barely noticed.

All eyes were now on the Fang Clan's section.

Their juniors hadn't even fought yet.

But the name Fang Yuan still rang like thunder.

Chapter 59: Tournament [3]

A chime rang again, and the host stepped forward, her voice ringing with spirited grace.

"For the next match, Wu Yan of the Wu Clan!"

Cheers rose from the Wu Clan's section as a tall girl in storm-blue robes stepped confidently onto the stage.

Her hair was tied in a high ponytail, her eyes sharp and proud.

She moved with purpose, every step brimming with self-assured energy.

"A direct disciple of the Wu Clan," murmured someone in the crowd.

"Early Qi Transformation, right?"

"Of course. Wouldn't be up there otherwise."

The host's hand swept to the other side. "Her opponent—Du Xiao! Rogue cultivator."

From the other waiting area, a girl stepped forward.

She was younger-looking, likely no more than seventeen, her face calm and unreadable.

Her clothes were plain but well-fitted, a brown tunic over a white undershirt.

On her back was a simple steel sword, unadorned and slightly weathered.

The crowd stirred.

"She's pretty..."

"Look at that figure—how does she swing a sword with those things?"

"I don't see a clan crest. Definitely not from a great family."

Du Xiao walked up the stage without drama.

Her expression was like still water, peaceful, yet unsettlingly deep.

Wu Yan smirked as they faced each other.

"No hard feelings, rogue girl," she said.

"Let's give them a show before I knock you down."

Du Xiao didn't reply.

The referee raised a hand. "Begin!"

Wu Yan moved first. She exploded forward, closing the gap with a burst of speed.

"Five Elements Fist!"

Her right fist flared with elemental energy—flames around one knuckle, wind around another, earth solidifying the rest.

She struck in a rapid chain, every punch augmented by a different element.

Du Xiao leaned slightly, pivoted and sidestepped.

Each punch missed by inches. The air cracked with force as her attacks hit only empty space.

Du Xiao responded with a single horizontal sword swing, fluid, minimal, but fast.

Clang!

Wu Yan raised her bracer in time, sliding back half a step from the force.

Eyes narrowing, she spun away. "Not bad."

She shifted stances.

"Tiger Claw!"

Her qi surged into her arms, taking the shape of translucent tiger paws as she lunged again, slashes, feints, and swiping claws trying to break through.

Du Xiao calmly deflected with angled parries. One step forward, a small pivot, and she slashed downward.

Another clean, simple arc.

Clang!

Wu Yan blocked, but this time she stumbled back two steps. Her expression cracked.

"Tch. Try this then."

She swayed, her stance changing again.

"Drunken Fist!"

Her body moved unpredictably, weaving and staggering forward in an off-kilter rhythm.

Every sway disguised a strike, her fists curving with bizarre angles, knees flying in from strange pivots.

But Du Xiao never flinched.

She adjusted calmly, blade flashing with minimal motion.

No flashy sword techniques. No blinding light or qi explosions.

Just clean, perfect fundamentals.

Dodge.

Step.

Swing.

Parry.

Step again.

Another swing.

Clang! Wu Yan's arm snapped back as she was pushed off balance again.

A gasp rippled through the crowd.

"She's not even using techniques..."

"Just basic sword swings?"

"No way. That's not... normal."

Back on the stage, Wu Yan gritted her teeth.

She gritted her teeth.

This wasn't just about her. She was a direct disciple from one of the five great families. She had to win!

"Fine," she hissed, qi flaring violently around her. "Let's end this—Wu Clan Final Style!"

Her hands glowed with a unique pattern as she drew a symbol in the air, two tigers roaring across the wind.

She charged in, the marble cracking beneath her feet.

Du Xiao raised her sword.

No words. No techniques.

Just a downward swing.

CRACK!

The sound echoed like thunder.

Wu Yan stopped moving.

Her arms shook. The momentum was gone. Her technique shattered mid-air. Her body, trembling, slowly slumped to one knee.

Her eyes were wide in disbelief.

She looked up at Du Xiao, who stood calmly with her sword resting lightly against her shoulder, not a bead of sweat on her brow.

As Wu Yan slumped to a knee, Du Xiao quietly sheathed her sword with a click so soft it was almost a whisper.

She didn't bow. She didn't celebrate. She simply turned... and walked away.

The referee blinked twice.

"W-Winner... Du Xiao!"

The crowd erupted when the winner was announced.

"Did she just—?"

"One sword swing broke a final technique?"

"What the hell is her background?!"

In the Wu viewing area, Zhao Ming groaned. "That's not something you see every day."

The next match followed swiftly, and the crowd stirred in recognition.

"Zhao Ren of the Zhao Clan—step forward!"

A tall youth in crimson and black robes walked onto the stage, his stride steady and proud.

His qi flared outward in a disciplined burst, calm yet undeniable—Peak Qi Transformation.

Gasps rippled through the stands.

"The son of Zhao Ming himself..."

"Peak stage at just twenty-one? Impressive."

The host turned toward the opposite end of the arena. "His opponent—Cultivator Shen, from the Northeast Hills."

A lean figure in plain robes stepped onto the stage, noticeably younger, with a cautious expression. Qi lightly shimmered around him—Early Stage Qi Condensation.

The moment the cultivator felt Zhao Ren's oppressive presence up close, he paused.

Then, with a low bow to both his opponent and the referee, he turned... and walked off the stage.

The referee blinked. "Surrender acknowledged. Winner—Zhao Ren of the Zhao Clan!"

There were no boos. No sneers. Just a murmur of quiet understanding.

"Wise choice."

"There's a fine line between bravery and stupidity."

"You don't fight a peak Qi Transformation head-on with early Condensation unless you've got a death wish."

Even Zhao Ren didn't gloat. He gave a formal salute and returned to the Zhao family box with composure.

But not all memories were so clean-cut.

A few of the older cultivators in the stands chuckled quietly.

"Still," one said, nudging his companion, "Remember when a certain twelve-year-old didn't know the meaning of surrender?"

"Oh-ho, you're talking about Fang Yuan?"

"Who else! Every year he got up there, early Condensation or not, and stared down people twice his age like it was personal."

"He never won back then," someone added with a fond laugh. "But damned if he didn't make every match look like a heroic epic. Crowd went wild every time."

"Watching him grit his teeth, bleeding, bones broken but still swinging that sword like he had something to prove..."

"Now that was tenacity. That's the kind of fight you don't forget."

The murmurs faded as the next name was prepared.

Chapter 60: Tournament [4]

The referee raised a hand.

"Begin!"

Zhao Lu was the first to move.

He charged in with a confident burst of speed, his qi flaring gold-red behind him like trailing embers.

"Dragon's Claw!"

His fingers curved into a clawed strike, energy rippling down his arm as he launched a sweeping blow toward Fang Yang's midsection.

The force behind it distorted the air, accompanied by a faint roar like an awakening beast.

Fang Yang didn't back away.

He drew his sword in a single, smooth motion.

"Tyrant Light Sword—First Strike: Divine Line!"

A piercing beam of light exploded from his blade, shooting forward like a gleaming spear.

The two attacks collided with a shockwave that cracked the marble beneath their feet and sent a gust of wind howling through the arena.

BOOM!

The crowd gasped as both fighters were pushed back from the rebound, their feet skidding across the platform.

Zhao Lu blinked. "You're... Qi Transformation?"

The realization hit the crowd a second later.

"He's... not some junior at Qi Condensation?"

"He's early Qi Transformation—just like Zhao Lu!"

"Didn't they say the Fang juniors were still behind?!"

A ripple of astonishment swept through the stands, and even Zhao Ming's eyes narrowed slightly.

Fang Chen said nothing.

But his knuckles loosened around his teacup.

In the arena, Fang Yang steadied his stance. His eyes were cool, unwavering.

Zhao Lu grinned now, the earlier courtesy fading into adrenaline. "This just got fun."

He dashed in again, faster, stronger, sharper.

"Phoenix Strike!"

He leapt high into the air, twisting as crimson-gold flames coiled around his leg, and came down in a powerful axe kick that seemed to split the sky.

Fang Yang spun to the side, narrowly avoiding the impact.

CRACK!

The stone where he had stood exploded into molten chunks.

Before the dust could settle, Fang Yang slashed horizontally—

"Divine Line!"

A streak of white light tore across the stage, straight toward Zhao Lu, who threw up both arms and braced—

BOOM!

He skidded back three full meters before stopping, panting slightly.

Cheers erupted.

"They're evenly matched!"

"But Fang Yang's technique, what sword style is that? Is that a family technique?"

"Tyrant Light Sword," an elder muttered from the side. "one of the common technique of the Fang Clan... if I recall correctly, Fang Yuan later improved it and introduced two more layers to it."

The crowd gasped at the information.

On the platform, Zhao Lu narrowed his stance and inhaled deeply.

"Perfect Harmony," he whispered.

His qi shimmered around him, soft, graceful, as if wind, water, and flame all flowed in a rhythmic loop.

His body followed the motion, entering a flowing stance that seemed to erase all openings.

In response, Fang Yang's sword shimmered with twin lines of silver light.

He raised it above his shoulder.

"Tyrant Light Sword—Second Strike: Star Form."

Two lines of light extended from his blade, tracing into a V-shape across the platform.

The air itself vibrated.

"Only two lines?" the elder from earlier whispered.

"Still... that's the second form of the Tyrant Light Sword, isn't it?"

"Yes, and only those at perfection can draw five..."

"Then this Fang Yang, he's not there yet."

"But close. Damn close."

Down on the stage, Fang Yang lunged forward, blade trailing two gleaming lines of light.

Zhao Lu twisted into his Perfect Harmony stance, meeting the assault with elegant, spiral deflections.

Every strike Fang Yang made was blocked or redirected but not effortlessly.

Clang! Crack!

A dozen exchanges passed in seconds.

Sword against fist.

Technique against form.

Speed against timing.

And neither one could break through.

Dust swirled. Stone cracked. The air was thick with tension.

Then they separated, panting, staring across the platform.

Both bloodied slightly.

Zhao Lu wiped a smear of blood from the corner of his mouth, his chest rising with excitement.

"I'll admit it," he called across the field, voice sharp and proud. "You're strong, far stronger than I expected..."

Then he grinned, baring his teeth like a predator. "But I'm better!"

He launched forward, qi roaring to life around him. Golden energy coiled around his fists and legs like the twin spirits of dragon and phoenix.

"Dragon's Claw—Twin Talon Rush!"

His arms moved in a blur, each strike heavy and deliberate, slamming down with the weight of a landslide.

Every blow came with a sonic boom that made the audience flinch.

Fang Yang raised his sword just in time to intercept—*clang!*—then again—*clang! clang!*

The blade vibrated in his hands. He took a step back.

Then another.

Then another.

Zhao Lu's attacks rained down like a storm.

Fang Yang parried each one, his footwork nimble but pressured.

His sword arm began to tremble under the continuous assault.

Zhao Lu let out a shout and launched a sweeping kick, forcing Fang Yang to leap back or be tripped.

"Phoenix Strike—Feathered Wind Sweep!"

His foot arced up into the air and crashed down.

BOOM!

The impact cracked the stone floor where Fang Yang had landed.

Dust burst skyward.

"Urgh—!" Fang Yang grunted as he rolled away, barely evading the blow.

His robes were torn at the shoulder, one knee scraped and bleeding.

Zhao Lu didn't stop there.

He followed through with a palm thrust wrapped in spiraling red-gold qi.

Fang Yang raised his sword, too slow this time.

BANG!

The palm landed squarely against his blade, knocking him back.

Fang Yang flew several meters before flipping in midair, boots skidding on the ground as he barely righted himself.

His blade shook in his grip.

But he didn't fall.

He looked up, breathing heavy, eyes sharpening.

Zhao Lu snorted. "Still not surrendering? I'm giving you another chance before this gets ugly."

Fang Yang smiled, sweat dripping down his jaw.

"Not surrendering. Not yet."

And then, he shifted his stance again.

The crowd murmured.

"That's the Tyrant Light stance again."

"Wait... are those third lines forming...?!"

But no. The twin silver lines pulsed once more, unchanged but brighter.

Stable and refined.

Fang Yang raised his sword high.

Then the silver lines lit up again.

"Let's see if you can handle my counter, Zhao Lu."