

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

## **#Chapter 61: Tournament [5] - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 61: Tournament [5]**

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From the Fang Clan's viewing stand, Fang Tian slowly rose to his feet.

His arms were crossed, but his eyes gleamed with sharp light.

"Looks like Little Yang practiced extra hard," he muttered, a rare flicker of pride crossing his face.

Beside him, Fang Mei leaned forward, hands clenched tightly in her lap.

Her breath caught in her throat as she whispered, "Please don't fail..."

On either side of her, Fang Rui and Fang Bo, usually restless sat still for once, their gazes locked on the figure standing alone in the swirling dust.

Down below, Fang Yang stood tall amidst the cracked stone.

His robes fluttered in the aftermath of Zhao Lu's relentless assault. Dust settled slowly around his boots like snowfall.

But he didn't waver.

He inhaled slowly... and then let his blade fall.

**Clang.**

The tip struck the ground with a soft chime—gentle, almost reverent.

And then, light surged.

Twin silver lines glowed from the blade's core, humming with restrained force.

"Tyrant Light Sword—First Strike: Divine Line!" he declared.

The lines shot forward, clean, controlled beams of qi, straight and sharp like arrows of starlight.

Zhao Lu's eyes widened. He raised his arms instinctively, qi flaring to shield.

**BOOM!**

The first line struck, staggering him back.

**CRACK!**

The second hit, shattering a portion of his shoulder guard and sending a ripple through his golden qi.

Zhao Lu steadied himself, panting, a thin cut bleeding across his upper arm.

He grit his teeth, glaring across the stage.

"You dare use the same technique twice...?" he spat, wiping the blood.

"Tch. Fancy tricks won't save you twice!"

He stomped forward, stance wide.

"Zhao Clan Secret Style—Perfect Harmony!"

A swirling force of yin and yang qi spun from his palms, light and dark, heat and frost, spiraling together into a balanced vortex of elemental fury.

The arena floor cracked again under the pressure.

Fang Yang raised his sword.

The glow had faded.

But his feet slid into a firm stance.

He whispered under his breath—

"Again."

And his blade lit up once more, this time trembling faintly with a third unstable line.

It sputtered. Faded.

But the two existing beams reignited stronger.

"Tyrant Light Sword—Second Strike... Star form!"

A sweeping arc.

Two beams this time but from different angles.

One from above. One from the side.

They crossed midair like converging starlight, crashing into Zhao Lu's swirling Perfect Harmony vortex just as it roared forward, a maelstrom of elemental chaos.

**BOOM!**

An explosion of blinding light erupted across the arena, white and gold flaring so bright that even the protective formations flickered.

The stands rocked. Dust and fractured stone flew outward.

Spectators gasped and instinctively shielded their faces, qi barriers snapping up across the VIP box.

And then there was absolutely silence for a short while.

As the light slowly faded, the stage came back into view.

Fang Yang stood tall at the center.

His sword was scorched and shaking slightly in his grip, sleeves torn, a thin line of blood trailing from the corner of his mouth but he stood.

Across from him, Zhao Lu lay crumpled on the ground.

Zhao Lu's eyes trembled. His lips parted, but no sound came.

He looked at his fists as if they belonged to someone else.

As if they had betrayed him.

His Body was twitching faintly.

Unwilling.

Unwilling to admit defeat.

Unwilling to move.

But unable all the same.

The referee hesitated only a moment, then stepped forward.

"Match over! The winner—Fang Yang of the Fang Clan!!"

A roar exploded from the Fang section, cheers echoing like thunder.

Fang Bo whooped, practically jumping over the railing. "He actually did it! He really did it!"

Fang Rui pounded a fist to his chest. "Tch, show-off. But damn if it wasn't cool."

Fang Mei's hands flew to her mouth, eyes wide with disbelief and pride.

"He pulled it off... he really did..."

Beside her, Fang Tian gave a rare smile, slow and calm.

"You did well, Little Yang," he said, his voice low.

"More than well."

Fang Yang stumbled a little on the walk back.

But before his knees could give, Fang Bo and Rui were already there, slapping him on the back, catching his arms.

"You're a freak, you know that?" Fang Rui grinned.

"We're buying you something expensive after this," Fang Bo added.

Fang Mei stood and walked toward him with a soft smile.

"You scared the life out of me," she whispered. "But... I'm proud of you."

Even Fang Tian gave him a firm nod.

No words this time.

Just approval shining in his eyes.

Fang Yang exhaled, still shaky, but his eyes burned brighter than ever.

He had won.

Not because he was the strongest—

But because in that moment, when it mattered most...

He refused to fall.

Up in the elevated viewing booth, the atmosphere had taken a sharp turn.

The heads of the Five Great Families sat in a loose semicircle, but all four pairs of eyes were now pointed in one direction, toward Fang Chen.

Zhao Ming was the first to break the silence, though his voice was tight, his smile strained. "Well now. That was... unexpected."

He Long chuckled, arms crossed as he leaned back comfortably in his seat.

"I didn't recognize the boy at all. Where've you been hiding him, Brother Fang? That was no fluke."

He jabbed a playful elbow toward Zhao Ming.

"And to think your descendant lost to him. Hah!"

Zhao Ming's brow twitched.

Matriarch Lin Xi's gaze never wavered from Fang Chen.

Her smile was graceful, eyes sharp like a needle hidden in silk.

"Your clan head did say we would be surprised," she said, voice lilting like a songbird, though every word struck with precise weight.

"But I didn't expect it would be this kind of surprise."

She leaned forward, folding her hands under her chin. "Now I'm excited. How about you, Brother Fang?"

And just like that, all eyes, Zhao Ming's narrowed gaze, He Long's amused smirk, Wu Shun's unreadable stare behind his glasses turned toward Fang Chen.

He could feel the pressure like four mountains slowly tilting toward him.

He straightened his robes, smiled politely, and nodded with diplomatic calm.

"It seems... our juniors have been more diligent than I thought."

Outwardly composed. Inwardly?

AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!

*Dear nephew!*

*Get out of seclusion already!!*

*Your uncle is about to be eaten alive by tigers in robes and spiritual perfume!*

*I'm just a Peak Qi Transformation, why do I have to sit next to four Golden Core monsters?!*

Fang Chen reached for his tea with a steady hand but inside, his soul was sobbing.

## **Chapter 62: Fang Yuan [1]**

Boom!

Somewhere within the phoenix soul pavilion, in one of the seclusion caves, it trembled as a muffled explosion echoed through the stone walls, dust scattered, a few pebbles tumbled from the ceilings and then silence.

A moment later, the massive stone door rumbled open.

Fang Yuan emerged, shirtless, smoke curling faintly from his shoulders.

He casually brushed dust off his arms, cracked his neck, and muttered with a tsk.

"Hah... So close. Damn it."

He stretched with a long groan, joints popping, muscles flexing with spiritual energy that hadn't quite settled.

A flick of his wrist summoned the translucent interface before his eyes.

[ACTIVE QUESTS:]

[Quest: Win the Championship in the Upcoming Coldwind City Tournament]

Reward: 100,000 SP

+ Divine-Grade Cultivation Manual.

He blinked once.

Only one left.

Because the other had already been claimed.

[Quest: Cultivate Two Junior Disciples to Reach Qi Transformation Realm]

Reward: 60,999 SP

Status: CLAIMED ✓

"Heh." A self-satisfied smirk spread across his lips. "Good job, my juniors."

As soon as the notification had rang, he decided to reward himself with ten Nascent Soul-grade pills by dumping a cool 50,000 SP.

Once purchased, he pushed all logistics to his poor uncle and vanished into seclusion.

The goal had been the Hollow Spirit Realm.

Did he reach it, though?

Sadly, no.

But, was he close?

Very.

He was now a half-step Hollow Spirit cultivator not quite there, but definitely no longer shackled to the Nascent Soul stage.

And more importantly, if he were to face another peak Nascent Soul expert...

...He could probably fight two of them. Comfortably.

Okay, maybe not comfortably, but with style.

"How long was I out for...?" he muttered, voice echoing faintly down the tunnel.

There was no reply, only the rustle of residual qi and the creaking of worn stone.

Shrugging, Fang Yuan began walking back through the winding path, hands behind his head, casual as a man returning from a midday nap.

Halfway down the tunnel, he paused. Sniffed.

Sniffed again.

He raised his arm and winced. "Ugh. I smell like an old spirit beast's armpit."

With a grimace, he picked up his pace. "I probably should take a bath first."

Fang Yuan arrived at the main pavilion of the Fang estate.

It was... quiet.

Almost eerily so.

The courtyard, usually bustling with outer disciples, passing elders, and loud childrens, was now nearly deserted.

The trees rustled lazily in the breeze.

A lone bamboo leaf spiraled through the air like a confused messenger.

Somewhere off to the side, a squirrel chittered, then ran off like it had something more important to do.

Fang Yuan squinted.

"...Did I come back to the wrong dimension?"

Not a soul noticed him. Nor were there any guards to rushed and greet him.

No junior disciples scampered over to report the latest events. There wasn't even a sound of a single baby crying.

Just silence and the distant call of a bird.

He strolled forward like a wandering traveler returning to a forgotten hometown.

His footsteps echoed as he passed through the pavilion hall, into the inner courtyard, and finally stopped at the side baths, an open-air spiritual spring carved into the stone, cold mist gently rising from its surface.

Without ceremony, he stripped down, tossed his dusty clothes onto a nearby rack, and stepped into the pool.

Splash.

Cold.

Pure.

Blissful.

He sank to his shoulders, let out a long sigh, and leaned back against the edge.



"Haaaaahhh... that's the stuff."

The water glimmered faintly with spiritual essence, cool as winter moonlight but refreshing as spring rain.

Dirt and lingering qi-residue lifted off his skin like regret in a purification ritual.

He closed his eyes and relaxed.

As his stink slowly dissolved into the water.

He sank deeper, until only his nose poked above the gently rippling surface.

Eyes open, staring blankly at the pale blue sky.

With a lazy sigh, he spread his divine sense out like a yawn in spiritual form, first through the pavilion, brushing past sleeping chickens and idle guards.

Then outward.

Across the estate.

Into the city.

It was subtle, perfectly masked. The kind of sweep only a Nascent Soul Realm cultivator could pull off.

No cultivator below Nascent Soul would even sense the ripple.

Naturally, he would also notice if someone at the Nascent Soul level or higher picked it up.

He felt... no such response.

All seemed normal.

Except—

His brows twitched.

His expression sharpened, gaze sweeping the horizon with sudden intensity.

What is that energy?

It crackled faintly at the edge of his divine sense, foreign, volatile, and utterly unnatural.

It wasn't loud nor was it radiant.

But it felt more dangerous than anything he had ever sensed before.

A chill ran down his spine.

"Huh...?"

It was coming from a certain necklace.

A certain... necklace that was made from a ring.

Fang Yuan was confused for a second so his divine sense zoomed in.

It hovered over the arena and then locked onto Fang Tian.

Who wore the ring around his neck like a keepsake.

"...Wait a minute."

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes.

He focused.

No way.

No. Freaking. Way.

He honed in on the core.

And there it was, like a blazing lantern in spiritual darkness.

Golden Core cultivation base.

Solid.

Real.

Unmistakable.

A powerful whoosh of water erupted as he stood up in the bath, eyes bulging with disbelief, water cascading down his bare body like some angry yet aesthetically pleasing waterfall.

He stared into the distance, mouth agape.

A powerful whoosh of water erupted as he stood up in the bath, eyes bulging with disbelief, water cascading down his bare body like some angry yet aesthetically pleasing waterfall.

He stared into the distance, mouth agape.

"How...?" he muttered slowly, voice hoarse.

But what shocked him wasn't Fang Tian's cultivation realm.

Oh no.

That was child's play.

This was far, far more devastating.

His eyes trembled.

His jaw clenched.

His entire soul seemed to let out a silent scream.

"HEAVEN! How can you be so cruel!"

He clenched his fists and turned sharply, glaring at the floating golden screen before him.

The system.

That cursed, shiny, reward-dangling system.

"WHY!" he wailed. "I could've picked Task 1 and gotten more system points!"

## Chapter 63 Fang Yuan [2]

A few minutes later...

Fang Yuan emerged from the bathing hall, spiritual robes draped over his shoulders, hair loosely tied as droplets still clung to his collar.

His expression, once bright with post-seclusion triumph, was now dark with defeat. Not the kind earned in battle, no, this was the weight of bureaucracy. He stepped into his study, and froze.

"...Whoa."

On his desk sat two massive piles of scrolls.

One was neatly labeled in his uncle's handwriting: "Important: Requires Clan Head Clearance"

The other had a smaller note stuck on top:

"Already sorted. Read if you want to catch up."

Fang Yuan raised a brow, walked around the desk, and dropped into his seat with a resigned sigh.

He leaned back, muttering, "I knew I could count upon you, uncle... dumped the sect work on him for two months and he actually made a system. Not bad, old

man."

He plucked the top scroll from the 'optional reading' pile and cracked it open with one hand.

The parchment was official, stamped by one of the city's messengers. He began to read:

CONFIDENTIAL REPORT:

Regarding: Fang Yuan, current Head of the Fang Clan

Rumors have circulated across the Eastern Region suggesting the Clan Head has reached the Peak of Nascent Soul Realm.

These claims, however, have been debunked.

Teacher Ian, direct instructor of Crown Prince Lukas Von Avetide and a respected member of the Imperial Cultivation Academy, made the following

statement:

"I personally felt his divine sense when I visited the Fang estate due to their Spirit pond discovery banquet. He is strong, but his realm is Early Nascent Soul Realm, nothing more. The rumors are exaggerated."

Public perception aligns with this conclusion. Most citizens and experts believe the Clan Head's recent reclusion and achievements stem from natural progress post-breakthrough.

Additional note from Teacher Ian:

"However-while I myself only reached the Nascent Soul Realm at sixty, I've been informed Clan Head Fang accomplished it at thirty. He may not be at the peak of nascent soul realm right now... but make no mistake-this man has monstrous potential."

Fang Yuan stared at the scroll for a moment.

Then he tossed the scroll aside with a scoff.

"A little bit of nonsense," he muttered. "What's next?"

He picked up the next scroll with one hand and cracked it open lazily.

His eyes scanned the opening lines.

REPORT: Regarding internal financial crisis - status: resolved.

He blinked.

Then leaned forward, suddenly far more attentive.

Subject of Note: Fang Tian, the younger brother of Fang Yuan

The incident began with the destruction of Herb Warehouse No. 3, which had caught fire during your presence.

This led to a critical shortage of alchemical ingredients across the sect.

Due to the lack of herbs, our alchemists were unable to fulfill production quotas, which in turn caused several of our affiliated shops to run dry of key pills and medicinal products.

Left unresolved, this would have resulted in a projected 41% loss in monthly revenue.

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow. "That bad?"

He kept reading.

However, Fang Tian intervened.

Utilizing independent study and existing alchemical notes, he adjusted several core pill recipes, replacing high-grade ingredients with more sustainable alternatives.

The new formulas proved not only cheaper, but also markedly more effective in internal circulation tests.

Production resumed ahead of schedule, and profits rose by 60% compared to the previous quarter.

Fang Yuan leaned back, eyes slightly wide.

"Wait, what?"

He kept going.

Additionally, Fang Tian personally oversaw the investigation into the warehouse fire.

He traced the arson back to a rogue subordinate under the Lin Pavilion, potentially acting on internal pressure from their elders.

After a tense negotiation with Matriarch Lin, peace terms were reached.

Fang Yuan frowned. "That woman's always up to something..."

Then he read the next line.

Matriarch Lin herself offered to betroth herself to the Fang Clan Patriarch, should he desire it as an act of goodwill and reconciliation.

He blinked.

Fang Tian agreed to this part of the deal on the Clan Patriarch's behalf, pending no objections.

Fang Yuan spat out.

"PUHAH!!!"

The scroll fluttered to the desk as he shot up from his chair, coughing violently.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE AGREED?!!!"

Silence followed, only the faint rustle of the scroll settling and the quiet creak of his chair as he slowly sank back into it.

He let out a long breath, rubbing his temples, eyes closed.

After a moment, he muttered to himself, voice dry and weary, "...Of course he did."

He leaned back, gaze drifting toward the ceiling, expression somewhere between exasperation and reluctant amusement.

"The snake may be beautiful," he muttered, eyes narrowing with a dry glint, "but a snake's still a snake. This little brother of mine really enjoys making trouble for me..."

With a heavy sigh, he reached into his drawer and pulled out a crimson ink stamp, engraved with the Fang Clan's seal of judgment, reserved for internal discipline and formal resolutions.

He dipped it into the inkstone beside him and dragged over a clean scroll.

In brisk strokes, he wrote:

Fang Tian's merits in resolving the financial crisis and reformulating medicinal processes are acknowledged.

However, the unauthorized engagement agreement with Matriarch Lin is a direct violation of Clan rules.

Result: Merits and demerits nullify each other. No rewards shall be granted.

He stamped it with a satisfying thunk, the bright red mark declaring finality.

He smirked faintly.

"Petty?" he muttered. "No, I'm being generous."

Tossing the scroll into the "Resolved" tray, he picked up the next document, slightly thicker, with finer parchment and laced in a subtle floral fragrance.

It was the formalized contract from the Lin Pavilion.

A binding agreement outlining terms of alliance, resource exchanges, dowry distribution, and, at the very bottom in flowing golden calligraphy marital oath

clauses.

He stared at the signature line meant for the Fang Clan Patriarch.

His eye twitched again.

Without a word, he dragged out a large, dusty stamp with a barely legible carving across its face: DECLINED.

He slapped it on with a little too much force.

BANG!

A vivid red seal bled into the corner of the scroll.

DECLINED.

This agreement is deemed null by the authority of Fang Yuan, Patriarch of the

Fang Clan. Fang Yuan leaned back once more, arms behind his head, as he watched the scroll curl from the damp stamp.

## **Chapter 64: Wu Min [1]**

Back at the Coldwind Tournament Arena, tension once again thickened like mist over a spirit spring.

Currently on stage were two figures, both graceful, both deadly.

Wu Min stood at the eastern edge, sleeves fluttering in the breeze, her pale jade robes carrying the lion crest of the Wu Clan. Her eyes were sharp, unreadable. Calm, but not relaxed.

Her opponent stood facing her across the polished white marble platform: Fang Mei.

Unlike the younger Fang juniors who had earned the crowd's attention through surprise, Fang Mei needed no introduction.

Her presence carried the quiet dignity of a rising force.



Already ordained as an elder of the Fang Clan, she had made her name through strength and poise to say her rank was not ceremonial.

Her robes bore the Fang family's crest proudly, and her expression was composed, neither arrogant nor timid.

From the crowd, murmurs buzzed like flies around lantern light.

"That's the Young Elder of the Fang Clan..."

"She's already mid-stage Qi Transformation, isn't she?"

"Yes. Same as Wu Min."

"Two mid-stage Qi Transformation cultivators going at it. Finally!"

On the stage, Wu Min spoke first.

"So you're the Young Elder," she said coolly, her feet gliding a half step forward, exactly three paces away. "The next Fang Yuan, I suppose?"

Fang Mei's lips curved, not quite a smile.

"No," she said softly. "I'm nowhere near Elder Brother's level. He's a genius... I'm not qualified to be compared to him."

She lowered her stance, fingers poised like coiled silk, spirit energy quietly humming around her.

"But I'm strong enough to win against you."

Wu Min didn't flinch. She didn't laugh either.

Instead, her gaze grew more focused.

"I see," she whispered. "Then show me."

Qi surged from both girls at once, silent but searing.

The marble beneath their feet began to tremble.

Two whirlpools of raw spiritual force collided without touching, twisting the air between them.

Wu Min moved first.

A blur.

A whisper of wind.

Her palm shimmered:

Mirage Slap.

The same move that had ended her last match in a single strike.

The air cracked.

But Fang Mei didn't freeze.

Her eyes narrowed, and her body twisted at the last second.

Whoosh! CRACK!

The shimmering slap arced through the air, Mirage Slap unleashed with perfect form.

Fang Mei twisted just in time to avoid a direct hit to the face, but...

Thump!

Wu Min's palm still struck.

Right across her chest.

A quiet beat passed.

Wu Min blinked. Her hand froze in the air as she registered what had just happened.

Then,

"...Uh," Wu Min said, voice small. "My bad."

Fang Mei stared at her, face suddenly flushed a brilliant crimson, equal parts shame and pure, simmering embarrassment.

The crowd didn't know whether to laugh or panic.

Then...

Tap!

She took a graceful step forward.

Swift Step Footwork. A low-grade black-level movement technique. Elegant, precise, and right now, fueled by intense fury.

With a whoosh of spirit energy and a fwip of her sleeve, she drew her blade.

"Fang Family's Tyrant Light Sword—Third Form: Heaven's Will!"

Her voice rang through the arena like a silken bell, elegant, deliberate, and laced with fury.

In that instant, Fang Mei's sword ignited not with fire alone, but with the blazing light of wounded pride.

(You can find the correct Ch63 at [webnovel!](#))

Crimson flame surged up the blade's length, twisting into gold-edged arcs that danced and hissed like spirits with something to prove.

The air bent around her, trembling with spiritual pressure, as if even the heavens had taken a guilty step back.

Unlike the first form, which fired a clean divine beam...

Unlike the second, which intersected light in a calculated star-shaped barrage...

This one flared, wild and free. It wasn't a technique of control.

It was a declaration.

With a single slash, a curved wave of flame and radiant qi erupted outward like a phoenix clawing its way across the sky, fueled by mortified vengeance.

Wu Min's eyes widened.

FWOOOOM!

The air screamed as Fang Mei slashed downward, a wave of fiery sword qi tearing across the platform.

Wu Min barely managed to retreat with a blast of her own qi, slipping backward at the last second....

BOOM!

The stage cracked.

Not dented. Not scorched.

Half. The. Stage. Was. Gone.

The tiles were gone. A whole crescent chunk of marble platform now floated lazily as rubble.

Wu Min landed on the edge of what remained, eyes huge.

"You're not mid-stage! That's late-stage Qi Transformation!" she shouted, as she steadied herself from the aftermath.

Fang Mei slowly raised her head, her expression composed... except for the twitch in her brow and the bright red still painting her cheeks.

The crowd was dead silent.

Someone in the stands gulped audibly.

Wu Min gulped louder.

Fang Mei blinked once, sheathed her sword with a soft click, and gave Wu Min a mild, deadly smile.

"... I'll kill you."

Wu Min exhaled slowly, her breath steady as a breeze through bamboo.

She shifted her stance, planting her feet with precision, right hand forward, left drawn back near her waist like a coiled spring.

A calm aura enveloped her.

"All right," she said, voice low but clear, "I'm ready."

Across from her, Fang Mei lifted her sword once more. Her eyes narrowed, lips parting as her spiritual energy surged.

"Tyrant Light Sword—First Form: Divine—"

PA!!

The slap came without warning.

A ripple of sound echoed across the arena.

Fang Mei vanished from her spot in a blur of motion, sent skidding back across the marble tiles.

Her boots screeched against the ground until she landed near the far edge, knees bent, sword gripped firmly in her hands.

The air still hummed with the leftover force of the Mirage Slap.

Fang Mei remained composed. Her eyes met Wu Min's across the stage.

Her voice was even.

"You're strong."

Then Wu Min stepped forward, lowering her stance slightly as qi gathered around her fingers like silk threading through the air.

"Mid-stage Qi Transformation against Late-stage," she said, her

tone teasing but focused. "You think that's enough to decide the outcome?"

She smirked and brought her arms back into the ready position, aura flaring like a quiet blaze.

"Think again."

## **Chapter 65: Wu Min [2]**

Fang Mei's eyes flashed.

With no further words, she pushed off the ground.

Swift Step Footwork.

Under her control, she moved like lightning cloaked in silk.

She vanished in a blur, the ground cracking faintly beneath her as her momentum surged forward.

One step, two steps, each one tighter and faster than the last, barely visible to the untrained eye.

A streak of silver and scarlet swept across the stage, her sword raised, burning with residual flame from the earlier exchange.

Wind howled in her wake, spinning her long sleeves like battle flags.

Wu Min's gaze tracked her calmly.

"Fast," she muttered and then bent backward with impossible grace, letting Fang Mei's sword skim past a hair's breadth from her nose.

Fang Mei twisted in mid-air, landing low and sliding to the side, skidding in an arc before rebounding again.

She spun, blade gleaming.

Tyrant Light Sword—First Form: Divine Line!

This time she got the words out, her sword erupted with a focused beam of light, pure and piercing, tearing through the air in a straight shot toward Wu Min.

Wu Min leaned into the movement, spiritual energy weaving around her limbs as she snapped her arms wide.

Tiger Mirage Step, an evasive technique of the Wu Clan.

She shimmered, once, twice and reappeared at Fang Mei's flank, palm already cocked back.

"Let's see how many of those forms you've got," she whispered playfully—

And launched another slap.

CLANG!

Fang Mei's sword snapped up in a clean, practiced arc, not to slash, but to parry.

Palm met steel, and a shockwave cracked through the air like thunder.

Fang Mei parried the slap.

Steel met palm with a sharp crack that echoed across the arena.

Wu Min's eyes widened. "You blocked it?"

Fang Mei didn't answer. Her stance held firm, knees slightly bent, sword trembling faintly from the force of the impact but she stood her ground.

Cheeks still tinged red from earlier embarrassment, she managed a tight grin.

"I'm not letting you slap me twice."

A ripple of laughter traveled through the crowd, but Wu Min's expression only grew more focused.

She stepped back, one foot sliding softly against the polished marble.

"It's rare," she murmured. "Only two people have ever seen through our clan's Mirage Slap technique."

Her gaze narrowed, the wind catching her sleeves like battle flags.

"The other one... was Fang Yuan."

Before Fang Mei could respond, Wu Min blurred into motion.

"Five Elements Fist!"

Her right fist lit up like a forge: flame danced around her thumb knuckle, wind spiraled along her index, and earth crystallized along her middle fingers.

The punch chain that followed was a masterwork of elemental fusion, fiery jabs, slicing gusts, pounding strikes that thundered with stone.

**Boom. Boom. BOOM!**

Fang Mei's blade blurred into motion, whirlwind arcs of silver light. Each swing was exact, controlled.

Not just parrying the blows, dispersing their elemental fury. A flaming strike crashed against the sword's flat and fizzled out.

A wind-infused punch curved around her shoulder, only to be cut down mid-path.

An earth-clad strike smashed the floor beneath her, cracking marble but she slid with the shockwave, absorbing the momentum instead of resisting it.

The crowd collectively leaned forward, gasping.

"She's keeping up!"

"She blocked the Mirage Slap and now this?!"

Wu Min's breath caught, not from fatigue, but from sheer delight.

"You're not like the others," she murmured, a slow, thrilled grin forming on her lips. "This just got interesting."

Fang Mei exhaled lightly, her eyes shining with battle-fueled clarity.

"You call that interesting?"

She twisted her wrist, blade pointed skyward as it began to glow.

"Then let's take it up a notch."

Tyrant Light Sword—Second Form: Star Form!

Her sword pulsed and three brilliant arcs of light erupted from the blade.

But these weren't mere beams they were arcing, intelligent, slicing through the air with curved trajectories.

One soared from above like a falling comet; two more came in from opposing sides, spiraling and tightening their angle like predator hawks in formation.

Wu Min's pupils shrank.

That wasn't just swordplay, it was suppressive force. The kind that could level a stage.

It felt like a golden core cultivator's pressure.

But she didn't retreat.

Her arms glowed with fiery runes.

"Clan Final Style!"

Her hands slashed through the air, drawing out a luminous symbol.

Two ethereal tigers, wrought from roaring wind and orange-gold qi burst from her arms, charging forward with furious howls.

The beams and tigers collided midair..

**BOOOOOOM!!!**

A deafening burst of light and force tore across the stage.

Wind howled outward in a giant ring-shaped shockwave, slamming into the barriers.

Dust and marble shards rose into a dense mist.

A dome of light formed, then slowly peeled away like a melting lotus.



Silence followed.

And then they saw the silhouettes.

Both girls still standing.

Fang Mei's hair was a little frazzled, the hem of her robes scorched.

A cut traced her left sleeve.

Her breathing was calm but heavier.

Wu Min wiped a trickle of blood from her lip.

One gauntlet cracked, and her stance was slightly crooked but her eyes gleamed like twin stars.

Both smiling.

Fang Mei rolled her shoulder.

Wu Min cracked her knuckles.

"I like you," she said at last, grinning like a tiger discovering a worthy rival.

Meanwhile, up at the viewing booth—

A ripple of silence swept through the five family heads.

Fang Chen blinked once, then again. His brows twitched.

*Third form? But she hasn't even perfected the second yet... How did she—*

*His jaw tightened.*

*How did she learn the third form without mastering the second? That's supposed to be impossible...!*

Wu Shun on the side stiffened, his fan pausing mid-flutter.

*Another one? The Fang Clan has another monster who can counter the Wu techniques?*

Zhao Ling leaned forward, brows creasing.

*Late-stage Qi Transformation? That girl was mid-stage Qi Condensation during Fang head's 30th birthday. Did they all eat some divine herb recently?*

He Song's expression soured, his fingers drumming on the armrest.

The Fang juniors were supposed to be slow-witted and safe to ignore. So where the hell are all these monsters coming from?!

And Matriarch Lin—

She simply raised her teacup, a faint smile playing at her lips as she continued sipping with delight.

### **Chapter 66: Wu Min [3]**

Fang Tian stared hard, fists clenched behind his back.

Down on the arena floor, Fang Mei stood tall amid the fading echoes of her battle.

Her hair was tousled, her robes dusted with ash.

Internally, he whispered, *You can do it, Fang Mei... You can do it.*

A quiet scoff echoed in his mind.

"Look at you," came Qin Shi Huang's voice from within the ring around his neck.

*"Why don't you just shout it out for her to hear, instead of whispering like she can read your mind the way I do?"*

Fang Tian didn't respond at first.

Then, "Master... I don't suppose she'd lose this match, right?"

*"No, she'll definitely win," the ancient spirit murmured, voice unexpectedly serious. "From what I've noticed everytime you are with her, this Fang Mei is beyond impressive. Majestic, even. But there's something that's been holding her back."*

Fang Tian's brows furrowed slightly as he watched the fight unfold, Fang Mei's every step clean and calculated, even as she clashed again with Wu Min.

Then Qin Shi Huang muttered something else, quieter, but heavier.

*"Oh, right, yes, she appears to have the Thousand Poison Physique."*

Fang Tian's eyes widened.

"Thousand Poison Physique? What is that?"

"Mhm. It is a rare and difficult physique, honestly it's rare to even find one in the mortal realm. This physique, if nurtured to completion, it can evolve into the Myriad Poison Physique, which can grant complete immunity to all types of poison and even the ability to refine toxins into energy. But as of right now..."

Fang Tian's gaze remained on the battle as Fang Mei's sword glowed as she launched another Tyrant Light Sword—First Form: Divine Line, the beam streaking across the stage like a bolt of righteous fury.

Wu Min barely dodged, the marble floor cracking beneath her retreat.

"Right now," Qin Shi Huang continued, his voice low and steady, "that latent physique is likely doing more harm than good. It's absorbing her qi, restraining her potential... and I doubt she even knows the reason why."

Fang Tian's gaze sharpened, the weight in his chest growing heavier with each word.

He lowered his eyes to the ring on his finger, the ancient artifact gleaming faintly under the sunlight, its warmth deceptive.

*Just like what you've been doing to me... ever since I was young?*

The spirit gave a short, amused chuckle. *"Oh please. Take that up with your elder brother. He's the one who placed the ring around your neck as a form of necklace during your fifth birthday. If he didn't, you would have soared."*

Something snapped in Fang Tian's chest when he heard the full.

His grip tightened, knuckles whitening.

"Oh, so now it's his fault?" he hissed under his breath, voice sharp with emotion.

"My parents died when he was barely an adult! That ring was the only thing they left behind! He gave it to me so I'd have something, so I'd always remember them, that they were still with me even in—"

He stopped.

But it was too late.

The words had already slipped past his lips, not as a thought, but aloud.

Silence fell.

Heavy and stretching.

Then, after a moment, a cautious voice broke through the stillness.

"Senior Brother... are you alright?" Fang Rui asked, her tone careful, almost hesitant.

Fang Tian blinked, the heat behind his eyes vanishing beneath a practiced, easy smile.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Ah, sorry. Just... a bad memory slipped out. Nothing serious."

At his side, Fang Bo and Fang Yang exchanged a glance but said nothing. The silence between them spoke volumes.

Inside, Fang Tian's heart thudded.

*Damn it...*

He kept his gaze fixed on the stage, unwilling to say more to them.

*You may be my master, he thought to the spirit, but I won't allow even a whisper of blasphemy against my brother. He's carried enough burdens for a dozen lifetimes.*

The spirit in the ring fell quiet.

Whether in agreement, respect, or something else entirely... Fang Tian couldn't tell.

And maybe he didn't want to.

And then—

"Well," the old spirit spoke into his head, "*once this fight is over, you should probably ask her out on a date.*"

Fang Tian blinked, deadpan.

"...Master."

*"What? She's strong, beautiful, and if you help her awaken that physique, she'll be even stronger. That's what I call marriage potential. Besides she loves you too."*

Fang Tian sighed.

Back on stage, the tension snapped like a taut string.

Fang Mei's blade shimmered as she raised it high, her voice clear and resonant across the arena.

"Tyrant Light Sword—Second Form: Star Form!"

With a powerful downward slash, four blazing arcs of radiant swordlight tore through the sky, spiraling, converging like heavenly meteors locked onto their target.

The very air shimmered beneath their descent.

Up in the viewing booth, the Fang family members jolted forward in their seats.

Their focus had shifted.

The murmurs faded.

No longer were they speaking of her realm, her physique, or who she might become.

All eyes now tracked the glowing lines streaking down from the heavens.

"Four lines," Fang Yang whispered.

"Not yet five... but enough," Fang Rui added.

"It's more than enough," Fang Bo murmured, voice tight with awe.

Those four radiant beams, drawn from the technique perfected by their clan head, now wielded with her own nuance and force rained down upon the prodigy of the Wu Clan.

Even Wu Min looked up, face bathed in the golden light.

For a moment, she didn't dodge.

She didn't block.

She simply... smiled.

"Tch... What a drag," she muttered under her breath, not in frustration, but in admiration.

Then, at the last moment, she moved.

Her stance deepened.

She crossed her arms in a guarded 'X' in front of her chest, feet braced wide as she absorbed the brunt of the impact.

***BOOM!***

A blinding burst of force slammed into her like a divine hammer.

Her form was thrown into the air, trailing sparks and dust until she landed, skidding past the outer ring.

Out of bounds.

Silence.

Then—

The crowd erupted.

Cheers exploded like fireworks.

The Fang family side of the stands surged to their feet, roaring with pride.

Fang Bo, Fang Yang, and Fang Ruì leapt from their seats, fists clenched in elation.

Down in the corner of the arena stands, where the younger generation of the Fang clan gathered, the air was thick with celebration.

Boys and girls shouted Fang Mei's name with tearful joy, voices hoarse and proud.

"YOUNG ELDER!"

"THAT'S OUR ELDER MEI!!"

Wu Min, lying just beyond the edge of the platform, sat up slowly.

Her robes were singed, her arms slightly trembling from the final clash.

But her smile remained.

She dusted herself off and rose to her feet with quiet grace.

Then, she turned toward Fang Mei, and gave a deep, warrior's bow.

"Thanks," she said softly. "You were the better one today."

Fang Mei blinked in surprise, then returned the bow with equal respect.

A duel had ended.

But a rivalry—had just begun.

Meanwhile, back at the Fang Family Estate...

Deep within the serene chambers of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, Fang Yuan sat behind a wide, immaculately carved desk, one hand flipping through scrolls, the other absently sipping spirit tea that had long gone cold.

He was surrounded by a mountain of documents, each stamped with crimson seals of varying urgency.

Until his hand paused.

A scroll with a black wax seal caught his eye.

Fang Yuan cracked it open, and his casual smile stiffened slightly.

### **SIGHTING REPORT:**

**Location: Northern Region, bordering the Dark Forest.**

**Threat Level: High.**

**Suspected creature—Nascent Soul-Level Saberfang Tooth Monster.**

Fang Yuan froze.

"...Saberfang...?" he murmured.

The image of a massive, fanged beast roared back into his mind, its jagged silhouette echoing from memory, from that cave, from that night.

He leaned back slowly, eyes narrowing.

"That's the same type I fought back then..."

Then, almost to himself, he muttered, "Could there be another Hollow Yeklo Grass near it...?"

A beat of silence.

He turned his gaze toward the towering stack of scrolls on the desk, filled with clan logistics, cultivation assignments, and resource management.

Then he smiled. Slowly. Like a fox deciding on a second helping of chickens.

"I'm sure Uncle won't mind handling another two or three months of paperwork..."

He giggled, oh yes, giggled as he rolled up the scroll and slipped it into his sleeve.

## **Chapter 67: Phungrei City [1]**

After that, a day passed.

During that period of time, Fang Yuan was already deep into the Northern Regions, trekking across the frost-bitten wilderness with his robes hidden beneath a thick cloak.

Though the landscape was hostile, his steps were light, carefree even.

Currently: Phungrei City.

A border town of modest size and sharp paranoia.

The banners of the Gu Household fluttered on every street, their symbol, an orchid carved onto armor, lanterns, and even the side of the local well.

He was currently disguised as a wandering middle-aged cultivator, complete with a slightly hunched posture, fake mustache, and a bulked-up frame hidden beneath padded robes.

Fang Yuan had blended in almost too well.

He didn't look like a mere passerby. He actually looked like trouble.

And right now, Fang Yuan sat in a smoky little inn tucked between two weathered guard posts, a shallow lantern flickering overhead.

The scent of stewed pork and toasted herbs hung thick in the air.

In front of him, a fresh bowl of pork stew steamed invitingly, fat glistening on the surface, the broth rich and dark from hours of simmering bone and spice.

He lifted a piece of meat with his chopsticks, bit in slowly.

Tender. Juicy.

The kind of flavor that clung to your tongue and made your soul sigh in relief.

"Mmm... now this is what I call living," he murmured to no one in particular, savoring the bite with the exaggerated bliss of a man who look like he hadn't tasted decent food in weeks.



Beside him, ten empty bowls, neatly stacked like trophies.

The low murmur of conversation had shifted, angled toward him like the drift of smoke.

From one corner table, a thin man whispered behind his sleeve.

"Who is that guy?"

"Dunno," came the answer from his friend, eyes darting nervously. "But judging by the sword on his back... probably a cultivator."

A pause.

Then from another table, a woman hissed quietly, tugging her friend's sleeve.

"Hush! Cultivators have sharp ears. He might hear us..."

Someone scoffed, voice barely above breath.

"Tch. Acting so high and mighty... scamming mortals like us just to survive."

But before the words could hang too long in the air, an elder man smacked the speaker upside the head.

"Idiot. Keep your voice down. You want your house burned down?"

The room tensed briefly, then resumed pretending not to stare.

All eyes shifted again toward the lone man at the center table, still chewing calmly, still eating like he hadn't heard a thing.

Fang Yuan let the flavor melt on his tongue, then reached for his tea.

His ears, of course, had caught everything.

Every slight.

Every whisper of pity for the poor innkeeper.

Every assumption that he would vanish without paying a coin.

He slurped the broth thoughtfully.

Then, with a jolly tone that cut across the quiet, he called out.

"Innkeeper! Another bowl, if you please!"

The room went still.

The innkeeper, half-trembling, half-resigned peeked from behind the kitchen screen.

His lips parted, maybe to ask for payment, maybe to plead mercy.

But Fang Yuan simply smiled and tapped his chopsticks against the rim of the bowl, a steady clink-clink that echoed faintly through the smoky room.

The innkeeper had begun serving him out of fear.

Then, out of doubt.

And now, just pure desperation.

From behind the kitchen screen, the man clutched an empty meat basket with both hands, fingers trembling as he leaned toward the nearest servant boy.

"H-he's on his fourteenth bowl," he whispered, pale as flour. "At this rate, I'm going to die..."

His hands fumbled at his waist pouch.

He shoved a handful of silver coins, ten of them into the servant's hands.

"Take this. Go call the village guards. Hurry."

The servant's eyes widened, but he nodded and darted out the back door without a word.

The innkeeper then took a deep breath, forced the corners of his mouth up into a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, and stepped back into the dining room with another steaming bowl in hand.

His footsteps hesitant, his courtesy stiff and forced.

"S-second helpings, sir," he said, bowing stiffly as he set the bowl down in front of Fang Yuan.

Fang Yuan didn't need to read minds to know what was going on but he didn't mind either.

He had noticed the unease.

The sweat at the man's temples. The smile just a little too tight.

But hey.. he was hungry.

And he was going to pay.

So why should he worry?

He lifted another slice of pork, bit down with visible pleasure, and let out a long, satisfied hum.

"Ah... heaven in a bowl."

The innkeeper laughed nervously.

But his fingers, clenched tightly behind his back, told a different story.

Soon after, armored boots clanked outside. The Gu Family Patrol had been summoned.

A few moments later, a figure stepped in. One of the local Gu guards, tall, iron-clad, and clearly annoyed walked toward Fang Yuan's table, his expression unreadable but edged with suspicion.

He cleared his throat.

"Young man—"

Fang Yuan didn't even look up.

He scooped another chunk of meat into his mouth, eyes closed in bliss, and muttered through the bite:

"Can't you leave an old man to his own meal?"

The Gu guard paused, visibly thrown off by the low, rumbling voice and the sheer bulk of the so-called 'old man' in front of him.

"...You've eaten half a month's worth of stock."

"Mm," Fang Yuan nodded solemnly, licking his chopsticks. "It's cold out there. I need the fat. Vital for bones."

The guard narrowed his eyes. "You're not from Phungrei."

"I'm not from anywhere," Fang Yuan said, voice low and bored. "But I've left plenty of places behind."

"...Mind telling me your name?"

Fang Yuan opened one eye.

"No," he said simply. Then sipped his soup with exaggerated slowness.

The room tensed. A few other customers stopped chewing.

The Gu guard's brow twitched.

Outside, the patrol squad was slowly circling the building. Inside, the tension had begun to rise like the steam from Fang Yuan's last bowl.

He licked the edge of the chopsticks.

And smiled.

Fang Yuan then set his chopsticks down and leaned back with a satisfied sigh, patting his belly like a lazy tiger after a hunt.

And then he raised his voice.

"Innkeeper!"

## **Chapter 68: Phungrei City [2]**

The old innkeeper peeked past the iron shoulder of a Gu guard, lips pale, eyes wide with the dread.

Fang Yuan didn't even glance at him. He reached calmly into his robe.

***Clink. Clink. Clink.***

Ten gold coins dropped onto the table with a soft, deliberate jingle. The sound landed heavier than thunder in the dead-quiet room.

Fang Yuan offered a warm, measured smile.

"Old man, that was the best meal I've had in years. I'll come back again sometime."

Silence.

You could hear a chopstick drop.

**Ten gold coins. Enough to buy the entire inn along with the servants... Twice!**

The innkeeper's jaw worked soundlessly before he stumbled forward, legs half-collapsing with every step.

"S-sir! Thank you! May your ancestors ascend to the heavens! May your digestion remain strong through ten thousand meals!"

He swept the gold off the table, eyes glistening, shoulders shaking from the weight of his good fortune and then disappeared into the backroom, weeping tears of gratitude.

The Gu guards remained rooted in place, processing what they had just seen.

One of them finally muttered,

"Who even pays like that...?"

The squad leader exhaled and straightened. His expression returned to neutral, but not without effort.

"Come with us. The captain may want a word."

Fang Yuan rose with deliberate ease, brushing a few pork crumbs from his sleeve. His movements were neither hurried nor tense.

He looked around once, taking in the stunned inn guests and the now-empty table beside him.

He tipped his head slightly, a polite gesture, not mocking, not boastful.

"Well, then. Let's not keep the captain waiting."

The guards stepped aside to let him through, their armor clinking with every motion.

Outside, two more patrolmen joined the formation, their boots thudding against the stone as they surrounded him.

The city streets were starting to dim as dusk approached.

Lanterns flickered to life in shuttered windows, and the cool wind carried the scent of incense and roasted chestnuts.

But most eyes turned toward the strange scene: Gu soldiers escorting a bulky, gray-haired 'wanderer' through the town center like a suspect or a celebrity.

Whispers followed.

Some guessed he was a wanted criminal.

Others swore they had seen a noble who dressed like that just to go out.

Fang Yuan, however, moved like none of it mattered.

Hands folded behind his back, expression unreadable, eyes soft and half-lidded.

He seemed like a man on a stroll through his own courtyard.

The lead guard finally broke the silence.

"You're not worried?"

Fang Yuan didn't bother turning his head. He simply replied:

"Should I be?"

The man blinked, as if the answer unsettled him more than any bravado might have.

He said nothing more.

But the tension shifted. Subtly.

A few guards edged closer too close for safety, too far for comfort.

Their posture changed: less formal, more poised.

Not yet hostile, but not neutral anymore.

Then came the turn.

A literal one.

Instead of continuing toward the central barracks, the guards suddenly veered off, left, into a narrow alley between two soot-streaked smithies long since abandoned.

The temperature dipped noticeably in the confined space. Moss clung to damp stone, and the faint scent of oil and rust lingered in the air.

Fang Yuan stepped into the alley without comment, eyes flicking briefly toward a crooked gutter above.

He seemed more intrigued by a sleeping cat on a roof beam than the shifting footfalls behind him.

Then... CLANG.

The harsh scrape of metal leaving sheaths shattered the quiet.

He turned, slowly.

All six guards now had blades drawn. Their once-civil faces had twisted into thin smirks and narrow eyes, greedy, sharp.

They weren't soldiers anymore.

They were scavengers who thought they had found a plump, clueless pig walking straight into their trap.

Fang Yuan exhaled softly.

Not surprised. Not afraid.

Just... disappointed.

"You could've atleast waited until I finished the broth."

The lead patrolman shook his head slowly, feigning patience, though his fingers were already curling tighter around his sword hilt.

"Listen here. You and us... why don't we settle this in a peaceful manner?"

Fang Yuan tilted his head slightly, the faint smile on his face never quite reaching his eyes.

"Go on," he said smoothly, voice light and unhurried. "I'm all ears."

But the smile, calm, unconcerned irked them more than a snarl ever could.

One of the younger guards scowled.

"You paid ten gold coins for a meal?" he sneered. "That's suspicious. No sane man tosses that kind of gold unless it's fake."

Another stepped forward, voice low and oily.

"So be smart, old man. Hand over the rest of your gold... let us check if it's real."

Fang Yuan's eyes flicked over the speaker lazily, then back to the lead patrol.

"Interesting. I wasn't aware local guards were also part of the regional treasury inspection office."

The men didn't like that.

The smiles dropped and the pretense cracked.

The lead patrolman's expression sharpened like a rusted blade, all patience gone.

"You think this is a joke?" he muttered, stepping closer. His breath smelled faintly of dry herbs and wine.

"How about you hand over the rest, nicely and we won't have to gut you and toss your body into the tannery runoff."

The others chuckled under their breath, spreading out in the narrow alley.

They were like dogs trying to corner a deer they didn't realize was actually a tiger.

Fang Yuan didn't move.

Nor did he blink.

But his senses spread out, brushing the walls, counting the shadows.

A silent, almost casual sweep of the surroundings.

Not because of them.

They were ants. Qi Condensation at best. Strong among mortals, sure, but—

*Are you kidding me?*

At half-step Hollow Spirit realm, his spiritual power could flatten all six of them with a flick of his sleeve.

He wasn't worried about the blades in their hands, he was wondering what was behind this little setup.

Or who was watching.

His smile faded just slightly, replaced by a cool neutrality.

His hand casually dropped to the hilt of his blade, not as a threat, but as habit, like a noble resting a fan.

Fang Yuan then stared back at them.

## **Chapter 69: Phungrei City [3]**

Fang Yuan stared at them for a long moment.



Then he smiled.

It wasn't cruel but it wasn't a smug either.

It was warm. Friendly and almost... pitying.

And somehow, that was worse.

"Ah... this is awkward," he said lightly, rubbing his jaw.

The patrolmen tensed.

"I had this whole low-profile thing going on," he continued, as if they weren't drawing closer. "You know—wandering cultivator, mysterious drifter, hiding my cultivation base. Classic stuff."

The younger guard snapped, voice sharp and shaken:

"Shut up and drop the gold!"

But Fang Yuan didn't even flinch. He just kept talking, fingers tugging at his fake mustache.

"Look at this thing. Scratchy as hell. It's been killing me all day."

With a soft pop, he peeled the mustache off, revealing a youthful, clean-cut face beneath, still smiling.

The lead guard blinked. "Wha—"

He never finished the word.

**BOOM.**

Not an explosion.

Just the sound of displaced air, of a body moving faster than their eyes could track.

Fang Yuan blurred. A flicker. Gone from where he stood.

And then—*crack*.

He reappeared behind the tallest guard, who froze mid-swing. His arm hung at an impossible angle, blade slipping from nerveless fingers.

He crumpled like a puppet with its strings cut, already unconscious before his face hit the ground.

Another guard lunged, teeth bared only to stop short as a single finger tapped gently against his forehead.

That was all.

A whisper of contact.

But his eyes rolled back. He dropped like a sack of stones, a soft thud echoing in the alley.

Fang Yuan exhaled softly and turned.

Two more remained.

They didn't speak.

They didn't move.

They tried to run.

They didn't make it past two steps.

A streak of motion, barely seen two dull strikes, precise and silent.

They hit the wall first. Then the ground. Out cold.

Fang Yuan stood alone, adjusting his sleeves like he'd just stretched after a long meal.

The alley fell silent, save for the slow drip of water from a broken pipe above.

Fang Yuan dusted off his sleeves, looking mildly disappointed.

"Tch. I was hoping to finish my pork in peace."

He looked down at the four unconscious men.

"You'd think Gu family soldiers would be better trained than this. Or at least know how to check someone's soul depth."

He turned on his heel, walking back out into the open street, the mustache still in his hand.

"Guess I'll need a new disguise..."

And just like that, he vanished into the crowd once more.

Once the last echo of Fang Yuan's steps faded into the street, silence returned to the alley.

Then, soft footsteps echoed from the far end.

A girl stepped into view.

She paused at the sight of the four Gu guards sprawled across the ground, their limbs twisted awkwardly, blades scattered.

"Phew... he was strong," she muttered under her breath, eyes flicking over the scene. Then, hesitantly, she approached.

She knelt beside the nearest one, pressing two fingers to his neck.

A pulse. Faint, but steady.

She checked the others, each one still breathing.

But she didn't sigh in relief.

Instead, her gaze slowly lifted, scanning the alley... and then stopped.

Her eyes landed on a large rock by the wall. Half-buried in the shadows. Rough. Heavy.

She stared at it.

Swallowed hard.

Her heart thundered in her chest.

*No...*

*Are you really going to do it?*

The question whispered through her mind like a cold wind.

But then another voice, sharp and furious cut through.

*Why shouldn't she? They assaulted her. Toyed with her. Killed her only child. Her little girl. Her baby.*

Her fingers curled into fists.

They deserve worse than death.

Her breath hitched. Sweat beaded at her brow.

*But is this the right path?*

*Yes. Revenge is the only path left.*

*You said you'd avenge her, didn't you? You swore it on her grave. So what are you waiting for?*

Her feet moved on their own.

Step by step, she crossed the alley and stopped before the rock.

She crouched.

Her hands trembled as they touched the rough surface.

Cold. Damp.

Heavy.

She wrapped her fingers around its base.

Tightened her grip.

Lifted.

The rock groaned in protest, as if aware of what was to come.

But her resolve, was louder.

She rose slowly, arms straining, eyes burning with pain and memory.

Her movements were slow not out of hesitation, but from sheer effort.

The rock was heavy, awkward, its jagged weight biting into her palms with every step.

And yet, she carried it forward.

Toward the nearest guard.

He lay there, face slack, breathing soft. Peaceful, as if merely sleeping.

But she knew better.

She stopped beside him. Her shadow loomed over his body.

Her arms trembled, not from fear, but from strain, muscles crying, begging her to let go.

But she didn't.

Not yet.

With a choked breath, she lifted the rock higher.

The weight of the past bore down harder than the stone ever could.

She saw flashes behind her eyes: her daughter's tiny hands... the blood... the laughter of these men when she begged.

And then, she brought it down.

CRACK.

The sound echoed off the alley walls. A wet, sickening crunch. Blood sprayed.

She staggered back, gasping. Her hands trembled violently as the rock rolled from her fingers.

She stared.

The man's skull had caved in—unrecognizable now. Her breath came in short, panicked bursts.

The first life she had ever taken.

Her stomach twisted. She nearly fell to her knees.

But then—

The tears came.

Silent. Hot. Endless.

And with them... came the memories.

The tiny grave. The silence of the night it all ended. The captain's sneer. The guards' laughter. Her daughter's cold hands in hers.

"I'll never forget. I'll never forgive."

She grit her teeth.

Her hands moved on their own, back to the rock.

Blood clung to it like it remembered too.

Her body screamed. Her arms barely obeyed.

But her grief screamed louder.

So she picked it up again, this time without hesitation.

She turned to the next one.

She would not stop now.

Not until every breath stolen from her child was paid for, one shattered skull at a time.

Not until silence greeted every body.

Just like the night they took her child.

## **Chapter 70: Dark Forest [1]**

The jagged line where civilization ended and the 'Dark Forest' began loomed ahead.

Towering trees stretched endlessly toward the heavens, their thick canopies so dense that not a single ray of sunlight could pierce through.

The forest floor lay in perpetual shadow, shrouded in an eerie twilight no matter the hour.

Locals even called the 'Dark forest' the 'Night Forest', a place where day never quite arrived, and the darkness seemed to breathe with secrets of its own.

Fang Yuan arrived at the forest's edge, no longer dressed as an old rogue or wandering elder.

Today, he wore the guise of a young master, arrogant, refined, and unmistakably noble.

A long flowing robe of deep sapphire trimmed with silver cloud patterns wrapped around his lean form, the fabric whispering with every step.

His dark hair was swept back into a high, elegant knot secured by a jade pin, from which a silver tassel swayed with practiced grace.

At his waist hung a folding fan, painted with a black dragon winding between plum blossoms, half-open in his hand more for show than use.

A thin, deliberate sword scar traced one cheek, not deep enough to disfigure, but just enough to make him look experienced and dashing.

His boots were spotless. His expression, serene yet vaguely bored.

And the faint scent of sandalwood clung to him like confidence.

In short, he was the picture of every self-satisfied, dangerously competent young master the world both admired and feared.

He adjusted his collar and exhaled softly.

"Well... I'm sure I'll be able to scare others away with this facade of mine."

Just as he took a step forward, a voice chimed from behind.

"Going in there alone, young master~?"

Fang Yuan glanced over his shoulder.

A girl in a red dress approached with the sway of someone who knew exactly how to catch a man's eye.

Hair pinned up with cheap gemstone clips, perfume strong enough to mask the smell of copper from her last client.

She pressed closer, lips curled into a practiced smile.

"You don't look like a local... Or maybe you are, just trying to be mysterious?"

But if you're looking to get lost in the woods, how about having a little fun first? Only a copper coin for an hour."

Fang Yuan stared at her for a breath too long, then he smiled, all charm and mock consideration.

"You are tempting."

He reached into his sleeve and flipped a gold coin into the air.

She caught it without looking, fingers graceful, practiced.

Fang Yuan leaned in slightly, just enough to make it look conspiratorial.

"I'll come back for you... but later."

His voice was low, smooth and almost sincere.

Then he turned without waiting for her reply and strode straight into the forest.

The moment his figure disappeared beyond the first curtain of fog and shadow—  
—the girl's smile vanished.

Her shoulders slumped. Her gaze sharpened.

And she clicked her tongue.

"Tch. What a fool. I hope you just die there."

She pocketed the coin without looking at it and turned away, disappearing into the side trail with practiced ease, blending into the outskirts of the city.

The trees swallowed Fang Yuan whole. No trace of his presence remained.

Only the whispers of wind and the knowledge that no sane man should ever enter the Dark Forest alone.

Especially not without proper preparations.

In the meantime, the girl returned to the city's edge with a confident sway in her step, red dress catching the breeze like a banner.

She moved quickly, but not suspiciously, as if she was just another beauty with somewhere to be.

At the checkpoint near the outer watchtower, a Gu family guard leaned lazily against a stone pillar, half-dozing.

She sauntered up to the guard post, hips swaying with calculated ease.

"Hey," she said with a soft, teasing lilt, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. Her voice was just loud enough to tug at the nearest guard's attention. "I've got information."

The guard leaned slightly forward, eyeing her with casual interest. "What kind of information?"

"About the Dark Forest."

His expression sharpened. "How much?"



"Twenty silvers," she said smoothly, as if it were the weather.

He scoffed. "That's robbery. Five."

She rolled her eyes. "Fifteen. That's already low."

The guard folded his arms, thinking, eyes flicking across her face, then her dress, then back again.

He clicked his tongue. "Fine. Ten. Split the middle."

She blinked in mock surprise, then smiled. "Yes, yes, deal."

She leaned in slightly, voice dropping just a bit.

"A young cultivator wandered into the Dark Forest. Alone. Just a few minutes ago."

The guard straightened at that, frown tightening. "Alone?"

She nodded, her tone more serious now. "Could be nothing... but you lot like to know these things, don't you?"

The man grunted and scratched his head. He eyed her up and down with a little too much interest.

"Thanks for the info," he said, stepping closer. "Maybe I can return the favor in other ways, hm? How about you come keep me company for a bit—"

Before he could finish, she cut him off with a bright laugh, empty, pointed.

"Sorry, darling. I have business with your captain."

The man froze, eyes widening ever so slightly. He immediately backed up a half-step, then fumbled at his waist pouch.

He pulled out ten silver coins and offered them like a nervous schoolboy.

"For the info," he mumbled. "Y-you can go."

She smiled sweetly, plucked the coins from his hand, and walked past him without another word.

There was, of course, no business with the captain.

She had just wanted the soldier to shut up and ten silver was a decent enough bonus for saying what she was going to say anyway.

A few turns later, she reached a quieter street nestled between the southern merchant rows.

The market was still lively, full of shouting stall owners and dusty carts.

She bought a bundle of vegetables, some dried mushrooms, and a small pouch of marinated meat.

Her hands worked quickly, casually haggling down prices.

As she walked away, her hips still swaying, a subtle smirk played at her lips.

She reached into her sleeve and pulled out the coin Fang Yuan had casually tossed her earlier, more as an afterthought than a gift.

It was still warm from where it had nestled against her skin.

She glanced down at it with idle curiosity, ready to tuck it into her purse with the others.

Then she froze.

The light hit the coin's edge just right, revealing a gleam that no copper coin could ever give off.

Her brow furrowed as she turned it between her fingers.

The coin wasn't dull nor weathered.

It was rich, heavy and in fact, gleaming.

Gold.

Her eyes widened. Her breath hitched.

"Wait... what?"

She held it up higher, squinting in disbelief.

*That idiot.. he'd thrown her a gold coin?*

Her fingers trembled slightly as she stared at it, as if it might vanish the moment she blinked.

She could buy a whole wagon of vegetables with this. Or pay rent for half a year. Or bribe her way out of three lifetimes' worth of trouble.

Her steps slowed to a halt.

Then, softly, barely a whisper she muttered, "...That clown."

But her grip on the coin tightened, and this time her smirk wasn't for show.

"Hopefully you get what you are aiming for her out alive."