

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

#Chapter 81: Meet the Saberfang [3] [pt.2] - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 81: Meet the Saberfang [3] [pt.2]

Chapter 81: Meet the Saberfang [3] [pt.2]

Chunks of bark, shrapnel of exploding wood, and shockwaves of spiritual pressure tore into the clearing, flinging dirt, leaves, and beastly roars in every direction.

Fang Yuan spun and stared for a split second.

The beasts reared back, snarling as the barrage knocked the mid-stage ones off-balance.

Even the peak-stage Saberfang was momentarily slowed, its advance staggered by the terrain collapsing into a smoking mess of shattered trunks and jagged roots.

In the aftermath, Lin Zhaoyue landed lightly beside Fang Yuan, her hair fluttering like silk in the breeze, lips curled in smug satisfaction.

She gave a little twirl, graceful, theatrical, as if performing for an invisible audience and then shot him a radiant smile.

"Look at that, husband," she said, brushing off imaginary dust from her robe sleeves. "I'm the most useful woman you'll ever find."

Fang Yuan's eye twitched.

Not because she was wrong.

But because somehow, despite the literal life-or-death escape, she still had the energy to flirt.

He took a deep breath, steadying his qi.

They weren't out of danger yet.

There was still much to be done.

First, he needed to check the system reward, the one he had completely ignored mid-chaos.

And next...

A grin tugged at the corner of his lips, sharp and silent.

But before any of that.

"Let's get out of here. Now," he said, scanning the treeline for a safe route.

Without hesitation, he summoned his flying sword.

With a pulse of spiritual energy, the sleek blade hovered in mid-air, humming with anticipation.

He leapt onto it with practiced ease, only to hear a familiar voice behind him.

"Wheee~!"

Lin Zhaoyue jumped on the moment after, landing flush against his back, arms wrapping tightly around his waist as if this were some romantic outing rather than an emergency escape.

Fang Yuan's jaw tightened.

This woman...

"Hold on tight!" Fang Yuan growled, channeling a surge of spiritual energy into the blade.

With a blast of qi, the sword rocketed into the air, trees whipping past in a blur of motion as wind screamed around them.

Below, the woods erupted in chaos as the four Saberfangs gave chase, crashing through the underbrush, snarling and leaping up in pursuit.

The very forest trembled under their fury.

Fang Yuan didn't look back but he heard it.

A roar, deep, guttural, and filled with absolute rage shook the sky itself.

Fang Yuan gritted his teeth and flew faster, qi surging violently through his meridians.

Behind him, Lin Zhaoyue leaned in, her breath tickling his ear as she whispered, sultry and breathless,

"Hehe... you're so warm, husband~."

Fang Yuan didn't even turn his head.

His voice was flat, but the tips of his ears betrayed him, dusted faintly red.

"Stop talking," he muttered.

She pouted, of course, but the mischievous lilt in her voice didn't fade.

"So where are we headed, husband?"

Fang Yuan, already drained from the emotional weight of being chased by a peak Nascent soul realm beast, didn't bother to correct her on the 'husband' again.

"The Gu family estate."

That was when her body tensed against his back.

Subtle, but he felt it.

Her tone dropped a degree colder.

"...You're going to drop me off there?"

Still focused on balancing their flight atop the sword, Fang Yuan replied calmly,

"No. But we'll part ways near there."

A long pause.

Then came her voice, smooth, low, and suddenly sharp like a knife wrapped in velvet.

"You have a girl you want over there, is that it?"

Fang Yuan blinked, thrown off.

"Huh? No!"

Her tone deepened ominously.

"Then... that prostitute in red you promised to spend the night with after you got out of the Dark Forest?"

"What the heck?!" Fang Yuan nearly tripped mid-air from shock.

"I gave her a single coin and walked away! That wasn't even flirting!"

"Still a gold coin and you promised her," she hissed.

There was a sharpness to her words now.

"Flirting with mortals... even when you already have me. You really are cruel, husband."

Then she grabbed him, arms tightening possessively, her grip like iron across his waist.

Fang Yuan stiffened, trying to keep balance as spiritual pressure began to bleed from her.

This girl... is unhinged!

But worse, he could feel her mood shift, like a brewing storm.

And right now, she was strapped to his back while they soared through the sky.

One wrong move, and she'd both flirt and murder him.

She then suddenly sighed, voice melting into a soft, almost melancholic murmur.

"Fine... as long as I'm the first wife, you can have as many as you want."

"...Huh?"

Fang Yuan blinked, completely thrown off.

Just a second ago, she was about to choke him mid-air, and now... this?

There was no outrage or a murderous jealousy... just a quiet embrace, and those bizarrely generous words.

Before he could even process it, Lin Zhaoyue leaned in again, hugging him from behind with a lightness that felt... off.

It wasn't teasing nor possessive, just... gentle.

Before long, they landed the sword a fair distance away from the Gu family estate to avoid attracting attention.

The area was quiet, a patch of forest overlooking the high walls of the estate not far off.

She stepped down from the sword behind him without a word.

There was no snark, giggles or her usual flirtings.

Nothing!

Just silence.

A low, unfamiliar ache settled in his gut, like he had just missed something important and irreversible.

He didn't dare look back, and yet...

The silence was too quiet.

His brows furrowed and then he turned, slowly.

Lin Zhaoyue stood with her hands folded in front of her, gaze downcast, expression unreadable.

Her usual brightness dulled, her posture calm, too calm.

And Fang Yuan felt a strange twist in his gut.

Why was she acting like this? Was she angry?

She also didn't look mad. Or if she was... it was a kind he had never seen before.

She just stood there... quietly.

His heart ticked once.

"Was it... something I said?"

The thought echoed through him, unbidden.

Why does this feel so wrong?

He'd faced assassins. Starved in the wilderness. Been ambushed by beasts and cultivators alike.

But this silence?

This uncertainty?

It unsettled him far more.

His mind raced, turning over a million thoughts, yet none of them gave him the answer he needed.

Chapter 82: Saint Grade Manual.

Lin Zhaoyue's arms tightened around him in a sudden embrace, her lips pressing briefly to his cheek in a soft, startling kiss before she pulled back, flushed and triumphant.

"I'll return to the Lin family estate for now," she whispered, eyes gleaming. "But remember... I'm your first wife."

With a final, mischievous smile, she folded her legs beneath her and drifted upward on a wave of qi, vanishing into the treetops before Fang Yuan could even catch his breath.

He stood rooted for a heartbeat, then glanced down at the hairpin and spatial ring still clutched in his hand.

"Wait a minute..."

He opened his mouth to give chase then shook his head with a wry curl of his lips.

Slipping back into the forest's edge, he concealed his aura and wove through the innocent bustle of passersby until he arrived at a humble inn lit by paper lanterns.

Inside, the warm glow of oil lamps and the chatter of diners welcomed him like a spring breeze.

He paused by a worn wooden table, then sank onto the bench and beckoned the innkeeper. "Pork stew, four bowls, if you please."

As the first bowl arrived, guests stole curious glances, muttering behind cupped hands.

"Who is that man, ordering four bowls at once?"

"Must be flush with cash."

"A cultivator, no doubt, see that sword at his back?"

Fang Yuan only smiled, tapping his chopsticks against the side of the steaming bowl.

He finished each mouthful in a single bite, savoring the rich broth and tender meat, until the innkeeper quietly set a pile of empty bowls beside him.

Then, with a discreet gesture, Fang Yuan summoned the translucent system screen before his eyes:

System Points: 120,000 SP

A slow grin tugged at his lips as the numbers pulsed across the screen. 120,000 SP, like sunlight pouring into his bones.

Next, he tapped on the glowing [**Saint-Grade Cultivation Manual**] icon within the system interface, hovering gently in the air like a floating glyph.

Its outline shimmered with golden light, the emblem of celestial runes pulsating faintly along the edges like breathing sigils.

The moment he opened it, a ripple of light spread across the screen.

Then—

Acquiring Manual: [Saint-Grade Manual: Heavenly Mandate Scripture]

Beneath it, a series of blinking message appeared:

[Notice: Host, this manual was originally classified as Divine-Grade.

Due to external interference during the Coldwind City Championship, the reward has been downgraded.]

[Host, to found and lead a clan, you must cultivate the unshakable faith of your followers.

- Inspire their loyalty through impartial justice.**
- Earn their respect with unwavering integrity.**
- Guide them with clear vision and compassionate strength.]**

And a third notification appeared beneath it:

[Host, your younger brother's championship victory was aided by outside influence.

His unfair advantage has triggered a penalty:

The Divine-Grade Cultivation Manual has been downgraded to Saint-Grade.]

Fang Yuan's smile faltered, his excitement curdling into a bitter twist of irony. He closed the manual with a soft snap and stared at the empty bowls before him.

"Why," he whispered to the hush of the inn, "does it always have to be my brother pulling me down?"

Fang Yuan's brows drew into a thin, sharp line, for even in victory, his brother managed to make him lose.

He let out a slow, controlled breath, fingers tightening a little.

He then rose from his seat, dusted the folds of his robes, and placed a few coins on the table.

The innkeeper, half-dazed by the man's sudden departure and half-spooked by the unsettling aura he gave off, said nothing as he left.

Now that he had obtained something as profound as the Heavenly Mandate Scripture, he'd have to be a fool if he fooled around again.

He stepped into the bustling streets once more, the crowd thick as usual, merchants haggling, cultivators moving about, gossip drifting like smoke on the wind.

And then, he noticed a crowd gathered ahead.

Low whispers rippled through them, rumors, hushed murmurs, fragments of something unsettling.

Fang Yuan's curiosity stirred.

There was something familiar about that alley.

He followed the noise casually, pulling a simple mask from his sleeve and slipping it over the lower half of his face.

He melded into the crowd like a shadow slipping through mist.

Up ahead, the street was packed with people forming a semicircle around an alleyway.

A crowd had gathered, surrounding something on the ground.

Fang Yuan made his way closer, not pushing, merely observing.

There, at the center of the commotion, lay four corpses, Gu family patrol guards.

Dead.

Their heads crushed, misshapen like eggs beneath a hammer.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

"Who could've done this...?"

"Dead in one strike... all of them... their heads... gods..."

Each corpse had its skull crushed inward, as if a mountain rock had smashed down directly upon them.

Fang Yuan gave the scene one glance, just one and then Fang Yuan muttered inwardly, brow twitching as he glanced at the corpses once more.

The heck...? His breath caught.

Weren't those... the ones I only knocked unconscious?

His gaze lingered on the caved-in skulls, a dull chill creeping down his spine.

Who the hell crushed their heads in like that...? With a rock, no less...

A long pause. He said nothing aloud.

Then, with a quiet exhale, he shook his head and turned away.

"...Well, whatever."

And just like that, he slipped past the murmuring crowd, his figure vanishing into the winding streets without another glance back.

His eyes narrowed as he turned toward the Gu family estate beyond the rooftops, its silhouette looming like a stubborn parasite on the city's veins.

A whisper escaped his lips, cold and quiet:

"Enjoy my gift for today. If you survive, I'll come bearing more."

He unsheathed his sword with a soft shing of steel, stepped onto it with effortless grace, and soared into the sky.

Not because he had to.

But because he could.

Truth was, most cultivators didn't travel by sword. Not unless they wanted to waste spiritual energy.

Lin Zhaoyue had it right, walking or gliding with refined Qi techniques was faster, safer, and far more efficient.

Chapter 83: Back to Clan.

Fang Yuan arrived quietly at the gates of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, the heart of the Fang family estate.

From the distance, he could already hear the laughter, music, and the unmistakable clinking of wine cups.

Lanterns hung high in the sky, flickering softly in the evening light. Celebration was in full swing.

He gave a faint, knowing smile.

"Well, our family is never short of banquets, huh," he muttered, descending into the crowd with the ease of falling snow.

As soon as his feet touched the courtyard tiles, the festive chatter slowly stilled.

Heads turned and gasps followed.

"The clan head's returned!"

The entire Phoenix Soul Pavilion erupted in cheer.

And none louder than Fang Chen, his uncle, the current acting clan head.

Arms wide open, face beaming like a child reunited with his long-lost toy, he charged forward with absolutely no regard for seniority or image.

"Ah, nephew! I missed you so much!" Fang Chen bellowed, nearly tripping over his own sleeves in joy.

Several clan elders coughed awkwardly at his over-the-top enthusiasm, exchanging glances.

Some forced polite chuckles, while others tried to maintain their composed, stoic facades.

Except for Fang Jingyi, she burst into a sudden, uncontrollable fit of laughter, clutching her stomach and wheezing.

Elder Yin coughed into her sleeve. "Someone fetch her tea."

Just then, Fang Tian, his younger brother, stepped out from the crowd.

Straight-backed, proudly dressed in the ceremonial robes of a Coldwind City Champion, and with an expression that balanced pride and composure.

He stopped in front of Fang Yuan and smiled.

"Brother, we won the championship," he said simply, trying to sound modest.

Fang Yuan stared at him for a second.

And then His lips curved into a faint but genuine smile.

"Congratulations."

But then... silence.

The crowd didn't move. The joy didn't resume.

Everyone was staring. Their eyes fixated somewhere.

Fang Yuan blinked.

What?

And then, it hit him—

His eyes drifted to Fang Tian, locking onto the subtle ripple of spiritual energy around his younger brother's body.

Golden Core Stage.

Of course, Fang Yuan had already sensed it the moment he stepped out of seclusion.

The shift in his brother's qi was too obvious to miss for someone of his level.

But still... the others didn't know that.

The whole family probably assumed he hadn't noticed yet.

So, he decided to play along.

A brief pause, a beat of stillness and then his eyes widened just enough, his brows lifting as if only now realizing it.

He stepped back a half-step, as if startled.

"Wait a second... You're already at Golden Core Stage?" he said, tone layered with just the right mix of shock and admiration.

His expression shifted into a proud, almost teasing smile.

"Incredible. Truly incredible. Now I'm very convinced you'll win your three-year duel."

A few nearby elders nodded in agreement, visibly pleased with Fang Yuan's recognition.

And Fang Tian?

He simply gave a slight bow... but Fang Yuan didn't miss it.

The way his younger brother's lips curled upward, struggling to suppress the smirk that threatened to escape.

Tch... You're enjoying this a little too much, Fang Yuan thought, his own grin deepening.

Fang Tian turned away from the center of attention, his steps calm but clearly laced with satisfaction.

And then—

"Look at that," came a voice only he could hear, echoing from the jade ring that was on his neck like a necklace, faintly amused. "Your brother really is a born performer."

It was the soul residing within his ring, Qin Shi Huang, the once-supreme emperor whose consciousness still lingered through sheer will.

Fang Tian merely smiled.

Qin Shi Huang didn't stop there.

"I already told you. Your brother sensed our presence back during the Coldwind City Tournament," the soul continued, voice edged with curiosity. "So why pretend just now?"

Fang Tian let out a light chuckle, hands clasped behind his back as he walked through the banquet crowd.

"Brother enjoys his mystery," he said quietly. "But me? I like slipping in a little drama from time to time. Makes me feel like I'm playing a game only we understand."

There was a pause. Silence stretched for a moment, and then Qin Shi Huang's voice lowered, contemplative.

"You and your brother... it's rare. But perhaps, just perhaps, the two of you might truly be Heaven's chosen.

Two roads that fork yet cross. Opposing stars born under the same sky."

Fang Tian said nothing in response. His expression grew unreadable.

He quietly shifted course, walking over to where Fang Mei stood under the shade of a pavilion, engaged in conversation with Fang Rui.

As he approached, Fang Rui's gaze flicked toward him, then she grinned.

"Well, here he come," she said to Fang Mei, "You can do it."

Her smirk was sly, knowingly mischievous.

And just like that, she turned and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Fang Mei behind, visibly flustered.

Fang Tian raised an eyebrow as he arrived.

"...Well, what's this about?" he asked, a faint smile playing on his lips.

Fang Mei, caught between embarrassment and confusion, quickly looked away, trying to hide the subtle redness blooming on her cheeks.

"...Nothing!" she said too quickly.

Which, of course, made it something.

Fang Tian didn't press immediately.

He simply stood there, watching her squirm for a breath longer than necessary.

Then, his eyes curved in a soft arc, his smile annoyingly pleasant.

"Are you sure?" he asked, folding his arms and leaning slightly in.

"Because for 'nothing,' you're awfully red in the face. Should I call for the clan physician?"

"N-No!" Fang Mei burst out, almost too loud for the nearby banquet guests.

A few eyes turned their way, curious, but she quickly bowed her head, hands clutched tight at her sleeves, clearly trying to will herself invisible.

Fang Tian chuckled under his breath.

"Ah, then maybe it's a secret? One only cousin Fang Rui knows?" His tone was all teasing lilt now, mischief dancing in his eyes.

Fang Mei's face flushed deeper.

Her gaze darted, as if considering fleeing entirely, but something must've snapped in her resolve.

She stomped her foot softly and blurted out in a single breath:

"I-I want to go on a date with you tomorrow!"

Chapter 84: Fang Clan.

Fang Yuan joined his uncles and clan elders at the grand feast.

Wine flowed, laughter echoed, and plates were stacked high with delicacies.

The Phoenix Soul Pavilion glowed beneath the lantern light, warm with the joy of victory and reunion.

For once, Fang Yuan allowed himself to relax, just a little.

They drank. They dined.

And the night passed in bliss.

But as the embers of celebration died down, his gaze turned east.

There was still someone he hadn't visited.

"I wonder how Fang Lian is doing..." he murmured to himself, half curious, half hopeful.

Without further delay, he slipped away from the main hall and made his way toward the Eastern Ravine, where the spirit mine was nestled deep within the mountainous fold.

That was where she trained now, within the spiritual pond hidden far below the earth.

Two guards stood alert at the entrance, spears in hand, their eyes sharpening when they noticed the approaching figure.

But when they recognized him, their postures straightened even more.

"Clan head!"

Fang Yuan gave them a slight nod.

"I see you two are fulfilling your duties well. Keep it up."

"Yes, Clan Head! We will guard this place with our lives!" one of them replied with conviction.

Fang Yuan didn't say it aloud but he inwardly scoffed at that part.

'Laying down your life to protect a spirit pond would just make you a fool. I'd rather label you both cowards and have you run than see you die meaninglessly.'

Still, he appreciated the sentiment.

So instead, he simply gave them a nod of acknowledgment and walked past, letting the darkness of the mine swallow him whole.

The scent of damp stone and faintly glowing spiritual ore clung to the air as he descended deeper, the tunnel winding like a serpent into the earth.

Step by step, he moved through the twisting passages, qi lightly pulsing under his feet, guiding him until the subtle echo of a familiar voice drifted through the gloom.

A quiet, melodic hum at first... then words.

♪♪ The world will and has never been fair~

So what if you wanted to be part of a pair~

If you're not the one, you're treated like air~

And the only thing you can do is despair... ♪♪

Fang Yuan stopped mid-step.

That voice...

It was gentle and sweet.

And yet, tinged with something bitter.

A melody too soft to be angry but too hollow to be cheerful.

The spirit pond was not that far now.

As he turned the last curve of the tunnel, the glowing azure light of spiritual essence reflected across the rocks and there she was.

Fang Lian.

Sitting at the edge of the pond with her legs dipped into the shimmering water, hair slightly damp, and a blade across her lap.

Her eyes were closed as she hummed the last line, fingers lazily sketching ripples into the pond's surface.

She didn't seem surprised by his arrival.

"You're late," she said, voice quiet, almost playful. "I thought you were never coming back."

Fang Yuan blinked. "...You were expecting me?"

She opened her eyes, those violet pupils glinting faintly under the glow and turned to him with a smile.

"I dreamed it."

Fang Yuan arched a brow. "Dreams can lie."

Fang Lian tilted her head, that odd smile still resting on her lips. "So can people."

That made Fang Yuan chuckle, a low, amused sound that echoed gently in the cave.

"Seems like you've been doing well," he said, stepping closer, arms folded behind his back.

His tone carried a rare note of warmth. "So... you've been cultivating here all this time?"

Fang Lian nodded, her wet hair clinging to her cheeks as she looked up at him with a crooked smile.

"You gave me permission," she said with a light shrug. "Some already started calling me a nepo baby... but I'll be stronger than them. Just wait and see."

She glanced away for a moment, her gaze settling on the rippling surface of the spirit pond.

"This place gives me peace. Since, most of the time... I'm alone."

Her voice softened near the end.

Fang Yuan hummed thoughtfully. "The song... did you make that up?"

Fang Lian stared at the pond again.

"It came to me one night. I thought it was funny."

Fang Yuan raised a brow. "Funny?"

She shrugged, smiling wistfully. "Everything sounds funny when you're the joke."

Fang Yuan went silent at that.

Then, he slowly sat beside her, their reflections swaying together across the glowing water.

"You're not the joke," Fang Yuan finally said, his voice softer than before, quiet, yet firm.

The words echoed faintly in the chamber, brushing against the still surface of the spirit pond.

Fang Lian didn't respond right away.

Her back remained turned to him, her arms loosely folded behind her.

The silence stretched.

Then came her voice, light but uncertain:

"Master... am I pretty?"

Fang Yuan blinked, caught slightly off guard.

His eyes narrowed, not in suspicion, but contemplation as he looked at her again.

That was a strange question. But not a dishonest one.

So he answered, voice calm and steady, as if sharing a truth carved into the fabric of the world:

"Of course you are. Beauty isn't something granted—it's something revealed. The more you cultivate, the more the impurities of the world are burned away.

We're all born with light inside us. But as we grow, the dust of life, the scars, the burdens, they cloud it.

Cultivation is a return. A return to that clarity. That light.

The higher the realm you reach, the more the impurities fade... and what's left behind is beauty in its purest form."

He paused, then smiled faintly.

"So yes... you'll only grow more beautiful."

Fang Lian was still for a beat.

Then suddenly she giggled.

A small, playful sound that rippled through the quiet cave like a tossed pebble on water.

"I guess that only works for females then?"

Fang Yuan frowned slightly, confused.

And then it hit him.

...Wait.

His brow twitched.

What the heck?

Was this girl calling him ugly?

He turned toward her just as she turned her head, grinning mischievously.

Before he could say a word, she spun around on her heel and with a splash, she leapt straight into the spirit pond, water shimmering around her as if welcoming her back.

She laughed underwater, rising only halfway up, her cheeks flushed, droplets glimmering on her lashes.

All that melancholy from earlier was gone..

Fang Yuan stared for a moment longer, still processing what had just happened.

And then—

[You just received 100 Faith Points.]

["Faith Shop" is now unlocked.]

Chapter 85: Fang Lian's Woe.

Fang Lian leaned back in the glowing spirit pond, arms resting behind her, gaze locked on the rippling reflection of the ceiling above.

"...I want to stay here forever."

Fang Yuan's brows knit. "Don't be stupid," he said calmly, folding his arms.

"If you stay here forever, how are you going to heal others?"

She didn't answer immediately.

Then, without looking at him, she whispered, "I don't need to. They all look down on me anyway. Why should I help people who don't even treat me like a person?"

Fang Yuan's gaze deepened, a flicker of something unreadable in his eyes.

He was silent for a long breath.

"...Fang Lian," he said at last, voice lower, gentler. "You've taken a wrong turn somewhere."

His words didn't hold blame, only quiet concern.

"Come here."

Fang Lian blinked up at him, confused.

Her violet eyes shimmered, not with defiance, but with something quieter... something more fragile.

"...Master?" she said softly.

Her lips pressed into a thin line, the spark in her eyes dimming just slightly.

A subtle flinch touched her shoulders, as if she expected to be judged.

Fang Yuan noticed the change, the drop in her posture, the flicker of hurt, quickly masked behind practiced nonchalance.

He hadn't even said anything yet, but somehow... she already looked like she was bracing herself.

Not for punishment but for dismissal.

Like she thought he might see her as a liability now.

Just then, a screen blinked silently in Fang Yuan's vision:

[Fang Lian's Faith in you has fallen by 5 points. Currently now at 80.]

Fang Yuan muttered under his breath, brow arching in mild surprise.

"Huh... so that's how it works?"

He glanced at the faint system notification still hovering in the air before fading from view.

"So it notifies me when a person's faith rises or falls..." he nodded slowly, piecing it together. "That way I can actually fix things—if I mess up without realizing it."

There was something oddly reassuring about that.

A quiet mechanism, invisible yet vigilant, helping him understand his people better.

A tool not just for power, but for connection.

"Not bad," he murmured, lips curling faintly. "This might be more useful than I thought."

But then his eyes darted back to Fang Lian.

And his small moment of satisfaction shattered like a popped bubble.

"—Right. Now's not the time to be pleased with myself," he sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Her trust just dropped. Focus, idiot."

His gaze softened.

This is what matters.

And just like that, his mind cleared.

He stepped toward her and gently placed a hand on her head.

"Lian'er," he said quietly, "do you love your father?"

She nodded, almost reflexively.

Even if Fang Guo had been exiled after his failed coup, he was still her father.

Whatever mistakes he made, he had loved her.

"He was a good father," she said softly. "Even if... he wasn't a good man."

Fang Yuan didn't deny it. Crimes were crimes.

Justice had to be done. But that didn't erase the bond between parent and child.

His eyes, once calm and detached, now brimmed with silent responsibility.

Gone was the aloof cultivator who wandered at his own pace. In that moment, he stood as the pillar of the Fang family—

A leader not just of strength, but of hearts.

And his gaze, steady and unwavering, fell upon her like the judgment of heaven itself.

"Do you remember why you began cultivating in the first place?"

Fang Lian's brows knit. She blinked slowly. "...To... help people. To not feel weak."

Fang Yuan sat beside her on the stone, his robes barely brushing the pond's edge.

She was still submerged, the water catching the soft blue glow of the spirit stones embedded in the cavern walls.

"Where I came from," he began slowly, "power was everything. Everyone wanted it. And when they got it, most realized it was more than they could handle.

So they used it to control others. Or to run from themselves."

Fang Lian tilted her head, confused. "Where you came from...?"

She thought he meant the Fang family, or maybe even her father's revolt.

But the distant look in Fang Yuan's eyes told her he meant something deeper.

"There's also an old saying," he added with a faint smirk. "With great power comes great responsibility."

Fang Lian giggled. "That sounds fake. You made it up, didn't you?"

Fang Yuan sighed theatrically, shaking his head. "You brats never appreciate wisdom when it's passed down."

Then his tone softened again.

"So... tell me," he said with a small smile. "Who's been bullying you lately?"

She looked up, eyes blinking slowly.

He waited patiently.

Then, she pointed.

Up.

From the jagged ceiling of the cave, a single droplet formed, suspended at the tip of a translucent stalactite like a tear clinging to a trembling lash.

It quivered for a breathless moment...

Then fell.

The droplet sliced through the heavy silence of the chamber, twisting faintly in the dim, ethereal glow of the spirit pond below.

It glided downward, a slow, weightless descent, as if time itself had chosen to watch.

It struck her forehead with the gentlest tap—like a kiss from the mountain.

Then it began its slow journey...

Sliding down the curve of her brow.

Trailing the slope of her temple.

Weaving a shimmering path down her cheek, cool and smooth, reflecting the flickering blue light like a sliver of moonlight.

Her eyes fluttered shut, lashes damp with cave mist.

She didn't move.

She simply breathed, still, serene, waiting.

And as the droplet reached the edge of her parted lips...

She flicked out her tongue.

Soft. Deliberate. A subtle, almost sensual gesture.

The droplet disappeared with a quiet shlick,

leaving behind only a faint glisten and the echo of something unspoken in the air.

Then, in a whisper so soft it barely stirred the air, she spoke:

"Master... do you trust me?"

Fang Yuan looked at her for a moment, eyes calm, searching and gave a gentle nod.

"Of course I do."

A soft giggle escaped her lips, delicate and light.

"Then... may I resolve what's in my heart on my own?"

Fang Yuan paused.

In that moment, he finally understood.

So that's what this has all been about...

Still, he nodded once more, slowly.

"Fine. I'll leave it to you."

[DING! Your disciple Fang Lian's Faith has risen above 80.]

A soft chime echoed in his mind.

And another note appeared beneath it:

[Maintain Faith above 90 to gain passive Faith Point.]

Chapter 86: Filthy Insects [Gū] [pt.1]

Fang Yuan rose to his feet, brushing the dust from his robes with a soft exhale.

"Alright then," he said, casting a final glance at the glowing spirit pond.

But just as he turned—

SPLASH!

A surge of water erupted behind him.

Spirit-rich droplets arced through the air, landing with wet plops all over his robe and hair.

He blinked, momentarily stunned.

Behind him, Fang Lian surfaced with a mischievous grin, eyes glinting like a satisfied fox.

"Bye bye, Master~!" she called, waving one hand as she floated leisurely across the shimmering pond.

Fang Yuan stared at his now-soaked sleeve. Then chuckled.

"That girl..." he muttered, shaking his head with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Still amused, he turned on his heel and began his walk back through the winding cave.

The glow of the spirit pond faded behind him, replaced by the cool silence of stone and shadow.

As he walked, the familiar system screen flickered to life before him.

He began scrolling through its new options, eyes narrowing in focus.

And once he read then, Fang Yuan gave a soft hum.

"More items to learn and buy huh..."

By the time he emerged from the mine, night had fully settled.

The sky above was dark velvet, and the two guards outside the entrance snapped to attention.

"Clan Head!"

"You've both done well," he nodded curtly, and they bowed with pride.

As he stepped past them, his smile faded, replaced by a deeper, more thoughtful expression.

The crisp night air brushed against his skin as he summoned his sword beneath his feet.

With a muted pulse of spiritual energy, the blade lifted him into the air.

High above the Eastern Ravine, his robes fluttering in the wind, Fang Yuan sighed, long and quiet.

"This..." he muttered, glancing at the still-glowing system interface. "...will be much harder than I originally expected."

And with that, he soared silently through the night sky with his sword, heading toward his personal chamber, the weight of a clan's future resting quietly on his back.

The moonlight bathed the estate below in a silvery sheen as Fang Yuan glided through the air like a shadow.

His sword hummed beneath his feet, steady and silent.

The familiar rooftops of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion passed beneath him, lanterns flickering in the courtyards, and the distant echoes of laughter and clinking cups told him the feast still lingered.

But Fang Yuan wasn't in the mood for wine anymore.

His heart and mind were elsewhere, on the glowing screen hovering beside him.

By the time he landed near the rear pavilion reserved for him as clan head, the estate had quieted.

He stepped down from his sword, dismissed it with a flick of his sleeve, and entered the room.

Inside, the chambers were dim but comfortable, clean scrolls, lit incense, a few treasured weapons resting along the wall.

Fang Yuan moved to the meditation cushion in the center, seated himself cross-legged, and then, with a deep breath.

"System," he commanded.

The interface lit up again, now much clearer than before.

[Faith Points: 280]

[Disciples: 1 – Fang Lian (82/100)]

[Passive Faith Gain: LOCKED (Requires 90 Faith)]

1. System Shop
2. Clan Building Tools
3. Heavenly Mandate Scripture (Saint Rank) – ACTIVE
4. Faith stop

His gaze flicked to the Faith Shop, and with a thought, the panel expanded into a new menu.

[Faith Shop]

◆ [Minor Resource Well] – 100 FP

Create a spiritual spring in designated land. Enhances cultivation speed in a small area.

◆ [Loyalty Oath Token] – 250 FP

Bind a person's loyalty to the clan. Faith cannot fall below 60 unless they sever ties.

◆ [Artisan's Insight] – 150 FP

Grants a chosen person temporary enlightenment for forging, alchemy, or crafting.

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow. "Hoh... so many good stuff... and man, What are those...."

This... was infrastructure.

The type of investment not just for battles, but for building something lasting.

He scrolled further.

At the bottom, a note appeared:

📖 Special Notice:

"Faith is not born from strength, it is born from presence.

The more your followers grow to believe in you, the more your clan will thrive."

Fang Yuan leaned back slightly, resting his weight on his hands as his gaze drifted toward the intricately carved wooden ceiling above.

But then a name surfaced in his mind.

Gu clan.

The moment it did, his expression shifted.

The warmth faded from his eyes, and a subtle chill coiled beneath his skin.

His jaw tensed, and a faint crease formed between his brows.

That name, that family.

It soured his mood, his expression, once calm, twisted into something colder.

A murmur slipped from his lips like a vow etched in stone.

"Mother... Father... forgive me. But I will bring the Gu family down someday."

His voice was quiet. But it held the weight of thunder, final, solemn, unwavering.

Just then a soft rap on the door disturbed his peace.

Knock. Knock.

Without turning his head, Fang Yuan spoke, voice even.

"Come in."

The door creaked open, and a young servant girl in a modest blue robe entered, bowing respectfully.

It was Felicia, graceful and poised, her long black hair tied in a high tail, her eyes calm but curious.

"Clan Head," she said softly. "A missive from the Northern Gu Family has arrived. A formal petition... requesting financial assistance."

Fang Yuan blinked once, then slowly sat upright, a mocking smile tugging at the edge of his lips.

"Wow," he muttered dryly. "Imagine having the gall to ask for money from the family you tried to bury."

He raised an eyebrow and then gestured.

"Go on. What's their excuse?"

Feliciy produced a second scroll from her sleeve and carefully unrolled it.

"Phungrei City," she began, "was attacked by four Saberfang Spirit Beasts."

Fang Yuan's fingers froze mid-tap against the armrest.

"...Four?"

Fang Yuan's brow twitched but he said nothing.

Felicia continued.

"One of them was identified as a peak Nascent Soul realm, while the others are one late stage, and two the mid-stage."

Chapter 87: Filthy Insects [Gū] [pt.2]

Fang Yuan gave a low whistle.

"Quite a lineup," he muttered.

"They acted in unison," she went on, "and their coordination implies they were either herded or manipulated."

Felicia glanced at him meaningfully but didn't push the theory aloud.

"The Gu family," she continued, "responded by mobilizing their spirit cannons... but they exhausted half of their spirit stone stockpiles just to repel the four spirit beasts."

Fang Yuan's hands came together in a slow, almost theatrical clap.

He clapped again, sharper this time, his grin wide and full of gleeful sarcasm.

"Wonderful. Absolutely brilliant."

He leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

"They spent years hoarding stones and putting on airs... and now, not even one day after I touched the border of that city, they're already bleeding dry."

Clap. Clap. Clap.

Fang Yuan applauded.

"Bravo. Truly spectacular. The heavens do have eyes."

He leaned back, eyes gleaming with vicious amusement.

"So the Gu family finally bleeds, and now they want the Fang family to help stitch their wounds? Truly shameless, I gotta learn a thing or two from them, alright.."

"Mm." He then leaned his cheek against one hand.

"Like beggars at the temple. But dressed in gold."

Felicia cleared her throat gently, then added, "There is one more part, Clan Head."

Fang Yuan gestured. "Let's hear it."

"The message also says... a cultivator in white was seen interfering briefly in the battle. The Gu family couldn't identify him."

But he held off the peak-stage Saberfang for the time it took for an incense stick to burn out.."

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed.

"A white-robed cultivator?"

Felicia then continued. "Someone strong enough to hold a beast like that for even ten breaths should be known by name.

Let alone someone who could withstand it for about the time it took to burn out an incense stick."

"And yet," Fang Yuan muttered, "he's not."

Then he stood up and stretched, his robes flowing around him like a shadow stirred by wind.

"Well, we can't delay. Send the Gu family a reply," he said.

Felicia readied her brush. "And what should we write, Clan Head?"

Fang Yuan smirked, fingers lightly stroking his chin in thought.

"Be polite, of course. And tell them..."

He paused, letting the moment stretch just enough to drip with mock sincerity.

"...that the Fang family expresses its deepest concern," he said smoothly, "and is currently reviewing its options with the utmost gravity."

Then, a glint of amusement flashed in his eyes.

"Oh, and make sure to add this: '*The Clan Head himself is personally attending to the matter.*'"

He leaned back, satisfied.

Felicia raised an eyebrow. "So we're stalling."

"We're watching," Fang Yuan corrected. "If they're desperate enough to beg, then it means they're wounded."

He turned toward the window, gazing out at the moonlit grounds.

"And wounded beasts... either crawl to die or bite harder."

Felicia hesitated for a breath, then spoke with careful weight in her voice.

"Clan Head... the Gu family believes you might be one of the reasons those spirit beasts attacked.

It's why they sent the request so quickly."

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow, unsurprised.

"Well, obviously," he said with a shrug. "But it could just as easily be a setup. They might've staged the whole thing just to throw the blame on me."

Felicia blinked. "Wait... so you're saying they sabotaged their own city just to accuse you?"

Fang Yuan gave a small laugh and beckoned with a finger. "Felicia, Felicia. Come now."

She stepped closer.

He leaned slightly forward, his gaze playful yet piercing. "Look at me."

She met his eyes, reluctant but curious.

"What have I been doing the past few days?" he asked.

Felicia gave a long, exaggerated sigh, catching on immediately.

"Oh! Clan Head, you're finally out of seclusion. The entire family has been waiting with bated breath for your return."

Fang Yuan let out a dramatic groan as he stretched.

"Ugh, yes. My back. I can't believe I was stuck in that cave for... what, two months? Time has no mercy."

Felicia couldn't help but smile, slipping into the game.

"Shall I prepare a warm bath then, Family Head? You reek."

With that matter settled, Fang Yuan eased himself into the warm bath Felicia had prepared.

Steam curled lazily around the room, fogging the polished wooden walls of the chamber.

The soft scent of spirit herbs lingered in the air, relaxing, rejuvenating.

Outside, the night wind rustled faintly, but within the bathhouse, silence reigned.

Felicia had long since taken her leave, bowing out respectfully, saying it was far too late.

"Rest well, Clan Head," she'd said with that usual calm grace of hers before vanishing into the night.

Now, alone and finally still, Fang Yuan leaned back against the smooth stone edge of the tub.

The hot water lapped gently at his skin, drawing out the tension buried in his bones.

He exhaled, long and slow, a faint smile tugging at his lips as thoughts returned to the chaos far to the north.

Ah... Gu Jian. Gu Lanyue.

If only the beasts had swallowed you whole.

His grin widened, dark amusement flickering in his eyes.

I would have raised a glass. No.. make it two.

He scooped a bit of water and poured it slowly over his head, letting it trail down his face.

As the heat soaked into him, a memory resurfaced—

The moment when he had deliberately let his spiritual pressure leak, just briefly, as he flew from the dark forest towards the Gu family's estate in Phungrei City.

A subtle act. It was barely even a heartbeat in duration.

And yet... just enough for the Saberfang spirit beasts to smell his qi, the culprit, the thief, the one who stole their path to greater glory!

Ten sprouts of Hollow Yeklo Grass stolen... and from Saberfang territory, no less.

He leaned further back in the bath, satisfied.

Until....

A soft giggle echoed behind him.

Then came the voice, as silken as moonlight brushing skin:

"Husband~ Shall I wash your back?"

Chapter 88: Can I wash your back?

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed the moment the voice echoed behind him.

He turned around in a flash.

But nothing..... There was no one.

The bath chamber was empty. Steam curled gently in the air, shadows danced along the lacquered walls, but no figure stood behind him.

His expression darkened.

In the next breath, his divine sense surged forth like a tide, sweeping through every inch of the chamber, enveloping walls, ceiling, even the faintest speck of dust.

Mid-stage Nascent Soul.

Lin Zhaoyue was no fragile maiden, if she willed it, she could raze half the Fang estate and vanish before the guards even blinked.

If Fang Yuan weren't here, she could've even left behind a trail of chaos and no one would've known the perpetrator.

And yet... nothing. There was no trace of her presence. No ripple in the qi around him.

Until another giggle appeared, whisper-light, but unmistakable.

"Husband~ ah, you're searching for me so hard... makes me wish I was there with you."

His entire body stilled.

The sound hadn't come from outside.

It had come from....

His gaze fell toward the edge of the bath. The hairpin.

A chill slid down his spine despite the warmth of the water.

Could it transmit image to the other party? Or was it only voice?

But then, her next words left no doubt.

"Ah~" she moaned softly, breathy, as if watching him from mere inches away.
"Husband, your body is too good... I want to draw it and hang it on my wall."

Fang Yuan's eyes twitched.

With a flick of his wrist and a flash of cold qi, the hairpin shot from the edge of the bath like a comet, slamming into the far wall and clattering to the floor of the chamber with a sharp metallic ring.

He then dropped his entire body low into the water, letting the heat swallow him whole.

His face sank beneath the surface but not before a muttered curse slipped past his lips.

"...This woman."

Meanwhile, at the southern side of the pavilion...

Fang Jingyi sat cross-legged on a silk cushion, robes slightly askew, her sleeves rolled up as though preparing for battle.

Before her, a low table was cluttered with scattered spirit wine jars, half-eaten peanuts, and a deck of lovingly playing cards, each one etched with ancient figures and strange beasts.

Across from her sat a girl who looked barely older than twenty. Her long hair was tied in a loose braid, her features soft but alert.

There was a natural grace to the way she moved, but her qi betrayed the truth beneath her skin, unstable, like a cracked dam barely holding its waters.

Her dantian had been shattered.

A ruined cultivator.

Still, she smiled faintly as she picked up her hand of cards. She was trying, earnestly so, as Fang Jingyi taught her yet another round of the strange game.

They were playing Heavenly Flux, a gambler's game from the outer sect taverns.

A mix of bluffing, number-matching, and betting, played with a 108-card deck infused with mock spiritual energies like "Heavenly Veins," "Tribulation Jokers," and the dreaded "Void Card."

"Ha!" Fang Jingyi slammed down her final card with such force the wine nearly spilled.

"That's five pairs of elemental sets, thank you very much! I win again!" she declared, tossing her head back and gulping down another mouthful of crimson spirit wine with the flair of a drunken war hero.

Then, slamming her cup down with unnecessary drama, she leaned toward her companion and declared with unshakable conviction, "You know... my nephew, *hic* he really is a good man."

The girl blinked, lips pursing into a polite smile as she folded her cards.

Internally, she sighed for the hundredth time:

You've said that a thousand times already,... I know. Your nephew is a saint. A divine cultivator. A golden dragon wrapped in human skin. I get it.

Outwardly, though, she dipped her head modestly and said with the sweetest voice she could muster, "Ah, I see, Elder Jingyi. What a good nephew you have indeed."

Fang Jingyi squinted at her suspiciously through bleary eyes, tilting her cup as if the girl's sincerity could be measured by how much wine remained in her hand.

"Eh *hic* you... you don't *hic* believe me, do you?"

She pointed an unsteady finger at the girl, then wobbled forward dramatically, nearly face-planting onto the cards between them.

The girl instinctively reached out to catch her but stopped halfway, watching as Fang Jingyi slowly righted herself, chin lifted proudly as though nothing had happened.

"My nephew," she slurred, hiccuping, "is the best cultivator to ever *hic* crawl out of this blood-soaked, backstabbing, motherless realm."

She raised her cup again but paused.

Then, with a strangely solemn expression, she added softly, "And he's the only reason I *hic*

still bother playing cards instead of drinking alone."

The girl looked at Jingyi for a while, her expression a bit unreadable and then she asked gently, already reshuffling the deck, "Shall we go again, Elder Jingyi?"

Fang Jingyi blinked, then grinned wide.

"Damn right we shall. But this time *hic* I'm betting my gourd of Heavenshade wine."

The girl raised an eyebrow.

"...The one you already drank?

"Hush. That's beside the hic point.

And Why are you *hic* so interested in what I *hic* bet," Fang Jingyi slurred with a crooked smirk, cheeks flushed crimson from too much spirit wine, "when you're just gonna *hic* lose again?"

The girl across from her smiled sweetly, almost innocently... until she calmly reached down and lifted the sword beside her, laying it on the table with a soft clink.

"This round," she said, "I'll bet this."

Fang Jingyi leaned closer, eyes bleary, then squinted at the chipped blade.

"Ohhh..." she giggled, pointing with her cup, "a broken item for a broken item. Very classy~!"

The game began anew.

But moments later, the drunken celebration came to a tragic halt.

"Nooooo! My gourd of Heavenshade Wine!" Fang Jingyi cried, slumping over the table in despair.

Her companion, ever composed, tucked the gourd away with a victorious twirl of her fingers.

"Elder Jingyi," she said smoothly, voice silk and honey, "shall we go again?"

But this time, there was a grin on her face. It was no longer sweet. No more modest.

No. This one was the grin of a predator who had smelled blood in the water.

Fang Jingyi lifted her head, narrowed her eyes, and stared at her with all the hatred of a seasoned gambler being outplayed.

"...You witch."

Chapter 89: Du Juan

The girl's response was a simple, breezy laugh.

Her hands moved with startling precision, deft fingers shuffling the deck with the smooth grace of someone who had done this a thousand times, in darker corners, for far higher stakes.

Swish tap flip.

Fang Jingyi squinted, watching the flurry of motion with a dizzy kind of awe.

"Ugh... your hands are too fast. *Hic* I'm gettin' seasick just lookin' at 'em."

She slumped back slightly, then blinked and pointed clumsily.

"Alright... hic what was your name again?"

"Du Juan," the girl said lightly, not pausing as she dealt the cards with sharp, practiced flicks, each landing perfectly in place.

Fang Jingyi gave a big, enthusiastic nod. "Du Juan, huh? Nice name! Very bird-like. Sounds fast."

She clutched her cards dramatically to her chest. "Let's see if you can fly after I crush you!"

With a theatrical flourish, she scooped up her hand.

Her eyes darted over the cards... then her lips curled into a victorious smirk.

She peeked at Du Juan over the top of the hand and then she began to giggle.

A tiny snort escaped. "Hehe... hehe... ahem—"

And then she broke down again, giggling like a child who just found the cookie jar unguarded.

Du Juan raised an eyebrow, bemused, and casually lifted her own cards.

A slow, sly smile spread across her face.

"Oh no," she said, voice flat with mock surprise, "looks like I lost."

She tossed her cards onto the table with deliberate nonchalance.

Fang Jingyi flung her own cards down like she was casting a grand spell and leapt to her feet.

"Hahaha! I knew it! You winning was a *hic* a fluke!"

She beamed, arms raised in glorious triumph. "Wine goddess strikes again!"

Du Juan stood up, stifling a chuckle. "Alright, Elder Jingyi. Let's get you to bed."

"*Hic hic* nooo! I wanna play more!"

Fang Jingyi pouted fiercely, kicking her legs like a petulant child, but her steps were already growing unsteady.

Despite having no proper cultivation base left, Du Juan had no trouble guiding her to bed.

Moments later, Fang Jingyi was out cold, snoring softly, a hand still loosely holding an imaginary card.

Du Juan stood at her side for a moment, watching her sleep with something soft in her eyes.

Then she quietly stepped out.

The moon had begun its slow descent, trailing silver light across the roof tiles of the southern pavilion.

She returned to the card table, now quiet and cool in the night air. Pulling a stool close, she sat, tilting her head up to watch the stars shift behind the clouds.

And there, beneath the moon's fading light, she began to sing.

A low, wistful hum at first... then words, slow and gentle..

"Heavens above, the earth below,

You made every mortals to kneel and bow.

Yet for thousand prayers, a single dream—

The heavens fall silent when mortals scream."

"The jade gates shine for those above,

While those below are robbed of love.

The ones who dared, the ones who tried,

Were cast away... and still they cried."

"O Heaven, you wear a silver crown,

But hold a blade to strike us down.

Your rules are writ in sacred stone,

But not a word is carved for our own."

"My path was broken, my soul betrayed,

But I still sing, though stars may fade,

Oh, Immortals are immoral, yes they are

Their virtues are gone, throw out and far."

Her voice lingered in the dark like a forgotten lullaby, soft enough to go unnoticed,

and sorrowful enough that even the moon paused to listen.

As the last notes of her song drifted into the night, soft and bitter like wine left too long uncorked, Du Juan heard it, the faint rustle of grass behind her.

Her eyes narrowed. She turned slowly.

There, standing at the edge of the pavilion garden, was a young man.

The moonlight slanted across his face like a blessing, illuminating high cheekbones, a composed brow, and eyes that shimmered with both sharpness and calm.

His robes, though simple, carried the understated weight of someone used to being listened to.

Du Juan straightened, her gaze wary.

"Who are you?" she asked, voice low and cautious.

But the man only smiled faintly, tilting his head ever so slightly, as if studying her from afar.

"That's what I should be asking you," he said with effortless grace. "I'm Fang Tian—

Younger brother of the current clan head."

"I'm Du Juan," she replied with a soft voice, offering a polite bow, her sleeves fluttering like petals in the breeze.

Fang Tian gave a courteous nod, then lowered himself onto the stone bench nearby. His posture was relaxed, but his gaze was curious, thoughtful.

"You have a beautiful voice," he said, the compliment gentle but sincere.

Du Juan dipped her head with poised elegance.

"Thank you."

A pause lingered between them, filled only by the night wind brushing through the trees. Then Fang Tian spoke again, tilting his head.

"I don't believe I've seen you around here before."

"That's likely," Du Juan replied gracefully. "I'm... currently staying in the clan head's chamber. I don't go out often."

At that, something flickered in Fang Tian's expression, a realization.

"Oh, so you're Brother's—" he caught himself, the sentence halting midair. He quickly corrected himself with a faint smile, folding his hands.

"Please... take good care of my brother."

Du Juan smiled softly.

"I'll try to," she said, her tone warm, genuinely kind, without the need for flourish.

Fang Tian returned the smile with a graceful nod, then turned to leave.

But just as he stepped into the moonlight path beyond the courtyard, his eyes briefly caught a shadow lingering near the corner of the corridor.

Fang Mei.

She stood silently, her arms folded, half-hidden behind a pillar, eyes sharp with veiled jealousy.

The moment their gazes met, she turned away with a cold flick of her sleeve and vanished into the night.

Unaware or perhaps deliberately indifferent, Du Juan remained where she was, her gaze trailing the moonlight cast across the courtyard floor.

Now alone, she let out a quiet breath, eyes drifting back to the empty table. A small smile touched her lips.

"I wonder how he looks... the one they call Clan Head."

Her fingers brushed the edge of the stone table where the cards still lay.

Her voice softened, thoughtful, neither mocking nor reverent.

Chapter 90: Clan Meeting [1]

Early next morning the grand hall of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion was radiant with morning light, spilling through the high-arched windows and casting golden slants over the polished stone floor.

A long, rectangular table stretched down the center, filled with elders and seated dignitaries, each with their own aura and distinct robes embroidered with the lightning raven insignia.

At the highest seat of honor sat Fang Yuan, upright and composed.

His robes were a midnight black, trimmed with silver along the cuffs and collar.

Around him sat the pillars of the clan:

Elder Chen, Elder Sun, Elder Yin, Elder Jingyi, Elder Ra, Elder Joshua, Elder Long and Elder Mei.

And at the secondary seats half formal, half anticipatory, were the younger generation:

Fang Tian, Fang Rui, Fang Bo, Fang Yang.

The room buzzed with suppressed excitement.

Murmurs exchanged.

Everyone knew what today meant.

Except for Fang Tian.

He alone sat still, not even bothering to join in the quiet chatter. His fingers tapped lightly against the wood.

Fang Yuan glanced down at the scroll in front of him, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Another Golden Core cultivator... and from my own clan."

He didn't say the name, but he didn't need to. Every elder here had heard.

His younger brother, Fang Tian, had stepped into the Golden Core realm.

But that wasn't even the most exciting part.

Four new elder appointments.

Four.

And in a clan like this, where "Power is Truth", no one could be called an Elder without at least being at the Qi Transformation stage.

That meant four more cultivators had passed the threshold and the number of elite cultivators in the Fang Clan had swelled dramatically.

Even the juniors from the same batch were showing remarkable progress, most teetering at the peak of Qi Condensation, with only a thin veil separating them from breakthrough.

If this continued, it wouldn't be long before they rewrote the family standard again:

"Only Golden Core realm cultivators would hold elder positions."

Fang Yuan leaned back in his seat slightly, his mind briefly drifting.

"Power is one thing," he mused internally, "but power without wisdom is just an expensive blade in a toddler's hand."

From a modern mind, he knew, what you need is knowledge, insight, and balance.

He looked up and his voice rang out, steady and confident.

"Looks like everyone's here."

He laid the scroll down with purpose.

"Let the family meeting commence."

A ripple of spiritual energy hushed the hall.

The first to rise was Elder Chen, Fang Chen, the paternal uncle of Fang Yuan and former acting clan head.

Clearing his throat with a practiced ease, he began,

"Nephew, first of all... during my tenure as acting head, I'm pleased to report that there were no major incidents aside from that one... *ahem*..."

A few of the elders coughed to suppress their laughter.

Even Fang Tian, sitting calmly moments ago, subtly turned his face to the side, the corner of his mouth twitching.

Fang Yuan, however, didn't share their amusement.

His voice cut through the room, cold and clear.

"Enough. I'm not marrying that snake."

A palpable silence fell.

Elder Chen gave a stiff cough, quickly moving on before the topic could further derail.

"Right, well then. On a more relevant note—regarding Fang Tian."

He gestured toward the younger man briefly.

"During the recent crisis when our primary herb storage warehouse was burned down, it was he who took the lead in assisting the alchemists.

He proposed several new refining methods and restoration recipes, all of which are already being adopted by the Pill Pavilion."

Fang Yuan nodded slowly, clearly already informed.

"It's noted. I've read the report."

His eyes flicked over the scroll once more, then he placed it aside.

"If there's nothing else pressing, I'd like to move to the main topic—the Gu Family."

The room shifted at that. The lightness of before drained quickly from the air.

Fang Jingyi, his ever-dramatic aunt, stood up with a rustle of her robes.

"Family Head," she began, voice lilting with mock formality, "the Gu family has been spreading very specific rumors about you."

Her eyes narrowed as she flicked her fan open, purely for effect.

"Two months ago, they started claiming you've reached the peak of the Nascent Soul realm... and oddly enough, those whispers began the very moment you returned and slipped into seclusion. So tell us.. is what they say true?"

Fang Yuan met her gaze with calm composure... and lied as smooth as flowing ink.

"No. I'm still at the early stage of the Nascent Soul realm."

Fang Jingyi raised a skeptical eyebrow but said nothing, her lips twitching as she folded her fan with a loud snap and returned to her seat.

Fang Yuan then shifted his focus.

"How many business ties do we currently hold with the Gu family?"

The Finance Elder, Elder Joshua, stood up next, tugging awkwardly at his sleeves as if the numbers itched his conscience.

"Well... ah... some," he began, avoiding Fang Yuan's eyes. "Actually, quite a lot. More than half of our outer-market trade flows through Gu-controlled channels."

He cleared his throat.

"To be blunt, severing ties with them would... cause our finances to drop by at least 50%, and push us dangerously close to deficit."

The hall grew quiet. Fang Yuan exhaled through his nose and rubbed the bridge of his nose with two fingers, his thoughts racing.

"There are no alternative channels we can reroute through?" he asked.

Elder Joshua gave a solemn bow.

"I'm afraid not, Clan Head."

Silence. Fang Yuan stared down at the table before slowly raising his head, his voice crisp and resolute.

"Still.. cut all business ties with the Gu family. Immediately."

The silence that followed was sharper than a sword.

Elder Joshua hesitated for a fraction of a second... and then bowed again.

"Very well. As you wish."

Fang Yuan leaned back slightly and added,

"If the need arises, we'll use what remains in the clan treasury to buffer our expenses."

At that moment, Fang Jingyi abruptly stood again, her face lightly flushed, clearly battling embarrassment.

"Ahem... Nephew—" she corrected herself with a loud slap to her lips, "I mean... Clan Head. There's, um... something else."

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes. "...What is it?"

Jingyi chuckled awkwardly and looked away.

"Our treasury is, well... it's also empty."

His eyes froze. A single word popped into his mind.

"The banquets?"

Fang Jingyi nodded sheepishly, her fan now covering half her reddening face.

"Uh-huh. The banquets."

Fang Yuan exhaled deeply and leaned back in his chair, the wooden seat creaking faintly beneath him.

His gaze drifted toward the ceiling, eyes distant, deep in his own world.

Well I still got the system points... I could exchange them for cultivation pills and sell them on the outside market for sustenance...

His thoughts trailed off, spiraling like smoke.

But that is such a waste of resource.

His jaw tightened, a flicker of frustration shadowing his features.

And yet... what other choice do I have?

He sat in silence for a moment longer, fingers tapping lightly against the lacquered armrest. Every option he explored in his mind led back to the same place.

He needed to follow it. No matter how inefficient it felt.

I need to raise a living clan... not preside over a crumbling monument of glory past.

His fingers stilled.

So be it.

After a long silence, he finally spoke again.

"I'll handle it. I'll find a way to replenish the treasury."

Fang Jingyi gave a small nod, though the uncertain look in her eyes made it clear, she wasn't entirely convinced.