

**Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?!
#Chapter 101: A Random Family [2] - Read Clan
Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 101:
A Random Family [2]
Chapter 101: A Random Family [2]**

Gu Jian stepped forward, each word measured and sharp.

"So what if they struck first? We will make them bleed, slowly and thoroughly. Use the Imperial Order if you must.

Squeeze them of everything they own. Demand reparations for our 'losses.'"

His voice dropped, a low thunder rolling through the room.

"If we must burn resources, let it be to humble the right enemy. That boy Fang Yuan has grown too arrogant.

Let's remind him, remind all of them who truly rule the North and commands the East."

Silence reigned.

But it was no longer the silence of chaos, it was the silence of fear, and of a plan taking root.

He returned to his seat, eyes glinting beneath the lantern light.

"We will bleed them dry. And we will make them kneel."

Just as the oppressive silence settled over the council hall, the doors slammed open with a thunderous bang.

A gust of wind swept in and with it came Gu Lanyue, the former patriarch of the Gu family, cloaked in a storm of fury.

Beside him stumbled Gu Zhen, eyes red, face pale, lips trembling as if he had been weeping moments ago.

His legs barely kept pace with the old man, as though dragged by the weight of shame itself.

The elders straightened instinctively. Even now, Gu Lanyue's presence carried the weight of an era.

But the fire in his voice hadn't aged a day.

"Gu Jian!" he roared. "Is this how I raised you?!"

Gu Jian didn't flinch.

He sat still, eyes calm, fingers resting lightly on the table.

"No familial love left in your bones? Look at the boy!" Gu Lanyue gestured behind him with disgust.

"Your own son was humiliated and ridiculed, yet instead of seeking justice for him, you lecture him, as if he were the one at fault?"

A flicker passed through Gu Jian's gaze.

He rose, slowly, deliberately.

His spiritual pressure rose in tandem with his voice, coiled and controlled like a blade half-drawn.

He stepped forward.

"Father, shall I repeat the words I've kept buried for days now?"

He cast a cold glance at Gu Zhen, whose knees nearly buckled under his father's gaze.

"This boy, your grandson ran off without permission," Gu Jian said coldly, his voice like grinding stone. "And he dragged twelve Golden Core cultivators, our most promising youths, with him to try and capture Lin Zhaoyue."

He took a step forward, aura flickering with restrained rage.

"Do you even realize what that means?"

His voice suddenly rose, sharp and thunderous.

"If those twelve Golden Core disciples had died out there, do you know what that would've cost our clan?!"

He slammed his palm against the stone table, rattling teacups and hearts alike.

"They entered the Night Forest! That cursed place, they walked into it. It's a miracle they only come out humiliated!"

His eyes flared as he turned toward Gu Zhen, lip curling with disgust.

"And for what reasons did they enter there?!"

His voice dripped venom now.

"For lust?"

He took another step closer, his spiritual pressure spiking as his voice dropped to a harsh whisper.

"Are you stupid? Do you even understand what she is?"

His words cracked like whips in the stunned silence.

"A mid-stage Nascent Soul cultivator."

Gu Jian's hand opened and closed, as if holding something fragile and poisonous.

"I am at mid-stage Nascent myself. And even I wouldn't underestimate someone like her. This boy thought twelve golden cores would be enough? That's not bravery. That's idiocy."

His tone sharpened, full of scorn.

"So what if Khai Sang declared Lin Zhaoyue his wife? Let him! Let her! What exactly did we lose?"

He turned to face the elders.

"Nothing. Nothing! If anything, it removes a future threat, the Lin family has always been a thorn in our side.

And now? Let the sword demon marry her and carry her off. Let them waste each other's strength."

He took a deep breath, aura flaring like a gathering storm.

"I am the patriarch now," he said, voice thunderous. "And I demand the respect that comes with that title."

For a beat, the room was frozen.

Gu Lanyue's face darkened with insult.

"No respect," he muttered. "Not even for one's own father."

He turned with a disgusted flick of his sleeve. "Come along, boy. I alone am enough."

But Gu Zhen, overwhelmed by his father's fury and humiliated before the elders, had already lost control of himself.

The smell of urine filled the air.

Mortified, he scrambled after his grandfather, eyes lowered, silent and pale as a ghost.

The doors closed behind them with a final boom, sealing the tension inside like a trapped beast.

Gu Jian didn't move. He stood tall, like a mountain rooted in storm, eyes fixed not on his departing father, but on the Fang family's downfall.

"Foolish sentiment," he muttered under his breath. "Will not save us from war."

The scent of urine still hung thick in the council hall when, thousands of kilometres southwest, sunlight gilded the Moonview Pavilion.

Here, no shadows of war lingered, only the whisper of maple leaves and the hum of cicadas.

Fang Tian traced the railing's moon-carved patterns.

"Brother, it's ironic," he murmured. "We stand at Moonview Pavilion when the sun bleaches the stones."

Fang Yuan didn't turn. His gaze stayed fixed on the courtyard where plum blossoms floated on a koi pond.

"Ironic?" A ghost of a smile touched his lips.

"This is where Mother birthed you. At high noon, under a sky so fierce it scoured clouds from existence."

He pointed upward, finger cutting through the glare. "That sky named you. Tian."

Silence pooled between them, broken only by water trickling over stone. Fang Yuan finally faced his brother. "Twenty years ago, you arrived at this moment. Today, at this exact moment, you will depart."

From his spirit ring, he drew a band of star-metal, cold even in sunlight.

"A parting gift."

Fang Yuan chuckled as he leaned back, holding up a jade-colored ring that shimmered faintly under the sunlight.

"Brother," he said with a grin, "our family really is blessed with rings, isn't it?"

Fang Tian raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Fang Yuan smirked. "First, there's the one you wear around your neck. Sentimental, isn't it?"

Then there's the one you were so desperately searching for, which, by the way, happened to be in my possession all along."

Fang Tian blinked.

"And now," Fang Yuan continued, lifting the new ring between two fingers, "this one."

He turned it slowly, watching it catch the light.

"This was a gift from my master. He told me it contains enough power to block any attack from a Nascent Soul cultivator, for thirty minutes."

Fang Tian's eyes widened. "Any attack?"

Fang Yuan nodded casually, slipping the ring onto his finger.

"Any amount, any force. Thirty minutes of survival... if I ever needed it."

Fang Tian leaned in, voice low with awe. "You... you had a master?"

Fang Yuan's expression shifted slightly, still smiling, but with a glint of reverence.

"Yes," he said. "But he had no name. Only a title."

He looked out the window as if recalling a distant memory.

"They called him... the Thousand-Faced Immortal."

The name dropped like a stone into still water.

Fang Tian's breath caught. He swallowed hard, voice nearly a whisper as his fingers turned bone-white around the ring.

The koi stilled in the pond.

Chapter 102: Two Brothers.

Fang Tian hesitated, then asked softly, "Brother... was your master really an immortal?"

Fang Yuan let out a soft laugh, warm and wistful.

"No... not truly an immortal," he said. "Just a mortal man who had long transcended mortal desires. He lived simply... found joy in the quiet things. That's why I called him the Thousand-Faced Immortal."

Because he never had a name, Fang Yuan added silently. And I was only his disciple because... no matter what face he wore, I kept finding him.

He lifted his gaze to the skies where birds glided freely beneath the golden sun.

His voice dropped to a murmur.

"But one day I disappointed him and failed him as a disciple. But he still left me that ring, something to remember him by."

Fang Tian turned to him with quiet eyes. "Then, Brother... if this ring meant so much to you, why—"

But Fang Yuan raised a hand, gently cutting him off.

"Because I'm stuck here," he said, his voice firm but not bitter. "And strong enough now that I don't need it anymore."

He stepped forward and placed a steady hand on Fang Tian's shoulder, his smile faint but full of pride.

"You're the one heading out into the world now. And the world's not nearly as kind as it looks from the mountains. You'll need it more than I ever did."

Fang Tian looked down at the ring, its weight suddenly heavier. He clenched it in his palm and nodded with quiet resolve.

"I'll carry it well, Brother. I'll remember your master's title... and your trust."

Fang Yuan nodded, the corners of his eyes softening. "Good. Now then... what was it you wanted to tell me earlier?"

Fang Tian straightened, his expression sharpening. "I made a deal with Pill King Tushan."

Fang Yuan tilted his head. "Mm. Go on."

Fang Tian took a breath. "He's agreed to attempt refining a Hollow Spirit Pill, three times."

No cost, just one condition: you provide the ingredients."

A long silence followed.

Fang Yuan studied him, silent, pensive.

Fang Tian pressed on.

"I also found a lead. On the Hollow Yeklo Grass."

Fang Yuan blinked, but said nothing.

Lately... he had been stumbling upon that grass more often than he cared to admit. The Hollow Yeklo Grass, once thought elusive, seemed to appear everywhere.

Coincidence? Fate? He wasn't sure. But he didn't voice this thought, nor let it flicker across his expression.

He simply listened, eyes calm, as Fang Tian continued.

"It's being held in the royal treasury," his younger brother said. "But they are looking for a Seven-Ring Lotus in exchange."

Seven-Ring Lotus.

The name stirred something within Fang Yuan.

A rare herb in its own right, slightly easier to locate than Hollow Yeklo Grass, if only one had the patience to let time season it.

A spiritual plant that bloomed once every seven years, known for its power to nourish and mend a damaged dantian.

He exhaled softly through his nose.

So, they want that. Of course they do.

His gaze lowered for a fleeting second as an image surfaced in his mind, Du Juan.

That herb... he thought to himself, it would be perfect for someone like her.

Fang Yuan let out a low chuckle and smiled. "Brother... thank you. For thinking of me."

Before he could say more, Fang Tian dropped to his knees and gave a deep kowtow.

"Elder Brother... it's the least I could do. You've spent your life raising me, guiding the clan. I want to bring joy to your life, the same way you brought light to mine."

And inwardly, he added with silent determination—

And one day, I wish to be strong enough to stand beside you... shoulder to shoulder, sharing your burdens.

Fang Yuan's heart stirred. All his fatigue, his frustrations, it felt as though they evaporated, like smoke carried away on the wind.

"Seeing you healthy and happy," he said gently, "will always be the greatest joy of my life."

He bent down and helped Fang Tian to his feet. Then, with a smile tinged with playful mischief, he added,

"Now that you're leaving... can this big brother entrust you with one little task?"

Fang Tian nodded with a grin. "Yes, Brother. I'm all ears."

"Pay Elder Yin a visit," Fang Yuan said, brushing imaginary dust from his robes. "Check on Tushar Village. And if you come across any bandits..."

He paused, then smirked.

"Clean them up, would you?"

Fang Tian clasped his fist and bowed. "Understood, Brother. I'll finish it without delay."

Fang Yuan watched him walk away, the evening sun casting a long shadow behind the younger man's back.

"...Father, Mother," Fang Yuan murmured to the fading horizon,

"our little Tian... is growing up just fine."

The sky blushed with the colors of twilight as birds flew home across a crimson sun.

Just then, a shimmer of light flickered before Fang Yuan's eyes, the system interface sprang to life.

[System Upgrade Complete.

Faith System successfully integrated.]

[Current Active Quest:

Task: Eliminate the bandits near Tushar Village.

Reward: 500 SP

Failure: Village Faith Loss]

Fang Yuan's gaze slid down to the newly unlocked clan interface:

[Fang Family – Current Faith Overview]

Fang Tian

Realm: Mid-Stage Golden Core

Root Quality: Divine

Faith in Host: 91

Fang Yuan blinked.

"Divine Root? You're kidding me," he muttered aloud.

How the hell was he stuck in Qi Condensation for so long, then?!

He couldn't believe it, no, no one who heard him would believe him either!

Reaching the peak of golden core by the age of twenty was something someone even with a lower talent than the divine root could achieve!

Yet when this should have been what surprised him.... his eyes suddenly drifted to the next entry as he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

[Fang Chen

Realm: Peak Qi Transformation

Root Quality: Black

Faith in Host: 99]

Fang Yuan stared.

Then blinked.

Then stared again.

"Wait... Uncle?" he muttered under his breath, brows twitching.

"So much faith in me?"

His face twisted into a confused, almost betrayed expression, half disbelief, half amusement.

Chapter 103: Mirrored Self [1]

Tak, tak.

Soft footsteps echoed like falling petals. A faint, graceful scent, plum blossoms filled the air.

She walked toward Fang Yuan as the sun dipped beneath the horizon, painting the sky in hues of gold and indigo.

"Clan Head," she called gently, her voice like a breeze brushing across a still lake.

Fang Yuan turned, pulled from thoughts of rings and brothers. "Oh, Du Juan."

He gestured to the stone bench. "Sit with me."

She flowed into the seat, sleeve whispering as she drew out slender wine jars. Two cups chimed softly on stone. Amber liquid glowed like trapped sunlight as she poured.

"Clan Head," she offered, pouring the amber liquid, "A drink?"

Fang Yuan glanced at the cup, then at her. He nodded lightly.

"...Sure."

Even as he reached for the cup, a thought passed through his mind.

Doesn't she smell like plum blossoms?

A faint frown touched his lips.

Is this what Lin Zhaoyue smelled on me earlier?

His thoughts quieted as she handed him a cup. He took a sip, warm, smooth, mellow.

Then his voice shifted, calm but serious.

"I've been dying to know," he said, his eyes narrowing just slightly.

"Who did you face... that shattered your dantian?"

His tone held no accusation, only the quiet weight of curiosity and concern.

He already knew the woman before him had once stood at the Nascent Soul Realm.

That much had been clear when he first found her, unconscious on the street.

He hadn't saved her out of compassion, no. It was curiosity.

What could wound someone of that caliber?

Du Juan took a sip of her wine, then slowly lowered the cup. Her gaze lifted toward the rising moon.

"You saved my life, Clan Head," she said softly. "So I won't hold anything back."

A breath. Then—

"It was a peak Nascent Soul Saberfang," she said.

Fang Yuan's eyes didn't widen, but internally he seemed to ask again with the Saberfang?

Was she after the Hollow Yeklo Grass too?

He said nothing, only listened, while his mind spun quietly behind his eyes.

"I stole a herb it was guarding," she continued.

"But I wasn't lucky enough to escape unscathed. I hid the herb before stumbling into the city... and that's when you found me."

His voice was low, curious.

"What herb?"

Du Juan bit her lower lip, hesitating. A faint shimmer clung to her eyes.

"...A Seven-Ring Lotus," she finally whispered.

Fang Yuan blinked.

How ironic.

A herb used to repair dantian, it was costly, rare and very precious. And yet she had lost her own dantian trying to claim it.

He didn't voice the thought. Instead, he swirled the wine in his cup and said calmly,

"If it's still intact, I can use a favor of mine and refine a dantian repair pill with it."

He paused, then added, voice direct and steady, "You do wish to be healed, don't you?"

Du Juan looked up, startled. Her lips parted slightly.

"Why...?" she murmured.

"Why are you going so far for me?"

It wasn't suspicion in her voice, it was disbelief.

Her dantian had been destroyed. She was as good as dead in the cultivation world.

But this man...

He had picked her up from the gutter, tended to her wounds, gave her a roof.

And now, he was offering to restore the very core of her power?

No one does that for free.

He probably wanted the Seven-Ring Lotus and was just acting kind to have it... right?

Fang Yuan didn't know what thoughts passed through her mind, but he could sense her unease.

He exhaled slowly and said,

"I desire your strength."

His tone turned resolute.

"In exchange for healing you, I want you to serve as the Fang Family's guardian, for fifty years."

His eyes met hers, firm.

"I know recovering your dantian won't return you to Nascent Soul overnight. But with enough time and the right resources, you'll get there again."

He leaned back slightly.

"...And that's an investment I'm willing to make."

Fang Yuan let the offer hang in the twilight air, the scent of plum blossoms and wine mingling between them. "So, what do you say?"

Du Juan didn't answer right away.

But for the first time in weeks, her heart settled.

Oh.

Somehow... that made everything easier.

But the relief that had settled a second ago was replaced by a fierce, desperate resolve. She took a slow breath, steeling herself.

"Clan Head," she began, her voice low but unwavering, "Your offer... it is more generous than I dared hope. But..." She met his gaze directly, her dark eyes holding a plea wrapped in iron. "Can the terms be altered?"

Fang Yuan's brow lifted fractionally, curiosity sparking in his calm expression. He remained silent, inviting her to continue.

"Instead of one pill... could you refine two?" The request hung heavy in the quiet.

Before he could react, she pressed on, her words gaining momentum. "In exchange... I offer not fifty years of service to the Fang Family, but two hundred."

Fang Yuan stilled. Two hundred years? For a Nascent Soul cultivator, that was easily half their potential lifespan.

It wasn't just service; it was a monumental sacrifice of her future freedom.

His gaze sharpened, searching her face. *Why such an extreme counter-offer? What could possibly warrant this?*

Du Juan saw the unspoken questions in his eyes. She looked down at her cup, the amber liquid catching the last embers of the sunset.

A profound sadness, ancient and deep, softened her features.

"You asked who shattered my dantian... and why I sought the Lotus," she murmured. Her voice, usually so composed, held a tremor.

"The truth is... I wasn't seeking it for myself. Not originally."

She paused, gathering strength. "I... have a little sister. Our parents died when she was barely more than an infant. I raised her."

A flicker of warmth, instantly shadowed by grief, crossed her face. "I raised her as my own."

Fang Yuan felt the words land with unexpected weight.

The image of a tiny Fang Tian, wide-eyed and trusting after their parents' sudden passing, flashed vividly in his mind.

The sleepless nights, the fierce protectiveness, the overwhelming responsibility of being both brother and parent... it resonated with a painful familiarity.

He didn't move, didn't speak, but his stillness deepened, becoming an intense, listening silence.

Chapter 104: Mirrored Self [2]

Du Juan continued, her gaze fixed on the first stars pricking the twilight.

"As she grew... I noticed a problem during one of her breakthroughs."

Her fingers tightened, not in anger, but as if physically holding her sister's pain.

"When... I checked. I found a tiny leak in her dantian."

"And the doctor confirmed the worst." Her voice, though soft, carried the weight of irrevocable truth.

"Each step upward in cultivation... it would only widen the leakage. The gathering pressure..." She closed her eyes briefly, the image too cruel to voice fully.

"It will tear her apart. Slowly. Inevitably." The dread wasn't sharp, but a deep, sorrowful ache.

"To walk the path... is to walk toward her own ruin. She she has no clue and walks with a deep passion."

She finally met Fang Yuan's eyes again.

Unshed tears made them luminous, not weak, but reflecting a love fierce enough to challenge fate.

"The Seven-Ring Lotus... it's the only chance. To mend that crack before it shatters her."

Her plea wasn't a demand, but the quiet desperation of a drowning woman offering her soul for a lifeline.

A sigh escaped her, more weary than bitter. "So I went into the Night Forest. Found the Lotus. And also found the beast destiny placed there."

Her hand drifted unconsciously to her lower abdomen, a gesture of remembered agony, not defiance.

She leaned forward, not with predatory intensity, but with a fragile urgency that made her seem younger. "I need that second pill, Fang Clan Head. Not for me. For her. Before the fracture becomes huge enough and devour her."

Her voice, though strained, retained its inherent grace. "Name your price. Two hundred years? Three hundred? My life."

The offers weren't threats, but treasures laid humbly at his feet.

"I will pay. Whatever is asked. Just... save her."

Fang Yuan watched her.

The moonlight caught the sheen in her eyes, the tremor in her clasped hands.

Her sister. The explanation resonated deeply with him.

Fang Tian's small hand in his after the funeral pyre cooled yet instinct, honed by years of hidden schemes and betrayals, whispered caution.

A convenient tale? A Nascent Soul, even broken, is a valuable piece. Why offer more than asked?

He noted the raw sincerity in her voice, the unconscious touch to her ruined dantian, signs of truth, or a masterful performance?

He saw her value: a potential powerhouse bound by necessity and gratitude.

But he also started seeing the leverage: the sister.

A weakness, yes, but one that could bind Du Juan tighter than any oath... or become a vulnerability for him if exploited by enemies.

His suspicion was a cold stone in his gut, masked by the calm surface.

His hand moved, smooth and deliberate.

He reached for the wine bottle, refilling both cups.

The amber liquid swirled, catching starlight, a ritual sealing the pact.

He slid her cup back across the stone, the gesture almost tender. A show of trust, or the first move in a longer game?

"...Two pills," he finally stated, his voice low but carrying absolute certainty. "And two hundred years of your strength guarding my family."

He met her desperate gaze, his own eyes holding a depth of comprehension that went beyond the transaction. "The terms are accepted, Du Juan."

He raised his cup slightly, a silent toast to sisters, to brothers, and to the lengths one would go to protect them.

"We prioritize your sister first, of course. Her healing secures your focus."

And binds you utterly to me.

The unspoken thought hung in the fragrant air, a ghost only Fang Yuan acknowledged.

Fang Yuan tilted his head to the heavens, eyes tracing the silvered edges of drifting clouds.

The wind was fragrant, tinged with jasmine and still-warm stone.

"You may leave now," he said softly. "I want some peace and quiet."

Du Juan bowed with grace, wordless, then vanished down the moonlit path.

Her steps faded, swallowed by the silence of the night.

After a while, Fang Yuan let out a long, weary sigh, quiet but heavy.

"Come out."

The words were spoken without force, yet they carved through the still air with a weight that left no room for denial. He didn't turn.

Whether his gaze still lingered on the distant path or rested behind closed eyes, only he knew but his voice bore no surprise. Only tired inevitability.

For a moment, nothing. Then—

A dramatic, breathy gasp.

Deliberate and practiced.

From beneath the heavy shadow of a blooming Wisteria tree, a figure emerged, swathed in moonlight and mischief.

Lin Zhaoyue stepped forward, her movement almost too graceful, like mist gliding across still water.

She brought a hand to her chest in mock alarm. "Husband! You startled me!"

Her expression was wide-eyed perfection, exaggerated innocence painted across features far too clever to ever be mistaken as naive.

She floated toward him, her smile radiant, brittle, and false as polished jade.

"I was merely admiring the moonflowers," she cooed, gesturing lazily at a patch of pale blossoms nearby.

"They're particularly luminous tonight, don't you think?" Her eyes never once strayed to the flowers.

They remained fixed on him, keen and bright, searching his face for any hint he might believe her charade.

"This garden," she added, her voice a syrup-slick murmur, "is truly the most serene place for contemplation in the entire estate. So very... peaceful."

The irony in her tone was thick enough to slice with a blade.

She halted a pace away, folding her hands before her in dainty decorum, an image of poised, demure restraint. Her head tilted slightly.

"I had no idea you were having such a serious conversation," she said, blinking far too slowly. "Forgive me if I lingered... too close. By accident, of course."

Her tone was apologetic. Her eyes were anything but.

"That woman," she added, voice dipped in honey, "seemed quite distressed. Is everything alright, Husband?"

Her gaze slid over him not seeking exhaustion or worry, but something else.

A scent. A warmth. A trace. Anything left behind that wasn't hers.

"You look... tired," she whispered, and smiled sweetly. "Would you like me to stay and comfort you?"

Chapter 105: 105- Bandits clearance.

Fang Yuan didn't turn.

His voice, dry as ancient parchment and twice as brittle, sliced through her syrupy theatrics like a dull blade through silk.

"Moonflowers? Really?"

He shifted at last, just enough for his gaze to catch hers, flat, unreadable, and utterly unimpressed.

The weight of his deadpan stare landed like a silent slap. If his expression were a sword, it would be sheathed but the threat was unmistakable.

Lin Zhaoyue's radiant smile held firm, but something behind her eyes flickered.

A tiny crack in the porcelain. Irritation? Embarrassment? Hurt? Whatever it was, it vanished behind renewed sugar.

She drifted a step closer, the scent of jasmine trailing in her wake like a noose of perfume.

"Husband," she purred, voice low, sultry, dangerously close. "I'm also a Mid-Stage Nascent Soul cultivator, you know."

Her chin tilted upward in a flawless show of pride, lashes fluttering with infuriating grace. "You have such a strong wife..."

She let the word linger, drawling it out like a velvet whip. "Why would you want other girls?"

Then, with whiplash speed, her demeanor fractured.

Her lips quivered. Eyes shimmered. Her voice trembled, catching with expertly timed fragility.

"Is it... is it because I said I'm okay as long as I'm the first wife?" She clutched at her chest, fingers trembling just enough to look real. "Husband... you're going to break my fragile heart..."

The performance was flawless.

Tears, trembling, tenderness.

A masterpiece of vulnerability painted in weaponized femininity. But behind it all, her eyes watched. Waiting for a crack in his armor.

Fang Yuan blinked once, slowly.

His face didn't change and he didn't blink again.

"Did you get an answer back?" he asked flatly.

The transformation was immediate.

The trembling vanished. Tears dried mid-bloom. Her expression shifted, just barely but the mask of heartbreak fell away like shedding silk.

"The family has said yes." Her voice, now cool and precise, carried none of the fluttering affection from moments before.

Fang Yuan gave a single nod. "Good."

Silence fell again. The moon hung overhead like a watchful eye.

A gentle breeze stirred the wisteria, rustling petals down like falling sighs.

And then—

"...Thanks."

Soft and barely audible. But it slipped out before he could stop it.

It wasn't rehearsed. Not calculated. Just... real. A splinter of honesty that bypassed the walls around him.

He stiffened almost immediately, jaw clenching as if to bite the word back.

But the damage was done.

Lin Zhaoyue froze.

Then her breath caught, visibly. Her shoulders rose, lips parting, eyes going wide.

For a moment, her entire body stilled, stunned by that single, fragile offering. And then—

She bloomed.

Not just a smile. A radiance. Her eyes lit like twin stars, lips curving in breathless astonishment.

Her hands clasped to her chest, and she swayed forward ever so slightly, as if the moment had unmoored her.

It wasn't mere joy. It was rapture.

He thanked me... He needs me... He sees me.

In her eyes, that single word—thanks—was more intimate than any kiss.

Fang Yuan, meanwhile, regretted it already.

Lin Zhaoyue swayed, hands clasped over her heart as if cradling his single word—"thanks"—like a sacred relic.

The radiance pouring off her was almost physical, casting an unsettling, possessive glow over the moonlit garden.

When she finally spoke, her voice was a breathless hymn, trembling with devotion.

"Oh, Husband..." she exhaled, almost reverently. "This? This was nothing. The least I could ever do for you."

She took a dreamy half-step closer, intoxicated by the fleeting sincerity in his tone. "Truly! Just say the word. Name any task, any foe, any mountain you want crushed—"

Her eyes locked onto his, twin galaxies of manic love. "I am yours. Your sword. Your shield. Your devoted wife."

The last word dropped with the weight of an oath, velvet-wrapped and ironclad. "I live to serve your will, Husband. Anything you desire..."

Her voice softened. Her gaze dropped, for just a second to his lower abdomen, then darted back up with a blush so vivid it threatened to ignite her cheeks.

The next words burst out, earnest and completely deranged.

"...Even— even if you desire an heir! A strong child, born of our union, to carry your peerless legacy! I would be hono—"

"I'm gay."

Fang Yuan didn't even blink as he said it. Just delivered the line flatly, like reporting the weather.

There was a beat of silence. Two heartbeats. Three.

Then—

"HAAA?!" Lin Zhaoyue recoiled like she'd been slapped by a thunder talisman.

Her hands flew up in cartoonish horror, eyes going wide enough to rival spirit beasts.

"Gay!? H-Husband... no... surely you jest...!"

She blinked rapidly, her voice pitching higher with each word. "Is... is this because I made the 'first wife' joke again? I can stop! I can share! We can... We can negotiate terms!"

Fang Yuan said nothing. Just arched a brow.

She clutched her chest, visibly spiraling. "Or... or is it your way of resisting temptation?! Yes! Yes, it must be!"

She brightened again, eyes sparkling with renewed, deranged hope. "You're testing me, aren't you, Husband?! Ahhh~ so cunning, so cold! That's why I love you!"

Fang Yuan turned away with a smile, her reaction was amusing to say the least.

Behind him, Lin Zhaoyue was muttering feverishly to herself. "It's alright... I can fix this... maybe with the right dual-cultivation technique..."

As Fang Yuan walked away, the soft hum of spiritual energy danced at the edge of his perception.

A golden screen suddenly shimmered into view before his eyes, illuminating the night with its divine glow.

[Mission Complete: Eliminate the Bandits near Tushar Village]

Status: Completed

Party Involved: Fang Tian

Reward: +500 SP

He paused mid-step.

"Hmph," Fang Yuan murmured, eyes narrowing. "Its not even been a day yet... how productive of him."

But the screen didn't vanish.

It flickered again and this time, more data unfurled in a radiant script.

[The villagers of Tushar have grown more faithful to the Fang Family after this incident.]

(+900 Faith Points)

His eyes sharpened as the screen pulsed once more.

[Elder Yin, who had been ostracized by the village for years, has finally received an apology. She is feeling content. (+2 faith point)]

Another name materialized below it.

[Fang Yin]

Realm: Mid-stage Qi Transformation

Root Quality: Black

Faith in Host: 91

Then came the final message, quiet but weighty, like the chime of a bell at midnight.

[Current Faith Point income per day: 1,100 FP]

The higher the faith your followers have in you, the more you gain passively.

Current Faith Point Total: 3,000.

Chapter 106: 106-Merit System

Fang Yuan sat quietly in his room, the moonlight spilling across his table like silver ink.

A soft breeze rustled the scrolls and open books before him, but he didn't move.

His eyes were distant, shadowed by thought.

"So... Elder Yin was ostracised by the very village she protected all these years? She never spoke about that..."

He leaned back slowly, arms folded, gaze fixed on the ceiling as if trying to see through the wooden beams above.

"How did she endure it?" he murmured. "How patient must she have been...? Would I have able to think about them if that had been me?"

The memory came unbidden.

Elder Yin, with her ever-circular way of speaking, always skirting the point, never quite direct had stood before him during the last elder meeting.

Her tone had been polite, her words cautious, but the request beneath it was clear: help for the villagers.

Fang Yuan hadn't thought much of it at the time. Just a passing suggestion, irrigation trenches, nothing elaborate.

Simple, effective, easy to implement even with mortal means.

Yet to her, it had been like hearing a divine revelation. This world didn't know irrigation yet and what he had said was the solution she had been seeking for.

She had clung to that suggestion with startling zeal, her eyes alight with the kind of gratitude that made him feel... uncomfortable.

His gaze lowered, fingers idly brushing the edge of his sleeve.

She had been ostracised, rejected by the very people she was meant to protect.

Yet when the chance came, she didn't hesitate to help them.

He wondered, when she stepped back into that village, did she share the idea of his to the villagers? Try to ask for their help?

Or did she quietly get to work alone, sleeves rolled up, digging trenches with her own hands under the summer sun, just to help the villagers despite how they ostracised her?

Fang Yuan's expression darkened.

If she did it silently, without asking for recognition or help, simply because she believed in her duty... then he had misjudged her strength. Perhaps even her heart.

A knot formed in his chest, unfamiliar yet heavy. He realised something bitter, he had become the clan head, yes.

He had wielded power, made decisions, fought enemies.

But he had never truly looked... never examined, deeply, what his elders carried behind their bowed backs.

Never asked what they had sacrificed to keep the clan standing.

Only now did he begin to understand.

Their time.

Time they could have spent with their families... lost.

Time they could have used to cultivate, to grow stronger... traded away.

All so the younger generation could have a place to stand.

They had endured quietly, bearing the weight of the clan even when it meant setting aside their own ambitions, their own peace.

And yet, they had never once asked for praise.

Fang Yuan's chest tightened.

They had been willing to shoulder that burden... simply because someone had to.

Fang Yuan exhaled, long and low.

A sigh that came from somewhere deep.

"Hah... I suppose it's time I start with what I can fix."

He sat up straighter, brushing his sleeve aside as a golden system screen bloomed into view at his gesture.

Lines of numbers flickered across it, the latest glowing softly in the corner.

[System Points Available: 121,000 SP]

He narrowed his eyes. It had sat unused.

"Let's use this. Raise the potential of our talents... equip the family properly."

With a flick of his hand, he summoned a blank scroll and began to write.

"First," he murmured, "finalise the Lin family trade deal. That will stabilize our outer economy. And also solve our immediate problem for finance."

The brush glided across the parchment.

"Second... make full use of the alchemical notes Fang Tian left behind.

Turn it into a monopoly of spirit-grade pills. This should help us stabilise our finance as well."

His movements quickened, each stroke of the brush more confident than the last.

"Create spirit gathering formations across the compound. No—dedicated cultivation chambers... access granted based on merit. That should fuel competition and reward hard work."

He paused.

A flash of guilt crossed his face as he recalled the recent past.

"...Fang Mei and Fang Lian."

Fang Yuan set the brush down, his gaze falling to the fresh ink still glistening on the scroll. His thoughts wandered back, uninvited but clear.

He had let them use the spirit pond freely, without requiring anything in return.

At the time, it felt natural. One was family, the other his disciple.

But now...

He sighed, rubbing his temple.

"I let them skip the line while the others had to earn their place," he muttered.

There was no anger in his voice, just quiet honesty.

"It's not fair. Not to the ones who've worked for it."

He leaned back in his chair, eyes drifting toward the half-open window where the first rays of dawn were slipping in.

"Favoritism, even when unintentional, sends the wrong message. If I don't fix this now, I'll lose the clan before I build it."

He clenched his jaw.

"That's not the kind of leader I want to be."

He added a final note on the scroll:

All opportunities, spirit ponds, elixirs, resources will follow a merit-based system. No exceptions.

He sat back, staring at the list now filled with reforms, principles, and plans.

His hand ached slightly from writing, but he felt lighter.

The sky outside was already lightening, streaks of orange and gold cutting across the night.

Fang Yuan looked out the window, eyes thoughtful but this time, there was something new behind them.

He cracked a faint smile.

"Hah... finally. The internal system is done."

He rolled up the scroll and tied it with a red silk string.

"All that's left... is to implement it."

Fang Yuan stretched, the stiffness of a sleepless night easing from his limbs.

A rare, small smile touched his lips as he pushed open the chamber door.

And froze.

Chapter 107: 107- A hidden Sun.

Right there, curled up on the floor, her back resting lightly against the wooden frame, was Lin Zhaoyue, fast asleep.

Fang Yuan blinked.

"...You've got to be kidding me," he muttered under his breath.

Her breathing was soft, peaceful.

The corners of her lips even held the faintest trace of a smile, like she had found comfort just being near his door.

He sighed, rubbing his temple before crouching down.

With practiced care, he slipped one arm beneath her knees and another behind her back, lifting her gently into his arms.

Despite her earlier mischiefs and madness, right now she seemed fragile, almost innocent.

He carried her to the bed and laid her down slowly, tucking the blanket over her shoulders with a light touch.

Then, standing over her for a quiet moment, he whispered, "Rest... you lunatic."

With another sigh, this one amused, he turned and stepped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

There was work to do.

He needed to gather the family elders and implement everything he had written.

A proper merit system. A structure to support the clan's long-term strength.

And more importantly, a shift in mindset.

No more children of the clan walking around like little masters, snapping their fingers at servants.

The Fang family did have attendants but the younger generation would no longer grow up pampered and idle.

They'd learn to contribute. To understand the weight of effort and responsibility.

The servants wouldn't be replaced but the children would work alongside them, even if only for a few hours a week.

Not out of necessity, but out of principle.

It would build discipline and humility.

As if in perfect timing, the system chimed in his mind.

[Host, you have taken one more step closer to building a beautiful and strong clan.]

[New System Function Unlocked: Daily Quest Generator – Fang Clan Youth Division]

[Function Description: Random quests will be generated daily which the younger clan members can pick based on their strength.]

Each task will vary in difficulty and impact. Danger levels will be clearly marked. Rewards will scale based on difficulty and completion.]

Fang Yuan's brow lifted slightly, impressed.

"Well... that's one less thing I'll have to micromanage."

He smirked, taking his first steps down the vaulted corridor. For once, the path ahead didn't feel like a battlefield.

It felt like a **Foundation**.

As they say, warm smiles are infectious.

He turned the corner where dawn's honeyed light streamed through latticed windows, painting gold across the polished cedar floors.

Up ahead, Mistress Lan, head laundress of the inner halls shuffled toward the linen vaults, her arms piled high with neatly folded silks.

Her eyes were downturned, her steps heavy with decades of unnoticed toil.

"Good morning, Mistress Lan," Fang Yuan called, his voice warm as sun-warmed stone.

"Thank you for your care. The robes you restored last week, they gleamed like new."

She froze. The silks trembled in her arms. Slowly, she lifted her head. For a heartbeat, her worn face was blank—then it *unfolded*.

Wrinkles softened into wonder, and a disbelieving smile broke like sunrise over weathered hills. She stopped mid-step.

The silks wobbled in her arms.

A pause, like the earth holding its breath.

Then, slowly, she lifted her head. Her face, creased by time and tireless work was unreadable at first. But then... it bloomed.

A trembling smile spread like the first thaw of spring. "C-Clan Head! You noticed? I—I'd polished the embroidery thrice, just in case..."

Fang Yuan inclined his head, eyes warm. "It showed."

He moved on. But Behind him, Mistress Lan stood a little straighter. Her shoulders no longer bowed beneath invisible weight.

When young Fei, the gardener's boy, darted past with a pair of shears, she reached out and gently tapped his arm.

"Careful with those, lad! And chin up, the Clan Head's making his rounds today!"

Fei blinked, eyes wide, then puffed up proudly like a fledgling learning to soar.

Further ahead, Old Man Geng, the stoic archivist, was dusting scrolls in a shaft of golden light. Fang Yuan paused beside him.

"Master Geng. Your work on the treaty archives was really impeccable. I needed a record yesterday, and found it in seconds. You've turned history into something usable. Thank you."

The old man's spectacles slipped down his nose. He pushed them back with trembling fingers. His mouth opened, but no words came at first.

At last, his voice emerged, worn but clear, like an old bell rung true.

"The Clan Head... honors this old servant. The records are all I have. Thank you."

His hands, usually stiff with age, now caressed the scrolls like sacred relics.

And so the morning flowed, warm and quiet like spring rain on parched earth.

A gardener pruning jasmine paused mid-snip as Fang Yuan praised the careful bloom of his work.

A guard at the moon gate straightened his spine the moment he was thanked for his steadfast watch.

A kitchen maid blushed down to her neck when Fang Yuan remarked how her ginger tea helped him think past midnight.

"Good morning, Clan Head!"

"May your day be blessed, Master Fang!"

"Thank you... for seeing us."

The voices came like rising birdsong, light, unexpected, full of grace.

Laughter flickered in corners where silence used to linger.

Light danced across the walls, and the air was filled with the scent of life, steamed buns, jasmine petals, morning ink.

Fang Yuan watched a young scribe trip over himself trying to bow, then scramble upright with a sheepish grin.

He saw Mistress Lan gently ruffle Fei's hair, eyes misty with something long-forgotten.

He heard, actually heard Old Man Geng humming to himself as he organized scrolls.

Watching the world with a different mindset, he realized, is like polishing a stone no one knew held a sun inside.

His own smile deepened, not as strategy, but as reflex. This—this—was power reforged.

Not through control, but with connection.

Not through fear, but shared light.

A clan that moved, together, under a shared sky.

For the first time in years, the corridor no longer echoed with the grim rhythm of duty.

It sang, soft and golden with belonging.

Chapter 108: 108- Clan Building [1]

The clan hall settled into a quiet stillness as the elders took their seats.

Present were Fang Mei, Fang Chen, Fang Jingyi, Fang Sun, Fang Ra, Fang Joshua, Fang Long, Fang Yang, Fang Bo, and Fang Rui.

Two seats remained empty.

Fang Tian was away on a long-term exploration, and Fang Yin, stationed in Tushar Village, couldn't make it on such short notice.

When Fang Yuan stepped forward, the low murmurs faded quickly. Eyes shifted to him, some curious, some cautious.

Fang Sun and Fang Ra, in particular, looked weary, the long nights leaving their marks beneath their eyes.

Yet, everyone turned to the young Clan Head, the weight of their hopes resting on his shoulders.

Fang Yuan gave a warm, easy smile that reached his eyes, gentle but confident, the kind of smile that made you trust him without question.

"Thank you all for coming today, for the sake of the Fang Clan's future," he said, spreading his arms in a light, almost playful gesture. "If anyone thinks they deserve a raise, speak up. I'm listening."

A moment of silence hung in the air.

Then, with perfect timing, Fang Chen slowly raised his hand.

The seriousness in his eyes was unmistakable, not just any elder, he was Fang Yuan's uncle, a man who had stood by him through every trial, a man who would trust his life on every word Fang Yuan said.

Fang Yuan laughed softly, a spark of affection in his gaze. "I said, tell me. Didn't say I'd actually give it."

His smile deepened, mischievous yet warm. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. The clan is still broke."

Fang Chen lowered his raised hand with a theatrical sigh.

"Ah, come now, Nephew. You shouldn't toy with an old man's heart like this, I have a daughter to care for, you know."

The room chuckled softly, the tension easing as Fang Yuan turned his gaze toward Fang Mei.

"Well, funny you say that," he replied with a smirk, "I was just about to suggest you retire. After all, your daughter's already one of the elders now."

The words carried the cadence of a joke, but every person in the room knew there was more to it than jest.

In a hall once reserved only for the senior generation, the presence of younger cultivators stood as quiet proof of the clan's future.

Fang Mei sat composed, but a faint pride flickered behind her cool expression. Alongside her, three other rising stars had claimed their place in this room—Fang Reì, Fang Bo, and Fang Yang.

They weren't just juniors anymore.

They were the ones the elders had nurtured, guided, and now... quietly admired.

Fang Yuan clapped his hands lightly, drawing the room's attention back to him. His smile faded, replaced by a more solemn tone.

"Thank you, Elders. Truly... for being a part of the Fang family."

He let the words linger, allowing them to settle in the ears and hearts of everyone present.

Then, his voice took on a firmer edge.

"Today, I wish to implement a new merit-and-reward system within the clan."

There was a brief pause, then a spark of recognition lit up Fang Sun's eyes.

"We're doing this again?" he asked, leaning forward slightly.

Fang Yuan blinked. "Something like this was suggested before?"

Fang Sun gave a nostalgic nod and stood slowly.

"Yes. Back when your father was clan head. He proposed a similar system. Every elder supported it at the time."

Fang Yuan frowned, a puzzled look crossing his face. "Then why have I never heard of it?"

Fang Chen chuckled under his breath.

"Because, Clan Head... your father wasn't married yet back then."

Fang Yuan raised a brow but nodded. "Alright, continue. I'd like to know what happened."

Fang Chen glanced at Fang Sun and quietly sat down. With a sigh, Fang Sun straightened his robe and began.

"Human greed," he said simply. "That's what happened, Clan Head."

He took a breath, the weight of memory dulling his voice.

"Ex-Elder Fang Guo accused and even had proof of your father of siphoning clan resources... to aid a rogue cultivator."

The air grew heavy. Fang Yuan's expression darkened. He stared at the papers in his hand, silent.

Fang Sun finished with quiet finality.

"That rogue cultivator... was your mother."

A beat of silence followed. Then Fang Yuan sighed, flipping through the pages before him without really reading them.

"Well..." he muttered, eyes still on the parchment, "Love truly does make a person blind, doesn't it?"

No one replied. The air in the hall held its breath.

Except for Fang Jingyi, who covered her mouth with a hand, the corners of her lips betraying a small, knowing smile.

Fang Yuan folded the paper and looked up again, his voice steady.

"You can all rest easy. From this moment on, the clan treasury key will be handed to Elder Joshua."

He paused, letting his gaze settle on the elder in question, then added with a sly grin,

"Frankly, he's the only one here who still looks like he hates me, so I trust him to guard it best."

Elder Joshua, who had been sipping tea with a stoic face, promptly choked, coughing violently as the hall erupted into laughter.

"Clan Head!" he wheezed between coughs, "That's blasphemy! I hold no such hatred in my heart!"

Fang Yuan chuckled, folding his hands behind his back.

"Well, at least I trust you more to guard the coffers than my aunt, who wouldn't even blink if I asked her to fund another banquet."

From the side, Fang Jingyi shot up with a mock glare.

"Hey!" she exclaimed, hands on her hips. "Banquets build morale!"

Laughter rippled through the hall again, louder this time. Even the more stoic elders couldn't help but smile.

Fang Yuan smiled faintly, his gaze drifting toward his aunt with playful exasperation.

"Morale's important, yes but at the rate we're going, we'll be bankrupt by winter. Pretty soon, we'll have nothing left but grass to eat."

Without missing a beat, Fang Jingyi lifted her chin defiantly.

"Then you'll eat it and thank me for the seasoning."

That did it. The hall erupted with another wave of laughter, loud and unrestrained.

Even Elder Joshua, still dabbing at the tea he'd nearly choked on, let out a wheezing chuckle.

Chapter 109: 109- Clan Building [2] (BONUS)

The hall's laughter finally subsided, leaving a comfortable, buzzing warmth in its wake.

Fang Yuan let the camaraderie linger for a moment longer, his faint smile softening the edges of his earlier exasperation.

Then, with a subtle shift in posture, shoulders squaring and gaze sharpening, he brought the focus back.

"Speaking of resources," he began, his voice dropping slightly, becoming steady and clear, "let's talk about foundations. Specifically, cultivation foundations."

He paused, letting the significance settle.

Every elder leaned in fractionally, the jovial mood instantly replaced by focused attention.

"Effective immediately," Fang Yuan continued, meeting their eyes one by one, "I will personally fund the acquisition and distribution of cultivation pills for our promising juniors and core disciples.

We're talking the full spectrum:

Qi realisation pills, Qi Condensation pills, qi transformation pills and also the golden core pills. And trust me, I'm more than welcome to share a nascent soul pill if you folks ever need one."

A ripple of stunned silence followed, thicker than the laughter moments before.

Eyes widened. Fang Sun's weary gaze snapped fully alert.

Fang Ra's jaw tightened slightly. Even Fang Jingyi's playful smirk vanished, replaced by intense scrutiny.

The sheer scale and cost of such a commitment was staggering.

Fang Chen was the first to break the quiet, his brow furrowed not in doubt, but in dawning, almost pained recognition.

He leaned forward, his voice a mix of awe and mild accusation.

"Clan Head... surely... it cannot be? Not from the... gifts brought by the Divine Ice sect?" He practically choked on the implication, his loyalty warring with the sheer improbability of that source funding such generosity.

Fang Yuan threw his head back and laughed, "Oh, heavens no, Uncle Chen! The ice Sect's generosity has its... limits."

He wiped a tear from his eye, his smirk returning, "No, this time, the benefactor is far more reliable."

He paused for effect, his gaze locking onto Fang Chen's.

"This aid comes courtesy of my dear sworn brother, Xiao Pei."

The name landed like a spark in dry tinder.

Fang Chen's eyes blew wide.

"Xiao Pei?" he echoed, his voice rising with incredulous excitement. "Xiao Pei as in...? The same Xiao Pei who...?"

Fang Yuan simply nodded, a satisfied glint in his eye. "Mhmm. The very same."

A wave of murmurs swept the table. Elders exchanged glances filled with disbelief, then burgeoning hope.

Fang Joshua tapped his fingers thoughtfully. While Fang Long's composed mask cracked entirely, revealing pure astonishment.

"Clan Head!" Elder Ra burst out, voicing the collective thought. "When... when might we have the honor of meeting this esteemed benefactor?"

Fang Chen slammed a fist lightly on the table, his earlier agony replaced by fervent admiration. "By the ancestors! It is him! He stood with us during the Spirit Mine crisis ten years ago, pulled our hides from the fire when the supply lines collapsed! And now... now he extends his hand again?"

He looked at Fang Yuan, his expression one of pure awe. "Clan Head, your ability to forge such bonds... it humbles this old man. Truly."

Fang Yuan chuckled, warmed by his uncle's genuine praise. "Alright, alright, enough flattery for now."

He raised a hand, snapping his fingers lightly towards the entrance. "Felicia!"

A figure materialized silently from the shadows near the doorway, Felicia, ever attentive.

"Clan Head?"

"Be a dear and fetch Xiao Pei for me. Tell him the elders are eager to offer their thanks... and perhaps bore him with some old war stories." Fang Yuan's eyes twinkled.

"At once, Clan Head." Felicia bowed and vanished as swiftly as she appeared.

Fang Yuan turned back to the table, his expression shifting to brisk efficiency.

"In the meantime," he announced, gesturing towards neat stacks of parchment that an attendant promptly began distributing, "I want you all to take a thorough look at the draft proposals for the merit and reward system, the youth contribution guidelines, and the new oversight protocols for the treasury."

He spread his hands. "I am open to all suggestions. Let's use this time productively."

The elders poured over the parchments, brows furrowed, lips pursed, the flick of sleeves and scratching of quills the only sounds in the hall.

One by one, they read through the merit drafts, the contribution guidelines, the treasury oversight.

Their expressions shifted, thoughtful, impressed... and then, inevitably, uncertain.

At last, it was Elder Fang Sun who voiced the unspoken doubt that had crept into every heart.

"Clan Head," he said slowly, lifting his gaze, "are you certain your... sworn brother can support this? This level of investment isn't just generous... it's sacrificial. You gain nothing tangible in return. At worst... we lose everything."

A heavy silence followed.

Fang Yuan stood.

His hands clasped behind his back, shoulders squared beneath the weight of leadership.

His gaze swept across the room, not cold, but resolute.

"Who says there's nothing to gain?" His voice cut through the hush, calm and ringing.

"The stronger our juniors grow, the more doors will open for us. Opportunities that once passed us by... will finally be within reach. And not just scraps, but real contention."

His tone hardened, not in anger, but conviction.

"If our foundation remains weak, we will forever be pawns. But if we nurture strength, true, disciplined strength we can carve out a place worthy of our name."

He paused, letting the words root.

Then he smiled, slow and knowing, like the tip of a sword glinting through fog.

"Who knows..." he murmured, eyes distant yet piercing, "maybe what my brother said about three years wasn't just a promise for himself... but a prophecy for our clan as a whole."

A pin could have dropped and echoed like thunder.

The temperature in the room seemed to fall.

Even the air dared not move.

Elder Fang Chen's lips parted slightly, as if to speak but no sound came.

Fang Jingyi's fingers froze mid-tap on the table.

Across the hall, even the attendants stood a little straighter, breath held without realizing why.

"Besides," Fang Yuan added, his voice steady as he turned to return to his seat, "my success... is my brother's success."

Chapter 110: 110- Hidden Sect [1]

The meeting hall soon reached a conclusion.

The senior elders, Sun, Ra, Joshua, Chen, Jingyi, and Long showed full support, nodding with firm conviction.

The younger elders like Fang Mei, Fang Rui, Fang Bo, and Fang Yang, all looked like confused kittens, blinking at one another before nodding along, clearly following the lead of their elders.

Fang Yuan smiled faintly as he observed their responses. Support was support.

"Very well," he said, rising to his feet. "Since everyone agrees, I'll have to request you elders overwork yourselves... just for one more month."

A round of chuckles followed.

"What's one more month," Elder Chen said with a shake of his head, "when we've been grinding our bones for years?"

Laughter rippled through the hall, warm and familiar.

Then, with a soft creak, the great doors opened.

In waddled a round, chubby man dressed in layers of silken robes that strained slightly at the seams.

He walked with the kind of confidence that came from deep pockets and no shame.

Trailing just behind Felicia, Xiao Pei was mid-wink, his hand halfway through offering her a suggestive peach blossom he'd conjured out of nowhere.

"Felicia, my dear, your smile—" he began.

Then he looked up.

And froze.

Twelve elders. One clan head. And every single gaze turned to him like blades drawn in silence.

The words slipped from his fingers.

"...Ah."

He straightened his back in an instant, tucking in his belly as best he could, hands folding solemnly as he gave a too-formal bow.

"Xiao Pei greets the esteemed elders and the ever-magnanimous Clan Head," he recited, face pale and lips trembling.

"Raise your head," Fang Yuan said warmly, stepping forward and helping Xiao Pei up with both hands.

"Oh, Xiao Pei—my clan elders wanted to personally thank you for all the resources you've provided us."

Xiao Pei blinked. "I... did?"

Fang Yuan smiled without missing a beat. "Of course you did. Brother Dapang, why so modest?"

He slung an arm around the confused man's shoulders. "Come, come, let me introduce you to the elders."

The poor man was whisked away before he could protest.

"First, Elder Chen," Fang Yuan gestured with theatrical pride. "I'm sure you remember him, the older brother of my aunt, Jingyi."

At the mention of Jingyi, Xiao Pei flinched as goosebumps broke across his arms.

His gaze darted toward the shadows, as if expecting her to leap out with a broom.

Thankfully, Elder Chen only stepped forward, clasping Xiao Pei's hands in both of his.

"Ah, Benefactor!" Elder Chen beamed. "You saved us a decade ago, and now, once more you help our clan rise to greatness. Truly, we owe you much."

"...I did?" Xiao Pei asked again, voice small.

Fang Yuan let out a boisterous laugh, slapping his back hard enough to make him stumble.

"Hahaha! Brother Dapang is far too humble and with such a sharp sense of humor! Let's go, there's more to meet!"

And so it continued.

Elder Sun called him a pillar of generosity.

Elder Long said he would write songs about his benevolence.

Even Elder Joshua wiped a tear and muttered something about "restoring hope in the younger generation."

Compliments poured like wine, and with each one, Xiao Pei's face grew a shade paler.

He didn't know what he had done or if he had done anything at all but it was clearly too late to deny it now.

He's setting me up! his mind screamed. *Shao ge, what are you doing?!*

Finally, they reached the last elder.

Fang Yuan's smile turned especially wicked.

"And now, for the final introduction, my dear aunt, Jingyi."

Xiao Pei froze.

His stomach dropped.

And, in the most pitiful tone imaginable, he clutched his belly and whispered, "Brother Fang... I think my stomach's acting up again... real bad..."

Fang Yuan raised a brow, a playful glint in his eyes.

"Oh?" he said, feigning innocence. "Shall I have my aunt escort you to the outhouse? Might be a chance to get acquainted."

Xiao Pei quickly waved his hands. "No, no! I know where to go, I prefer alone!"

Fang Jingyi stepped forward, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. "Well, if it isn't little Pei Pei! Finally stopped peeking at woman during baths?"

Xiao Pei's face flushed crimson. Fang Yuan chuckled.

"My bad, my bad," Fang Yuan said, his mirth softening into a genuine, albeit still amused, smile.

He met Xiao Pei's exasperated glare, a look that could indeed kill and held up a placating hand, his expression shifting to something more earnest. "Alright, alright. Peace, brother."

He took a breath, his posture straightening slightly as he turned to Fang Jingyi with deliberate respect.

"Elder Jingyi," Fang Yuan began, his voice now clear and formal. "Allow me to properly introduce my sworn brother, Xiao Pei. A man of integrity, courage, and a steadfast loyalty I value above most things."

He gestured towards Xiao Pei. "Brother, this is Fang Jingyi. She raised me for several crucial years, and I hold her in the highest regard, like a mother, even if circumstances later changed that arrangement."

Fang Chen chuckled softly at the qualification.

Fang Jingyi huffed, "Hey!"

Xiao Pei, still flushed but visibly steadied by Fang Yuan's sincere introduction and clear respect, gave a deep, respectful bow towards Fang Jingyi.

"Elder Jingyi," Xiao Pei said, bowing low, his voice sincere, "I offer my deepest apologies for the foolishness of my youth."

Fang Jingyi let out a laugh, light and unbothered. "It's fine, child. I forgive you. Just remember, I'm old enough to be your mother."

That remark made Xiao Pei freeze.

His blush deepened from crimson to near violet as he straightened, clearly unsure whether to apologize again or bury himself in the courtyard tiles.

Fang Yuan, grinning, placed a firm hand on Xiao Pei's shoulder and gently pulled him upright and aside.

"Alright, alright," he said, chuckling. "Let's not drown him in shame. Today is a day of celebration, after all."

He turned to the elders, expression sharpening with theatrical importance.

"And in the spirit of celebration, I would like to share a secret."

Elder Joshua, ever the polite and curious one, leaned forward with a small nod. "Oh? A secret, Clan Head Fang? You've piqued this old man's interest."

Fang Yuan's smirk widened. He clasped his hands behind his back, posture straight and commanding.

"I belong to a secluded sect," he said, voice calm but rich with undertone.

Beside him, Xiao Pei blinked. "You do?"

Fang Yuan completely ignored him.

Instead, he gave Xiao Pei a casual push forward, as though presenting a prized heirloom to the room.

"And this," he continued, voice booming just slightly, "this man here, my sworn brother, Xiao Pei is none other than the Grand Elder of that very sect."

Xiao Pei stumbled a step, as if the floor had tilted beneath him.

His eyes snapped to Fang Yuan, lips parted, caught between forming words and swallowing disbelief.

"I... am?" he breathed, the words barely audible, more a reflex than a statement.

His gaze darted, searching for clues, an escape, perhaps even divine intervention. None came.

The room around him buzzed, oblivious.

The elders leaned forward in their seats, eyes gleaming with shock, excitement and interest.

Their awe clung to Fang Yuan like incense smoke, thick and distracting.

None of them saw the bewilderment painting Xiao Pei's face a deeper shade of regret.

Xiao Pei slowly turned his head toward Fang Yuan, expression tight with disbelief, betrayal and confusion.

Fang Yuan didn't miss a beat. He leaned in, voice low, calm, conspiratorial.

"I'll explain later," he murmured, his tone smooth as silk laced with mischief. "For now... just play along. Grand elder."