

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

#Chapter 111- Hidden Sect [2] - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 111- Hidden Sect [2]

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The meeting came to an end. The elders filed out, murmurs of instruction already passing between them as they prepared to mobilize the younger generations.

Fang Yuan and Xiao Pei walked in companionable silence towards the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, the tension of the hall replaced by the tranquil sounds of the estate gardens.

They reached the serene koi pond, its colorful inhabitants gliding like living jewels beneath the surface.

Fang Yuan stopped, watching the fish. "Da Pang," he began, his tone thoughtful, "I intend to raise this family higher than it's ever been. And not just us. I plan to bring in outsiders too, train them, help them grow. Build something... lasting."

Xiao Pei eyed him suspiciously, his round face scrunching up.

"Are you... trying to do what our first brother tasked you with?" he asked, his voice laced with doubt.

Fang Yuan actually startled, turning to look at Xiao Pei properly.

A flicker of genuine surprise crossed his features before he chuckled, scratching his head. "Hah! I'd... forgotten," he murmured.

"He did say I'd raise one of the strongest clans under heaven..."

A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Hah. So I'm just walking the path he foresaw after all."

Xiao Pei shook his head, a wave of melancholy washing over his expressive face.

He looked down at his own hands, then back at Fang Yuan. "Brother Shao Ge... look at me. Look at *you*." His voice thickened.

"I'm just... stuck at the early stage of Qi Transformation. A beginner. And you? Nascent Soul realm! A giant among mortals already! I don't even know *why* I'm sworn brothers with you two. First Brother... he's probably soaring at the peak stage of Nascent by now, or even Hollow Spirit..."

Fang Yuan heard the raw sadness, the feeling of being left behind, in Xiao Pei's tone.

They were brothers of three, bound not by blood but by a crucible of shared life and death.

The eldest had ascended young, a blazing star leaving Fang Yuan and Xiao Pei trailing in the dust of his brilliance.

But strength hadn't erased brotherhood; their First Brother was also, in a sense, an oracle.

Xiao Pei sniffed, wiping his nose with the back of his sleeve. "First Brother told me... told me you'd be in grave danger within a year. Told me to... to steal everything I *could* from home and get to you. No matter what." He shuddered slightly, remembering the frantic, terrifying urgency.

Fang Yuan stared intently at a particularly vibrant koi, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Your arrival was godly, Da Pang. If you hadn't made it in time... I would have already shattered. Gone mad from the guilt and the..." He trailed off with a hollow laugh.

Xiao Pei tried to laugh along, but it came out as a choked sob. He wasn't laughing.

The memory of Fang Yuan's condition, the hollow eyes, the trembling limbs, the aura of near-death despair was etched into his mind.

It was nothing to laugh about.

Fang Yuan cleared his throat, turning back to Xiao Pei. His expression shifted, becoming purposeful.

"Brother Da Pang," he said, his voice regaining its steady warmth. "I have in my hand... a Bone Marrow Pill."

Xiao Pei blinked, confusion momentarily overriding his sadness. "A... what pill?"

Fang Yuan held up a small, intricately carved jade vial. "A Bone Marrow Pill. It tempers and purifies the marrow, scrubs the channels clean. It fundamentally enhances the body's foundation for cultivation. A key to unlocking greater potential."

Xiao Pei's eyes locked onto the vial. An audible *gulp* echoed in the quiet garden air. His earlier melancholy warred with sudden, desperate hope.

"N-no strings attached?" he stammered, suspicion warring with yearning.

"Hey!" Fang Yuan feigned offense, clutching his chest dramatically. "What do you take me for?"

"A scammer! That's *exactly*

what you are!" Xiao Pei shot back, though his gaze remained fixed on the vial like a lifeline.

Fang Yuan chuckled, a softer, more genuine sound this time. "You... just because I *borrowed* your family's Star-Seeking Compass for a little while..."

"*Borrow?!!*" Xiao Pei's voice shot up an octave, indignation flaring. "You *stole* it! Vanished for a week! I took the blame when the elders noticed! Then you magically 'found' it and returned it, and still I got thrashed for 'playing recklessly' with a priceless heirloom! ***Borrow?!!***"

Fang Yuan held up his hands in surrender, his grin sheepish. "Okay, okay! I'm sorry. That was... my bad. Truly."

Xiao Pei crossed his arms, pouting dramatically. "If you felt *really* sorry," he sniffed, "you'd come with me *right now* and apologize properly to my parents. Explain it was all *your* fault!"

"Hey! Brother Da Pang," Fang Yuan protested, then his expression softened into a knowing smile. He stepped closer, the jade vial held out meaningfully. "Isn't *this* why I'm giving you the Bone Marrow Pill?"

Before Xiao Pei could fully process the words, Fang Yuan swiftly pressed not one, but *two* small, glossy pills, deep crimson like crystallized blood and emanating a faint, potent warmth directly into Xiao Pei's palm.

"Take these. And now that you and Aunt Jingyi have finally buried that old hatchet," he added, a hint of his usual mischief creeping back, "go visit her. Tell her you need a full medicinal bath regimen to maximize the effects of these. She knows the best herbs."

Xiao Pei stared down at the precious pills glowing in his hand.

The pieces clicked together in his mind with almost physical force: Fang Yuan orchestrating the meeting, forcing the apology, paving the way for *this* moment... for *his* advancement.

It wasn't public humiliation; it was a carefully laid path to reconciliation and opportunity, disguised as Fang Yuan's usual antics.

The realization hit him like a tidal wave. His eyes, already slightly red from earlier emotion, welled up instantly.

His lower lip began to tremble violently.

A choked gasp escaped him, followed by another. His shoulders started to shake.

"B-Brother Shao Ge..." Xiao Pei stammered, his voice thick and wobbly.

Tears spilled over, tracing hot paths down his plump cheeks.

He looked up at Fang Yuan, his expression a mixture of overwhelming gratitude, profound shame for his earlier suspicion, and sheer emotional overload. "I... I *misjudged* you! Sob... I... I completely thought... *hic*... you just wanted to see me squirm... *waaah*!"

His words dissolved into proper, heaving sobs. Snot started to bubble slightly at his nostrils. "All this time... you were... you were *helping* me! Making me face Aunt Jingyi... so I could... so I could *use this*! Waaaah! I'm so sorry! I'm a terrible brother! *Sob... hic...*"

Xiao Pei, overwhelmed, lurched forward, arms outstretched, clearly intending to throw himself into a tearful, snotty hug.

Fang Yuan, witnessing the sudden, dramatic flood of tears and the impending clingy assault, took a swift step back, his usual composure cracking.

His eyes widened in genuine alarm. "Whoa! Hey! Hey hey hey!" He held his hands up, palms out.

"Da Pang! You're an adult! A grown cultivator, for heaven's sake! Control yourself! Haha!"

His laugh was a mixture of flustered embarrassment and fond exasperation.

He gently, but firmly, pushed against Xiao Pei's advancing, sobbing bulk. "Go! Go to Aunt Jingyi! Before you drown us both! Go on, shoo! Haha!"

He gave Xiao Pei a final, slightly desperate nudge towards the path leading deeper into the estate, relief mingling with amusement on his face as he watched his round, weeping brother waddle away, still hiccuping apologies into his sleeve.

Chapter 112: 112- Lin Zhaoyue.

Xiao Pei's retreating figure, a wobbly, sobbing silhouette disappearing down the garden path, finally vanished behind a screen of flowering plum trees.

Fang Yuan watched him go, a faint, almost imperceptible smile softening the usual sharpness of his features for just a moment.

Fond exasperation lingered in the air.

Then, the smile vanished.

He turned, his expression smoothing into detached focus.

With a thought as swift and silent as a shadow passing, he summoned the translucent, golden interface of his system.

Lists of resources flickered before his inner eye.

Faith Points: 4,250 FP

His gaze skimmed past the familiar items, landing on something he remembered seeing in the faith shop.

[Minor Resource Well] – 100 FP

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

"Is it permanent?" Fang Yuan murmured aloud, his voice low in the quiet garden.

The koi pond beside him burbled softly.

"If it's a permanent well... It could be useful for the outer disciples' quarters... or perhaps the herb gardens..." His mind began calculating placements, resource allocation, the subtle shift it could bring to the clan's foundation.

Curiosity, that ever-present spark, ignited.

He needed quiet space to think.

Turning on his heel, he strode purposefully back towards his private chamber within the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, the system interface dissolving as he focused on the path.

He reached the familiar, polished wood of his chamber door, hand already rising to push it open. He stopped dead.

At the doorway, bathed in the soft light filtering from the chamber within, stood Du Juan.

She was dressed not in her usual simple attire, but in finely woven traveling robes of deep indigo and silver, practical yet elegant.

Her hair was neatly braided and pinned, a small pack slung over one shoulder.

She looked... prepared.

Ready to depart.

Her posture was straight, almost rigid, but her eyes, wide and dark, held a flicker of apprehension as they met Fang Yuan's.

And behind her, close enough to be possessive, stood Lin Zhaoyue.

The girl's arms were wrapped loosely, almost casually, around Du Juan's shoulders from behind, her chin resting lightly atop Du Juan's head.

Her expression was one of serene amusement, a perfect, practiced curve gracing her lips.

But the smile didn't touch her eyes.

Those eyes, sharp and calculating as obsidian shards, were fixed solely on Fang Yuan.

It was a smile that held no warmth, only a silent, dangerous challenge.

A predator's smile, claiming its prey.

The air in the corridor grew thick and still, charged with unspoken tension.

The quiet hum of the estate faded away, replaced by the heavy silence between the three figures frozen at the threshold.

Lin Zhaoyue's grip, though seemingly gentle, felt like iron bands to Du Juan, who remained utterly still, a trapped bird held too close to the flame.

Fang Yuan's gaze, sharp as a drawn blade, flickered from Du Juan's travel-ready form to Lin Zhaoyue's unnerving, possessive smile.

The Minor Resource Well was instantly forgotten.

The silence stretched, thick enough to choke on.

Lin Zhaoyue's obsidian gaze never wavered from Fang Yuan, her smile a blade sheathed in silk.

Du Juan remained statue-still within her embrace, eyes darting nervously between the two.

Finally, Lin Zhaoyue spoke, her voice honey-smooth yet carrying the weight of glacial ice.

"Fang Yuan. How fortuitous we caught you. Du Juan and I were just discussing your little... expedition."

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed imperceptibly. *Expedition? What expeditions— The concept itself was foreign, unplanned.*

"Expedition?" he echoed, tone deliberately neutral, though a spark of pure, unguarded surprise flashed before being ruthlessly banked.

He hadn't considered, let alone planned, any such venture.

Lin Zhaoyue was operating on information he didn't possess.

"To the Dark Forest in the Northern Reaches," Lin Zhaoyue clarified, her fingers tracing idle patterns on Du Juan's shoulder.

Du Juan flinched minutely but didn't pull away.

"Such a dangerous place for a clan head to wander alone. Or even," her gaze slid meaningfully to Du Juan, "with only one companion."

Du Juan found her voice, soft but clear, laced with unwavering deference: "Clan Head Fang, I... I wished to inform you I am ready to depart immediately."

She continued, a hint of practical eagerness breaking through, "—I have already marked where I hid it, so it won't take lo—"

Ahem! Lin Zhaoyue's cough wasn't loud, but it sliced through Du Juan's sentence like a knife.

Before Du Juan could utter another syllable, Lin Zhaoyue's hand, moving with the speed of a striking viper yet the deceptive softness of silk, clamped gently but firmly over Du Juan's mouth.

"Shhh, Little Sister," Lin Zhaoyue murmured, her voice a honeyed whisper directly into Du Juan's ear, though her obsidian eyes never left Fang Yuan's face.

A smirk, wide and utterly self-satisfied, played on her lips.

"Mustn't give away all our precious secrets so freely in the corridor, hmm? Especially not the exact locations." Her grip on Du Juan's mouth was velvet-covered steel.

Du Juan's eyes widened above the restraining hand, but she didn't struggle.

She simply froze, accepting the silencing with a neutral, almost resigned stillness.

Fang Yuan observed this little power play. His expression remained calm, the picture of clan head composure.

Only a single, faint twitch of his left eyebrow betrayed a flicker of profound annoyance.

His gaze lingered for a heartbeat on Lin Zhaoyue's hand covering Du Juan's mouth, then lifted coolly to meet Lin Zhaoyue's triumphant smirk.

Lin Zhaoyue seamlessly resumed, her smile widening, revealing perfectly white teeth. "Ah, the Lotus. Precisely why I shall be joining you."

Fang Yuan stiffened. "Joining us?"

"Naturally." Lin Zhaoyue released Du Juan and took a graceful step forward, closing the distance to Fang Yuan.

Her presence felt like a sudden drop in temperature. "The Dark Forest borders our Lin Clan territory, you know. Its shadows whisper secrets only we ought to know. Its paths twist in ways only Lin blood can navigate safely."

She tilted her head, a predatory gleam in her eye. "Consider me your guide. Your protector, even. Would you deny your... *guest*... the chance to be useful? To ensure the safety of my dear husband?"

Fang Yuan met Lin Zhaoyue's challenging stare as a slow, calculated smile spread across Fang Yuan's face, mirroring Lin Zhaoyue's own dangerous charm, a predator acknowledging another.

"Perhaps," he conceded smoothly, his voice deceptively light, "that is for the best."

Lin Zhaoyue's obsidian eyes sparkled, a flicker of genuine, predatory joy lighting her features.

Her smirk softened into something almost... pleased. *He sees my worth. He accepts my claim, my place at his side.*

Fang Yuan continued, his tone shifting to one of casual inconvenience, as if discussing a minor household chore.

"Actually, Zhaoyue, your timing is... serendipitous. A rather pressing clan matter has just arisen, putting me unavoidably behind schedule."

He gestured vaguely towards his chamber, the picture of a burdened leader. "Since you're so eager to assist, and possess such... invaluable knowledge of the Dark Forest..."

He paused, letting the implication hang. "Why not do me this small favor? Accompany Du Juan directly to retrieve the Seven Ring Lotus? You seem perfectly equipped to ensure her safety and success."

The air crackled.

Lin Zhaoyue's expression froze mid-smirk.

Her eyes, wide with disbelief, locked onto Fang Yuan's infuriatingly calm face.

Her lips parted slightly, then snapped shut with an audible click of teeth.

Silence stretched, thick and brittle.

Two seconds.

Three.

The predatory joy vanished, replaced by a dawning, icy fury. Her delicate nostrils flared.

Then, it erupted.

"Husband!"

Chapter 113: 113- Fang Yuan

A day had passed, the echoes of Lin Zhaoyue's exasperated screech replaced by the quiet scratch of Fang Yuan's brush.

He sat in his austere office within the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, sunlight filtering through the lattice window, illuminating motes of dust dancing over stacks of parchment.

His focus was absolute as he meticulously transcribed tasks onto scrolls.

The System's quests shimmered in his mind's eye, invisible and inscrutable to anyone else.

The tedious work of manual transcription was the price for translating system prompts into clan action.

The rewards he gained were System Points every time each of the tasks got completed.

He paused, raising his head to gaze at the phantom numbers only he could see, superimposed against the far wall:

[System Points: 43,500

Faith Points: 4,100

Passive FP Gain: +1,100/day]

A grimace flickered across his face. 43,500. A stark descent from the 100,000 he'd started with.

That fortune had bled away into Bone Marrow Pills and cultivation elixirs now carefully cataloged in the clan treasury, awaiting distribution to those who earned the Merit Points he was currently creating.

Merit Points. The currency of mundane effort. He dipped his brush again, the ink flowing dark and sure.

Task: Sweep perimeter of Alchemy Pavilion.

Risk: Negligible

Reward: +10 Merit Points

He set it aside, picked up a fresh scroll.

Task: Collect Moonshine Flowers (West Meadow)

Risk: Low (Minor spirit beasts possible)

Reward: +20 Merit Points

Scroll after scroll joined the growing pile. He hummed a tuneless, absent-minded melody, his mind drifting momentarily.

An image surfaced: Lin Zhaoyue's face yesterday, a volatile storm of outrage morphing into reluctant, sulky acceptance.

It took time but she finally relented... although that woman wasn't one to go down without a fight.

"Under one condition. I get to hug you. Whenever I want. Wherever I want. That is my condition, Husband." He could almost feel the unnerving intensity of her grip.

Fang Yuan sighed, a long, weary exhalation that seemed to deflate his shoulders.

He dropped the brush onto the inkstone with a soft *clack*, the sound loud in the quiet room. Leaning back in his chair, he rubbed his temples.

"Felicia," he called, his voice carrying easily through the open door.

She appeared instantly, gliding into the room with her characteristic silent grace. Her expression was serene, attentive.

Fang Yuan gestured towards the neat stack of completed scrolls on the corner of his desk.

"Take these to Elder Mei. Instruct her these are the next batch of tasks for distribution. Prioritize according to the risk tiers."

Felicia gave a single, deep, and utterly polite nod.

Without a word, she stepped forward, gathered the scrolls with efficient movements, cradling them securely against her chest.

She turned and walked out, her footsteps silent on the polished wood floor, leaving Fang Yuan alone once more with his ledgers, his phantom points, and the lingering specter of conditional hugs.

With a slow sigh, Fang Yuan opened the System tab again.

[Hollow Spirit Pill: ???]

Still locked, still hidden behind a wall labeled: Insufficient Authority.

A nerve ticked in his jaw.

It was maddening. Like being a dying man, lungs filled with ash, bones rotting from the inside and just before the final breath, someone appeared holding the cure for cancer.

And imagine that he wasn't really poor. He was a trillionaire. A billion times over. He could pay any price. Sell empires. Burn worlds. But the answer wasn't no.

It was worse.

"You're not qualified... yet."

Qualified? He nearly laughed. ***Seriously? I'm dying here.***

That's what this felt like. That's what made his hands tremble ever so slightly as he clenched them into fists on the desk.

One Hollow Spirit Pill. Just one. That was all he needed.

Just one, and he could truly ascend. Be secure. Stand without fear.

He was already at the peak of Nascent Soul. So what? That no longer meant safety.

Not after revealing himself. Not after exposing his real strength in the face of the Gu family.

Now, eyes would be watching. Calculating. Waiting.

Fang Yuan exhaled slowly through his nose and dismissed the System screen with a flick of his will.

He rose from his seat with a quiet breath and moved to the corner of the room, where a small alchemy kettle sat nestled among jars of dried herbs.

His fingers, long and practiced, moved without thought, this was muscle memory.

He opened one jar, pinched out a gnarled shred of bitterness root, then another: thin curls of molten elderleaf bark, blackened at the edges like paper kissed by flame.

He dropped them into the kettle, poured spring-fed spirit water over them, and placed his hand atop the lid.

A flicker of golden spiritual light pulsed from his palm, activating the formation etched into the metal.

The kettle hummed softly, runes lighting up one by one like slow breaths returning to a slumbering beast.

Steam began to rise, sharp, earthy, and bitter enough to bite.

Fang Yuan remained still, arms folded behind his back as he watched the brew darken.

He said nothing, but his silence was not empty.

The scent that filled the room was rich and earthy, faintly bitter.

When it was ready, he poured it with slow precision, the tea falling in a steady stream into a single porcelain cup.

He stared at it for a moment, the steam rising like ghosts.

Then, softly:

"What's so special about this tea that Tian always asked me to brew?"

He brought the cup to his lips.

One sip and the world tilted.

The bitterness was staggering, almost violent.

It scalded the tongue with sharp, herbal fire, as if grief had taken liquid form.

His face twisted faintly, but he swallowed it down.

"My brother's taste buds are clearly built for war," he muttered.

And yet... he brewed this tea.

Every time he missed him.

Without realizing it. Without thinking.

Fang Yuan stared into the dark pool in the cup.

It didn't shimmer with any special glow. No secret properties.

No hidden powers. Just.... bitterness.

But sometimes, that was enough.

Chapter 114: 114- Lin Caravan (BONUS)

Elder Fang Ruì walked at the head of the group, her steps light despite the weight of her title.

At eighteen, she was already one of the youngest Qi Transformation cultivators in the Fang Clan's recent history, a feat that earned her the rank of Elder, yet left her leading peers barely a year her junior, all still in Qi Condensation.

She clutched the mission scroll, its parchment crisp against her fingers as Coldwind City's mist-threaded breeze tugged at her sleeves.

"Focus," she chided herself.

Explaining the task felt like balancing on sword's edge, too stern, and she had seem pretentious; too casual, and they had forget she was their Elder.

Behind her, the five junior cultivators chattered like sparrows, their energy bright and unburdened.

All except Fang Lian.

Lian trailed slightly apart, a silent shadow. The others unconsciously left a half-step of space around her, their eyes filled with hostility.

Fang Ruì glanced at Fang Lian, the personal disciple of the current clan head.

Earlier that day, when she had picked up a task to lead a group of cultivators on a caravan escort to the Lin family to earn some merit points, Fang Lian had unexpectedly volunteered to join.

She had mentioned having her own task to complete somewhere along the same route.

Fang Rui didn't mind the company, she needed to form a group anyways.

But when she heard that Fang Lian already had an individual task, she decided to form a different group and have her tag along.

Fang Lian did not speak much along the way and her expression gave little away.

That only made Fang Rui's curiosity grow.

What task did she have? She had not dare asked.

Pressing for details might have come off as rude, especially toward someone so closely tied to the clan head.

But still... she could not help wondering.

What kind of mission could be so important that it required Fang Yuan's personal disciple to travel so far?

The clan head was not exactly short on resources, if anything, he was known to be generous with those he trusted. Surely, if she needed help, he would have provided it.

So why was she out here like this? Outside like this? Was this task that important?

Fang Rui bit her tongue, resisting the urge to ask. *Surely she's also not out here like me earning merit points.*

She gave a light cough, more to steady herself than to clear her throat, and stepped forward.

Facing her team, she unrolled the mission scroll.

"The Lin family's caravan assembles at Northgate within the hour," she stated, her voice carrying cleanly over the quiet street.

"Our task is to escort them through the Blackridge Pass to Ashe City."

She maintained eye contact with each cultivator, her Qi Transformation aura lending weight to her words despite her youth.

"It's a three-day journey through territory notorious for bandit activity. The clan's intelligence confirms multiple organized groups operating in the region."

A subtle tension rippled through the junior cultivators.

Fang Rui continued, her tone deliberate: "Risk assessment classifies this task as moderate, which should be manageable for our team of five qi condensation but it will still require constant vigilance.

We'll maintain defensive formations at all times, rotate scouting duties, and establish nightly wards. Understood?"

A ripple of nods answered her.

All except Fang Bong, the lanky nineteen-year-old who leaned against a nearby wall of polished jade-stone, arms crossed.

A smirk played on his lips as the others murmured their assent.

Rui ignored it, tightening her grip on the scroll.

She had worked too hard-sweated through the championship trials, pushed her cultivation through countless sleepless nights-to let his pettiness undermine her now.

"Good," she said, her tone leaving no room for debate. "We move out in-"

"Relax, Little Elder," Bong cut in, pushing off the wall. His voice was a lazy drawl, slicing through the brief moment of order.

"We'll keep your precious merchant wagons safe. Wouldn't want our champion tripping over her own robes before the real fight, eh?"

He chuckled, the sound sharp and needling. "Just point us at the bandits. We'll handle the messy work while you... supervise."

Little Elder.

The words landed like a slap. Rui's fingers tightened on the scroll, knuckles bleaching white against the parchment.

She forced her chin up, the phantom taste of training yard grit sharp on her tongue. *Focus. Breathe. You earned this.*

Rui ignored it, the familiar burn of injustice flaring in her chest. She'd faced worse than Bong's pettiness on the championship sands broken ribs, Qi exhaustion that felt like dying.

She tightened her grip on the scroll until the reed core threatened to snap.

She had earned her robes. Yet now... *Just let it slide. He's senior in age, technically. Don't—*

"Apologize."

The air chilled. Fang Lian stood beside Bong, her voice a shard of ice.

She hadn't raised it, yet it silenced the path.

Bong blinked, his smirk faltering. "What? She doesn't mind! Right, Rui?"

He nudged her shoulder, overly familiar. "See? All good."

Rui opened her mouth to say to Fang Lian It's fine, really, no need but the words never made it out.

Fang Lian's gaze locked onto Bong, sharp and unblinking. Her voice cut through the air, low and absolute:

"You will address her as Elder Fang Rui. Not 'Little Elder.' Not 'Rui.' Every careless word you spit diminishes her rank, disrespects her attainment, and insults the clan head who personally granted her that title."

Her hand rested lightly on the plain hilt of her sword.

"Apologize. Now."

Rui swallowed. Lian wasn't being a busybody. Right now, she was her wall. A shield raised between Rui and the erosion of the respect she had bled for.

This timidity, this urge to fold wasn't her. Not truly. She had faced down rival cultivators on the championship, spirit beasts during the clan excavations. Yet why did leading her own feel harder?

Fang Bong's smirk twisted into something uglier. He straightened, looming over Lian with a derisive scoff.

"Who the fuck do you think you are to come between us?"

Chapter 115: 115-Lin Hao [1]

Fang Bong deliberately turned his back on Lian, a malicious grin spreading as he addressed Rui, his voice booming for the whole street to hear: "Look, Little Elder, you and I—we're lovers. Everyone knows it!"

He threw a venomous glance over his shoulder at Lian.

"Just like how you're the secret whore warming Clan Head Fang Yuan's bed! That's the only reason he made you his direct disci—"

THUD!

The sound was sickening, a wet crunch of fist meeting soft tissue below the ribs.

Fang Bo's vile words died in a gurgle as Fang Lian's strike drove the air from his lungs like a punctured bellows.

He crumpled to his knees, then face-first into the muddy street, retching bile.

Fang Lian stood over him, a statue carved from obsidian. Not a flicker of emotion crossed her face.

Slowly, deliberately, she spat beside his cheek.

When she spoke, her voice wasn't just cold, it carried the weight of a tomb sealing shut.

"You dare? Disrespect the Clan Head? Slander his honor? Is your head up in the clouds?"

Each question struck like a blade drawn across flesh.... measured, precise and lethal.

She leaned closer, her tone dropping into something low and merciless.

"Fang Bong, I suppose what I'm hearing... is your death wish."

The air crackled. The other Fang cultivators recoiled as if scalded.

Hands fluttered nervously, reaching out as if to pull Lian back or shield Bong, but stopping inches short of actually touching her.

"Lian, stop!"

"Elder Fang, please!"

"Bong, you idiot, shut up!"

Still no one moved in to help Bong. No one dared step within arm's reach of Lian.

She was a live wire, radiating lethal intent, her gaze fixed on Bo's shuddering form with terrifying focus, like a hawk deciding if the squirming mouse was worth the kill.

Fang Ruì, her face pale but her spine rigid, finally found her voice. It trembled only slightly.

"Enough."

She stepped forward, placing herself almost between Lian and the crumpled Bo, her eyes blazing not with timidity now, but with the hard-won authority of a champion.

Fang Ruì's command hung in the frigid air like a drawn blade.

"Apologize now, Fang Bong. Or face clan discipline before the bandits get a chance. Fang Lian... stand down. Now."

Bong dragged himself upright, one arm clutched around his aching ribs. Mud streaked his robes where he had fallen.

When he raised his head, his eyes were twin pools of smothered rage. He dipped his chin, a fractional, jerky bow toward Ruì first. "My words were... disrespectful, Elder Fang."

The title scraped from his throat like gravel.

Then he turned to Fang Lian.

The shift was electric. Where his posture with Ruì had been rigid submission, his body now coiled like a viper about to strike.

He didn't bow. Didn't even incline his head.

His gaze locked onto Lian's, and in that searing stare was a promise written in acid: This isn't over.

"...And my slander," he hissed, the word thick with sarcasm, "was unbecoming of a Fang clansman."

His lips peeled back, not in a smile, but a baring of teeth. "I... regret... offending you, Disciple Fang Lian."

The apology was ash in his mouth.

Everyone could hear the lie.

Everyone saw the hatred burning behind his eyes, a silent oath of vengeance that hung heavier in the air than Ruì's command.

Lian didn't react.

Didn't blink.

She merely held his gaze until he flinched first, the raw intensity of her stillness more crushing than any retort.

Bong looked away, wiping blood from his split lip with a trembling hand.

She then gave a single nod, then melted back to the edge of the group, silent once more.

The others avoided her gaze, the space around her widening again.

Respect, Rui realized, sometimes needed fierce guardians.

She straightened her spine, the scroll steady in her grasp.

"As I was saying," she continued, voice calm and firm, cutting clean through the silence.

"The path to Ashe City is dangerous. Stay alert. Maintain formations at all times."

Her gaze swept over the group, sharp and assessing, pausing just a fraction longer on Fang Bong.

"We move as one. Understood?"

A chorus of "Yes, Elder Fang" followed, quieter this time, more precise.

Fang Lian gave a small nod while Fang Bong said nothing this time.

* * *

The Lin family caravan sprawled across Northgate's wide plaza like a slumbering beast awakening.

Oxen lowered, harnesses jingled, and merchants called out sharp orders as crates were secured onto sturdy wagons emblazoned with the Lin family crest a snow-capped mountain peak.

At the head of this organized chaos stood a broad-shouldered man in practical, high-quality traveling robes.

His Qi pulsed steadily, marking him at the peak of Qi Condensation, formidable indeed for a merchant.

His sharp eyes swept over the approaching Fang cultivators, lingering briefly on Rui's distinctive Elder robes before settling on her face with a warm, practiced smile.

"Elder Fang Rui, I presume?" he called out, stepping forward with a respectful clasped-hand salute.

"Lin Hao, head of this humble train. Welcome."

His gaze flickered over the group behind her, noting their youth but also the disciplined lines they instinctively formed.

His smile deepened, genuine appreciation replacing the initial assessment.

"I must admit, I don't know how your esteemed Fang family got wind of us needing an escort of at least five Qi Condensation cultivators with such speed and precision," he said, his tone laced with genuine surprise and a touch of professional admiration.

"All I can say is your intelligence network is truly notable. Moreover," he added, his smile widening, "your clan's willingness to provide such capable aid so promptly is deeply joyful."

Fang Rui returned the salute with perfect Elder's grace, her own smile polite and assured.

"Merchant Lin Hao, the Fang Clan is honored to assist," she replied, her voice carrying clearly over the plaza bustle.

She met his appreciative gaze squarely, projecting confidence. "My companions and I are more than ready to ensure your safe passage to Ashe City."

She paused, just for a heartbeat, a subtle shift in her expression, not doubt, but a flicker of thoughtful curiosity.

Her eyes held Hao's for a moment longer.

"The Clan Head, Fang Yuan, was... particularly insistent on the composition and readiness required for this task."

She let the words hang, a carefully placed hint.

How did he know? The unspoken question lingered beneath her professional demeanor.

"He ensured we were briefed thoroughly on the potential hazards of Blackridge Pass."

Chapter 116: 116-Lin Hao [2]

Lin Hao's warm smile held steady, though a flicker of sharp curiosity lit his eyes at Rui's mention of Fang Yuan's detailed insistence.

He masked it expertly with another respectful nod.

"The Fang Clan Head's foresight is as renowned as his strength. We are doubly fortunate. The caravan is ready. If you and your cultivators would take positions—"

"I will join Elder Fang Ruì."

The voice, cool and flat, cut through the merchant's practiced diplomacy.

Fang Lian stepped forward from the edge of the Fang group, her movement silent but instantly drawing every eye.

She ignored the subtle flinch from the other juniors, her gaze fixed impassively on Lin Hao, then shifting fractionally to Ruì.

"My task aligns with this route. So I wish to travel with the escort. While staying with the Elder."

A beat of silence followed.

Lin Hao's gaze darted between Lian's unreadable face and Ruì's composed one, assessing the undercurrent.

Lin Hao's sharp eyes had taken in the scene instantly as they had arrived: the fresh mud staining one cultivator's robes, the palpable tension still humming amongst the young Fangs, the almost physical bubble of space surrounding the silent girl.

Internal clan strife, his merchant's mind categorized, none of my business, as long as the guard holds.

Payment was contingent on safe delivery; their squabbles were their own.

Yet, the sheer intensity radiating from that silent figure piqued a curiosity he could not quite suppress.

His warm smile remained fixed as Fang Ruì finished speaking, but his gaze lingered just a moment too long on the enigmatic girl.

The practiced diplomat warred briefly with the intrigued observer, and the observer won.

He inclined his head slightly, his voice retaining its polite warmth but now edged with genuine inquiry.

"Might I inquire, young lady," he asked, his tone carefully neutral, "who you might be? Your bearing is... distinct."

Fang Lian met his gaze directly, her own expression unreadable.

Her voice, when it came, was cool and flat, devoid of inflection but carrying an undeniable weight.

"Fang Lian. Disciple of the current family head." A fractional pause, then the barest tilt of her head.

"Will it be fine if I tag along?"

Direct disciple of Clan Head Fang Yuan? Traveling with an escort mission?

The implications flickered behind Lin Hao's eyes, but his merchant's instincts snapped back into place.

Get the cargo through. He bowed slightly, the motion seamless.

"Of course, Disciple Fang Lian," he replied, his smile widening just enough to convey welcome without probing further.

"Your presence is unexpected but undeniably strengthens the guard. A welcome addition, i should say." He smoothly shifted his focus back to Rui, the picture of professional courtesy.

"Elder Fang, shall we proceed then? The hour grows late and we need to arrive before the weekend ends."

Rui gave a single, firm nod, grateful for Hao's tact. "We shall. Assign our positions, Merchant Lin."

She turned to her team, her voice regaining its earlier command, though her eyes briefly met Lian's.

There was no surprise there, only a quiet acknowledgment. So she stays close. *Why? Is it protection or observation? Or is her task truly intertwined with mine?*

The questions buzzed, but she shoved them aside. Mission first.

Lin Hao gestured to a sturdy, enclosed carriage near the front, its wood polished dark, the Lin crest prominent.

"Elder Fang, Disciple Fang, if you would ride here for the initial leg? It offers comfort and a vantage point. The rest of your cultivators," he indicated the juniors, "can rotate flank positions with my guards. We move in standard diamond formation."

Fang Bong glowered but said nothing, falling into line behind Ruì and Lian as they approached the carriage.

As Ruì placed a hand on the carriage step, Lian moved fluidly, not ahead, but precisely beside her, like a silent, watchful shadow.

Ruì felt the weight of that proximity, a constant reminder of the lethal enigma she now shared her space with.

"Move out!" Lin Hao's voice boomed across the plaza.

Whips cracked. Oxen lowed, straining against their harnesses.

The great wheels of the merchant wagons groaned, then began to turn, carving ruts into the damp earth.

Coldwind City's Northgate receded behind them, its imposing walls shrinking against the vast, mist-shrouded expanse of the Blackridge Pass.

The rhythmic creak of wood and leather, the steady clop of hooves, and the low murmur of guards settled into the journey's cadence.

Inside the carriage, the air was still.

Ruì settled onto the padded bench, the mission scroll unrolled again on her lap, a pretense of focus.

Opposite her, Fang Lian sat ramrod straight, her eyes fixed not on Ruì, nor the passing scenery, but on some distant, internal point.

Her sword lay across her knees, one hand resting lightly on its plain scabbard.

She didn't speak a word and she barely even seemed to breathe.

The only sound was the rumble of the wheels and the distant cry of a hunting hawk, echoing the predatory stillness within the carriage.

At the same time, somewhere in the northern region...

Two figures glided through the Night Forest, their robes fluttering like banners in a storm.

"Matriarch Fang! Wait!" Du Juan's voice rang out, laced with urgency and no small amount of dread. "That's where the Viper Seduction Flowers lie in wait!"

The woman ahead halted mid-step, one foot perched dramatically on a mossy rock.

Her dark hair shimmered under the sun like polished silk, and the corners of her lips curled into something far too pleased.

"Matriarch Fang..." She breathed the title like a lover's name, fingertips brushing the jade token at her throat. "Say it again, little sister."

Du Juan recoiled. "The flowers—!"

"Hush." Zhaoyue's finger pressed against Du Juan's lips, her eyes wide and fever-bright.

She leaned close, her whisper a velvet threat, "You've pleased me today. Truly."

Du Juan caught up, flushed and frowning. "I'm serious. That flower lures spirit beasts from miles away. It's not—"

"Hush now." Zhaoyue raised a finger to Du Juan's lips, mock solemn.

"You're doing so well, little sister. I'm proud of you. Truly."

Then, with a mischievous wink, she added, "But trust me, the flowers over there are beautiful and even divine. I'll fetch one for you, too."

And with that, she sauntered forward.

Chapter 117: 117- Du Juan [1] (BONUS)

Lin Zhaoyue sauntered ahead, unbothered by the ominous air thickening with every step.

Her gait was light, almost whimsical, as if strolling through a garden, not the rotting breath of a venom-swamp.

Behind her, Du Juan exhaled sharply, gripping her sheathed sword like a lifeline.

Her eyes flicked warily around the terrain, and despite herself, she followed.

Internally, she prayed, half solemn, half sarcastic.

Clan Head Fang... if I make it out of this alive, I swear, you'd better compensate me with enough resources to buy a sect. How dare you send me alone with this unstable woman!

The ground softened beneath their feet, until finally... they arrived.

It was a swamp. Or what was left of one.

The terrain lay in ruin, gouged and shattered, as if a celestial beast had once clawed its fury into the earth.

Pools of stagnant poison shimmered with an unnatural luster.

One portion of the canopy above had collapsed entirely, allowing thin strands of sunlight to bleed down like the last gasp of hope.

Du Juan stepped into the ruined clearing, breath caught in her throat.

"Finally... a light amidst all this darkness," she muttered.

She was only able to see thanks to the thin veil of Lin Zhaoyue's spiritual qi wrapping around her senses.

If not for that... It would be nothing but darkness after darkness, she thought bitterly. *I wouldn't even know if I stepped into a beast's jaws until I was halfway digested.*

A rustle from ahead.

Zhaoyue's cheerful voice floated back. "Come along now, you're too slow! These vipers won't wait for our polite entrance!"

Du Juan's grip tightened.

What an unstable woman... she thought. But of course, she dared not voice it.

After all, she had once stood at the level of Nascent Soul.

She knew well, a nascent soul cultivator like Lin Zhaoyue could hear her heartbeat... and tell whether it rang with truth or fear.

Especially now, when she was little better than a mortal.

As they moved deeper into the swamp, the air grew heavier with every step.

Even the insects fell silent.

And then—

The flowers came into view.

A clearing bloomed open, covered in an array of blossoms so unnaturally vivid they looked painted by illusion.

Crimson petals like fangs. Azure stalks that pulsed softly, as if breathing.

Blossoms in shapes she'd never seen before, glowing, swaying gently despite the still air.

But Du Juan didn't smile.

Her throat tightened. She swallowed hard.

Her gaze slid to Lin Zhaoyue, who stood with arms outstretched, basking in the strange floral glow like a priestess receiving a divine vision.

Zhaoyue turned to her, eyes gleaming.

"What? Mesmerized by my beauty?"

Du Juan, stone-faced, muttered quietly: "Matriarch Fang..."

The effect was instantaneous.

Lin Zhaoyue's smile stretched wider, eyes fluttering closed in near ecstasy.

For a heartbeat, she looked so pleased, so content, it seemed nothing else in the world mattered.

Danger? Spirit beasts? Who cared?

Du Juan observed her with an expression of mingled awe and terror.

She didn't even bother checking if I was being genuine...

No. For her, the title alone is enough.

As long as I call her that, she might just let everything else slide...

She cleared her throat and carefully said, "With a group this large, Matriarch Fang... there's a high chance an exotic spirit herb is present and they're guarding it."

Then, after a slow breath, she added gravely:

"...And perhaps... a Nascent Soul-grade Viper Seduction Flower."

Zhaoyue turned her head, eyes narrowing with sudden interest.

And then, she smiled.

But this time, it held none of the earlier whimsy or bliss.

This smile was a razor's edge, cold and infinitely dangerous.

"Du Juan," Zhaoyue purred, the name dripping with sudden, intense contemplation.

Her gaze was distant yet fiercely calculating.

"Tell me, Little Sister..." She took a step closer, the unnatural light playing across her sharp features.

"Do you think Fang Yuan..." A breathless pause, filled with raw, desperate longing.
"...would finally take me as his wife... if I brought him the core of a Nascent Soul spirit beast?"

The question hung in the poisoned air, absurd and terrifying, laying bare the depth of her obsession, framed by the deadly beauty of the glowing, monstrous flowers.

Du Juan instinctively stumbled back a step, her worn boot sinking into the soft, sucking mire.

Her throat worked as she forced the words out, louder than intended: "Matriach Fang, I...!"

She caught herself, flustered, then plunged ahead, the lie tasting like swamp water: "In my heart, you're already his one and only wife!"

The effect was immediate and terrifyingly radiant.

Lin Zhaoyue spun on her heel, her entire being igniting with manic joy.

A brilliant, explosive smile shattered her predatory intensity, transforming her face into something dazzling and unnerving, like sunlight glaring off poisoned ice.

"Aiyah! Little Sister!" she cried, her voice ringing with genuine, overwhelming delight.
"You are too kind to me!"

Before Du Juan could blink, let alone raise her rusty heirloom sword as a feeble barrier, Lin Zhaoyue surged forward.

Arms like steel bands wrapped around her in a crushing embrace, lifting her slightly off the treacherous ground.

Du Juan gasped, her face instantly buried in the impossibly soft, fragrant silk covering Lin Zhaoyue's chest, a stark, terrifying contrast to the swamp's decay.

"Aww, don't be scared, Little cuckoo," Lin Zhaoyue cooed, her voice dropping into a velvet murmur that vibrated directly into Du Juan's muffled ear.

One hand came up to cradle the back of Du Juan's head, pressing her deeper. "I'll definitely take care of you."

The whisper turned intimate, laden with a promise that felt less like comfort and more like a life sentence. "Forever..."

Du Juan managed a strangled gulp, her nose filled with the scent of expensive perfume and underlying, potent spiritual energy. Panic flared, not just from the suffocating embrace or the terrifying promise, but from the sheer, embarrassing logistics of it.

Trapped, immobile, her vision filled only with expensive fabric and overwhelming softness, a single, desperate thought pierced the fog of fear:

I should have cultivated a taller body if I didn't want to be perpetually smothered by her... assets!

"...and ever," Lin Zhaoyue breathed, the final words ghosting against Du Juan's hair, sealing the suffocating vow.

(1/8 bonus)

Chapter 118: 118- Du Juan [2] (BONUS)

Du Juan stumbled back as the embrace released, sucking in ragged lungfuls of the tainted air.

Her gaze, almost against her will, flickered from Lin Zhaoyue's imposing silhouette, specifically the generous curves emphasized by her fitted robes, down to her own modest figure.

The sheer disparity in size was... *depressing*.

A sigh escaped her before she could censor it, the muttered words slipping out: "Size isn't everything. Personality is."

A beat of chilling silence followed. Du Juan's blood ran cold. *I said that aloud?!*

Slowly, dreadfully, she lifted her eyes.

Lin Zhaoyue was still smiling. But it was a smile laced with predatory amusement, her head tilted curiously.

"Oh my," she purred, a dangerous glint in her eyes. "Is Little Sister... perhaps feeling inadequate?"

Du Juan flushed crimson, snapping her head away to stare fixedly at a pulsating azure stalk.

A low, melodic laugh bubbled from Lin Zhaoyue, the sound both beautiful and terrifying. "Relax, Little cuckoo."

Her tone shifted, becoming brisk. "Now, I want you to stay exactly here. I'll retrieve those flowers and be back..." she snapped her fingers, "...in a jiffy."

Du Juan instantly wanted to say **NO!** but the protest died in her throat, replaced by a tiny, strangled squeak.

"P-Please... be quick."

The unspoken terror screamed in her mind: *Because if even a wandering golden core beast sneezes in my direction right now, I'm dead before I can blink!*

Lin Zhaoyue merely winked.

Then, without a ripple of displaced air, she flowed forward.

One moment she was beside Du Juan; the next, she hovered gracefully above the vibrant, deadly clearing, a dozen paces from the nearest cluster of hypnotic blooms.

Her expression shifted from playful to focused intensity.

She knew the game.

The Viper Seduction Flowers weren't just plants; they were lures, sprouting directly from the tails of twenty Golden Core realm Swamp Lurker Vipers hidden beneath the muck and blossoms.

Plucking the flower meant provoking the beast attached.

With a serene smile that didn't reach her coldly calculating eyes, Lin Zhaoyue dove.

Chaos erupted.

As her fingers closed around the first radiant crimson bloom, a flower shaped like a fanged maw, the murky water beneath it exploded.

A viper the thickness of Du Juan's thigh lunged, jaws distended, dripping corrosive venom.

Its speed was blinding to a mortal eye, but to a Nascent Soul cultivator, it was languid.

Lin Zhaoyue didn't flinch.

Her free hand snapped out, not in a fist, but fingers splayed.

A shimmering, iridescent dust, like pulverized opals mixed with pollen, erupted from her palm:

Heavenly Timber - 2nd Form: Sleep Dust.

The dust washed over the viper's head.

Its furious hiss died mid-strike.

Momentum carried it forward, but its eyes glazed over, its massive body going limp mid-lunge, crashing harmlessly back into the stagnant water with a heavy splash, already deeply unconscious.

Simultaneously, Lin Zhaoyue yanked.

The Viper Seduction Flower tore free from the base of the viper's tail with a sickening, wet rip.

A shudder of agony passed through the unconscious beast even in its drugged state.

This was the signal.

Like disturbed hornets, vipers erupted from their floral coverts all around her.

Scales gleamed like poisoned emeralds and obsidian in the eerie light, fangs bared, hissing fury filling the clearing.

Golden Core aura flared, potent enough to make Du Juan whimper and shrink back, her rusty sword trembling in her grip but utterly insignificant before Lin Zhaoyue's Nascent Soul presence.

She became a whirlwind of serene, bare-handed devastation.

Dancing effortlessly between lunging strikes, Lin Zhaoyue's hands were a blur.

Sleep Dust bloomed in shimmering clouds wherever she gestured.

One viper, leaping from behind, was engulfed mid-air and plummeted asleep.

Another, coiling to strike from the water's edge, received a palmful of dust to its snout and slumped instantly.

Each graceful dodge, each fluid sidestep, ended with her fingers closing on another impossibly vibrant flower.

Rip. Rip. Rip.

The sounds were sharp counterpoints to the thuds of unconscious vipers collapsing.

She moved with lethal precision, plucking flower after flower, azure pulsating stalks, spiraling violet blooms, iridescent spheres each extraction eliciting a reflexive spasm from its owner, even under the Sleep Dust's influence.

Twenty vipers.

Twenty flowers.

In less time than it took for Du Juan's panicked breathing to steady, it was over.

Lin Zhaoyue stood untouched amidst a circle of comatose giant serpents, her arms cradling a dazzling, dangerous bouquet of the Viper Seduction Flowers.

Not a single petal was bruised, not a drop of venom marred her robes.

She hadn't needed the destructive force of Wood Explosions; the Sleep Dust had been the perfect, surgical tool.

She floated gently back towards Du Juan, the terrifying bouquet held almost tenderly.

"I got them," she whispered sweetly.

Then she added, eyes gleaming as she handed Du Juan a single flower:

"Now let's bring this flowers to my husband first. I want him to see it bloom... just like his affection for me will."

Du Juan took the flower, her hands shaking.

And her voice was a frayed thread, low and strained as she fought to keep respect layered over her rising panic. "Matriach Fang..."

The title felt like a shield, flimsy but necessary. "Clan Head Fang sent us here for the Seven-Ring Lotus. If we return without it..."

She swallowed, the words tasting like ash. Her grip tightened on the rusty heirloom sword until her knuckles cracked. "...he won't be pleased."

Lin Zhaoyue, paused, her head tilted with unnatural, birdlike swiftness.

A single, bright syllable cut through the swamp's gurgle: "Oh?"

It wasn't a question.

It was the sound of ice cracking beneath Du Juan's feet.

Zhaoyue blinked slowly, her wide, obsidian eyes refocusing as if Du Juan's words were distant echoes finally reaching her.

"Right..." she murmured, a flicker of something almost like genuine recollection passing over her features before vanishing like swamp mist. "...that was the mission, wasn't it?"

Du Juan's world tilted. Her eyes widened, pupils dilating with pure, unadulterated dread.

No.

No, no, no—!

Her mind screamed. **You didn't forget. You couldn't have just—!**

And then, like the strike of a hidden viper, the truth pierced her consciousness.

Not like a slap. Like a poisoned spear thrust straight through her heart.

Lin Zhaoyue hadn't come for the Lotus.

She never intended to find it.

Du Juan's throat seized, parched as desert stone.

She clutched her head, fingers digging into her temples. A low moan escaped her.

"No..." The whisper was raw, ripped from her chest, horror blooming thick and suffocating within her. "No, no, no... this can't be happening—"

The dam broke. Louder, a raw cry of despair: "NO!"

Lin Zhaoyue blinked at her, her expression one of mild, detached curiosity.

"What's wrong, Little Sister?"

Her voice was light, almost singsong. "You look pale. Did a gnat bite you?"

Du Juan stared back, her face as bloodless as bleached bone.

What's wrong?

The question echoed absurdly in her mind.

Everything.

From the moment you decided I was your 'little sister' to this gods-forsaken swamp. Everything is catastrophically, lethally wrong.

But voicing that was suicide. She drew a shuddering breath, forcing her trembling limbs still.

Survival meant playing the game.

Playing her game.

"Matriach Fang," Du Juan began again, her voice scraped thin but deliberately calm.

She gestured towards the deeper, darker reaches of the shattered swamp.

"Let's go get that Seven-Ring Lotus now. And return."

She met Lin Zhaoyue's unnerving gaze, injecting every ounce of false deference she could muster.

"I want... I need you to follow me this time. Please."

The 'please' was a lifeline thrown into treacherous waters.

(2/8 bonus)

Chapter 119: 119- The Past [1] (BONUS)

The final system notification blinked away.

Fang Yuan stretched, the tension in his shoulders easing as the last of the day's assigned quests vanished.

"Finally," he breathed, the word heavy with relief. He rubbed his temples.

"I definitely need something to automate this. This manual grind is unsustainable."

As if summoned, a golden screen materialized before his eyes:

[Automated Quest Generator: 345,678 System Points]

Fang Yuan stumbled backward, catching himself on his desk.

"Scam!" he choked out, the astronomical number stealing his breath.

"Absolute daylight robbery!"

The door burst open.

Felicia rushed in, eyes wide with alarm. "Clan Head! Are you alright? I heard a thud—"

"I am fine, Felicia," Fang Yuan interrupted, his voice sharper than intended as the lingering shock mixed with irritation.

He forced a measure of calm. "But next time, knock. Respect boundaries."

A visible chill ran down Felicia's spine. "Of course, Clan Head! Apologies!"

She backed out swiftly, closing the door with a soft click.

Fang Yuan sighed, the brief flare of anger replaced by weariness.

He pushed away from the desk and stepped out of his study, finding Felicia hovering nervously just outside.

"Felicia," he said, his tone softer now. "Take the rest of the day off. Return tomorrow."

Her face fell. "Am... am I being punished, Clan Head?"

Her voice held a fragile sadness.

Fang Yuan shook his head gently.

"No punishment. I want you to go out. Enjoy yourself. See the markets, visit a teahouse... don't be shackled to this place every hour."

"But..." Her voice dropped to a whisper, vulnerability raw in her eyes. "I don't know if I can enjoy the day while being alone."

Fang Yuan stopped, truly looking at her, the loneliness etched into her posture. "You haven't made any other friends? In all this time?"

A mute shake of her head was his answer.

A profound sigh escaped him, heavy with an unexpected echo.

He leaned against the cool stone wall, the question triggering a floodgate he usually kept bolted shut.

Ten years ago.

The memory struck him like a physical blow:

He stood at the edge of a jagged, smoking wound in the earth, the collapsed Spirit Mine.

Not as the powerful Clan Head, but as a man drowning in the raw, screaming grief of others.

The air vibrated with it.

"Fang Yuan!" A woman's voice, shredded by tears, cut through the cacophony.

"Do you know what you've DONE?! Those lives... they're on YOUR HANDS!"

"Fang Yuan! Give me back my husband!" Another wail, filled with bottomless despair.

A child's voice, high and broken: "My dad! Dad, why?! You said you'd come back for my birthday!"

The accusations rained down, a hailstorm of pain:

"Fang Clan is cursed!"

"Murderers!"

"Worst of the worst!"

Mortals, consumed by loss, past caring for their own safety, their faces masks of agony and fury.

Fang Yuan stood amidst them, not cloaked in authority, but bowed low, repeating the only words that felt remotely adequate, yet utterly insufficient:

"I'm sorry. I am so sorry. I'm sorry..."

Over and over, a desperate litany against the tide of their anguish.

The weight of their grief pressed down, crushing. For a terrifying moment, he believed them.

He felt like the murderer.

The disaster had a single cause: one person's selfish negligence.

An Elder, tasked with maintaining the protective arrays within the spirit mine, had only one duty, to ensure the formations remained pristine and stable, checked and reinforced every week.

Some had once grumbled to Fang Yuan that this was excessive, a waste of precious resources.

But he had silenced their objections with quiet finality:

"It doesn't hurt to be careful. When lives are at stake, carelessness is not an option."

Miners, whether in this world or the one he had once lived in were never adventurers chasing glory.

They were people with families, mouths to feed, debt to pay.

In the Eastern Ravine Spirit Mine, every pickaxe swing was born out of necessity, not luxury.

But the Elder in charge had seen only opportunity.

Seeking to "conserve resources," she gradually stretched her inspections to once a month.

After all, many clans did the same, and the mines hadn't collapsed yet.

It was foolproof, they said.

Until greed took the reins.

For three months, she stopped maintaining the arrays entirely.

And then, without warning, the mountain roared.

The mine collapsed.

Dozens were buried alive beneath crumbling tunnels and spirit ore veins.

Dust and screams filled the ravine.

When the news reached the clan, the Elder didn't come forward.

She didn't take responsibility.

Instead she fled.

Not only did she abandon her duty, she even stole clan resources on her way out, vanishing into the night as families wept.

When Fang Yuan arrived, he was too late at the scene.

He saw the desperate, futile clawing at the rubble.

He smelled the dust and despair.

And he saw himself.

Not the Clan Head, but the furious, grieving child from another life, another world.

His father. Crushed in a collapsing mine shaft back on Earth.

The company brass, smooth-talking serpents, blaming "unforeseen geological shifts" when the reports had screamed negligence.

The helpless rage. The betrayal. The life forever altered.

Now, reborn into this new world, Fang Yuan had something he never thought he had experience again, a loving family.

His parents were well-off enough that his father never had to step into the mines.

His mother, gentle and wise, taught him how to read and write.

He grew up enjoying a warm, peaceful childhood, even if, deep down, he was a grown man who had once died from overwork on Earth.

There was something disarming about receiving unconditional parental love. It softened even the hardest hearts.

When his younger brother was born, Fang Yuan was already ten.

And by then, he had become a boy unlike any other his age, brilliant, quick-witted, and well-mannered.

He loved his younger brother dearly.

He taught him, guided him, and cared for him with a devotion no one had asked for but everyone respected.

They were a happy family. A perfect family.

And then, almost as if fate wanted to deny that perfection, tragedy struck.

Fang Yuan could never forget the moment his uncle returned, carrying the lifeless bodies of his father and mother.

They had died during a trip to visit the Gu family. That morning, they had left with smiles.

His father had ruffled his hair and laughed, saying, "Nothing will happen. Gu Jian is my sworn brother and he's already at the Nascent Soul realm. He's very strong."

But now, they were gone.

(3/9 BONUS)

Chapter 120: 120- The Past [2]

Fang Yuan stared at his parents dead body, his feelings numb.

Then he whispered, "You promised you'd come back."

He didn't cry.

Instead, he clenched the jade ring his father had always worn and ran to find his brother.

He found Fang Tian in the courtyard, only eight years old, joyfully swinging a wooden sword, unaware of the storm that had shattered their world.

Fang Yuan walked over, embraced him tightly, and said with a trembling smile, "Tian, look at this ring. Isn't it beautiful?"

His brother beamed in respond, letting go of the wooden sword.

"Yes, Brother! Can I have it?"

Fang Yuan nodded. "Alright then. It's a bit too big, so I'll make it into a necklace for you."

He took the wristband he had made by hand, strung the jade ring through it, and tied it around Fang Tian's neck.

Then he knelt, looked into his brother's eyes, and said softly, "Listen to me closely, Father and Mother... they just said they will be gone for a long trip. Of course they'll come back one day. But until then, you will have to listen to me, is that alright?"

Fang Tian nodded. "Okay."

Fang Yuan never told him the truth about his parents. It was selfish of him.

But at the time, he believed it was right thing to do.

In the days that followed, others stepped up to support them.

His uncle, Fang Chen, fought fiercely to secure resources for their future.

His aunt, Fang Jingyi, quietly slipped him cultivation pills from the alchemy hall, pretending she didn't know he noticed.

And Fang Yuan? He stopped hiding his strength.

He began asserting his presence, cultivating openly, and silencing opposition with results.

Two years passed after that.

He rose to become the next head of the Fang Clan.

The youngest Golden Core realm cultivator the region had seen.

He had not wanted the title.

But without it, he would not have had the authority to claim his parents' legacy or protect what they had left behind.

Time passed and slowly, he began to heal.

Eventually, he also told Fang Tian the truth.

He had braced himself for heartbreak. For anger and even for betrayal.

But his brother simply said, "I already knew, Brother."

That moment became his closure.

But peace never lasted long.

As just when things seemed to have settled.

The same crushing weight.

The same corporate sin. The same broken bodies under indifferent stone.

The same faces of the bereaved, mirroring his own past devastation.

The memories slammed into him, the old grief and the new horror merging into one suffocating wave.

The cries of the mortals weren't just accusations; they were echoes of his own past scream.

The apology wasn't just duty; it was ripped from the core of his being, directed at ghosts both old and new.

He hadn't just failed these miners; he had failed the memory of his father.

He had become the very thing he had raged against.

The internal blame was a vicious spiral: *'Your fault. You assigned her. You trusted her. You didn't check. You failed. Your vigilance failed. Your fault. Your fault. YOUR FAULT.'*

The self-recrimination was a physical ache—a crushing weight on his chest.

Each whispered "I'm sorry" felt like the only breath he could draw.

But apologies alone would never be enough.

Fang Yuan stood before the mourning families, his voice steady but his heart in pieces.

"The clan will compensate you," he vowed.

"Not just with spirit stones, but with everything we can offer, protection, support, dignity. As much as the Fang Clan can give, you shall have. As much as I can give... I will."

And inside, where none could see, a colder vow was forged.

He would hunt down that elder. Personally.

And so he did.

Months bled away.

The families knew only that Clan Head Fang had vanished.

And then, when he returned, it was under a blood-red moon.

He staggered into the clan courtyard, robes torn and dark with gore that wasn't entirely his own.

Cradled protectively against his chest, shielded from the grisly evidence staining his sleeves, was a small, unconscious girl, perhaps ten years old, her face pale and streaked with dirt.

Without ceremony, he entrusted her to his flirty but capable aunt.

The girl woke days later, eyes wide with vacant confusion.

All memory was gone, scoured clean by trauma or perhaps fate.

She remembered neither her name nor her past.

Fang Yuan looked at her silently.

She was the daughter of the traitorous elder he had slain.

That day, he made another vow, quiet, unshakable:

"The sins of the parent are not for the child to bear."

He gave her a new name, a name utterly foreign to this world, a fragment of a life buried deep within his soul:

"Felicia."

It was a clean slate, a promise. A name that didn't originate from this world, a name that would remind him of earth.

A fragile hope wrested from the jaws of vengeance.

Felicia (present) watched, confused and concerned, as Fang Yuan leaned heavily against the wall, his face pale, eyes distant and haunted, lost in that decade-old nightmare that felt as fresh as yesterday's blood.

The cheerful Clan Head was gone, replaced by a man forever shouldering the unbearable weight of two worlds' tragedies and the silent burden of the mercy he had shown the daughter of his enemy.

"Clan Head?" Felicia's soft voice broke the silence.

She tilted her head, brows drawn in confusion. "What are you thinking about so deeply?"

Fang Yuan blinked, the trance fading from his eyes as he turned toward her. "Hm... nothing important."

Then, with a slight shake of his head, he added, "Go find Fang Lian. She should be able to keep you company for a while."

Felicia blinked, then giggled. "Did you forget, Clan Head? You sent her out personally to assist Elder Fang Ruì with the Lin family escort."

Fang Yuan paused.

"...Ah. Right."

He let out a low chuckle, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

After a moment, he reached into his sleeve and pulled out two gold coins, handing them to her.

"Then here's a mission for you. Go buy some snacks but not just for yourself. Get enough for the children in the west district too."

Felicia frowned, her lower lip jutting out in a pout.

"But Clan Head, they always tease me... They say my name weirdly on purpose."

Fang Yuan gave a small, indulgent smile. "Then teach them a lesson. I didn't show you how to cultivate just so you could let bullies win."

She blinked.

"But first," he added, wagging a finger playfully, "try bribing them with food. Win their hearts, then smack them if they cross the line."

Felicia let out a little laugh and gave a mock-salute with a polite bow.

"Understood, Clan Head Fang. I'll complete the mission with honor."

She turned and walked off, her steps light and elegant.

Fang Yuan watched her for a while, his smile fading into something quieter, gentler.

Then he turned on his heel and began heading toward his chambers.

"I feel like I haven't slept in days," he muttered, his voice low and tired, swallowed by the halls as he disappeared into the quiet.