

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

#Chapter 151- Sealed Pact [2] - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 151- Sealed Pact [2]

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The hall was in chaos yet without any of the sound.

Every elder sat frozen, shock etched deep into their faces.

Fang Yuan let out a slow, weary sigh. He had known this response was inevitable.

At least the clan's safety was assured for now. His own safety... well, that was another matter entirely.

He straightened his back, his calm voice cutting through the tense air.

"Alright, Elders. I apologize for the abrupt summons. As compensation, I'll provide each of you with a personal cultivation cave. Of course, it comes along with your own minor resource well to make it complete."

"Oh, that's what it's called? I thought it was a Spirit Well," Fang Chen muttered under his breath.

"So did I," grumbled Fang Joshua, the elder who currently managed the treasury and also the cultivation caves in the eastern ravine.

Fang Yuan continued without missing a beat. "First, I'd like to address what Matriarch Fang has said earlier. She is my wife. It was a hasty marriage... but a vow is a vow. I want you to show her the same respect you show me."

The elders exchanged quick glances, then rose as one, offering their formal bows.

"Greetings, Matriarch Fang Zhaoyue."

Lin Zhaoyue, no, Fang Zhaoyue could barely contain herself.

The words rang in her ears like a victory fanfare. Sharing his name...! Her body trembled in barely contained excitement.

The next step toward becoming truly one with Fang Yuan was complete, one in name.

All that was left... was to be one in bed.

Fang Yuan's tone shifted, cool and deliberate.

"With that out of the way... I'd like to share some important news I recently got told. Fang Tian did not kidnap the Third Princess."

"He didn't?" Fang Mei rose abruptly. Her voice carried no outrage, only a fragile, almost desperate hope.

"No. He did not."

She exhaled heavily, relief pouring from her in an almost physical wave, and sank back into her seat.

Fang Chen hurried to her side, lowering himself beside her with a heavy thump.

"Daughter..." he murmured, his eyes soft as he watched over her.

Fang Yuan's lips curved faintly.

He then swept his gaze through the hall before he spoke, his tone calm yet edged with gravity.

"Fang Tian is currently being framed by the Crown Prince... and is now on the run."

The words had barely left his lips when Fang Jingyi shot to her feet, her chair scraping harshly against the floor.

"What are you waiting for?" she demanded, voice trembling with urgency.

"He's your brother! Are you just going to sit there and do nothing?"

Fang Yuan smiled faintly, a calm at odds with her agitation. "I trust my brother to survive this calamity."

"B—but—"

Her protest faltered, but the storm in her eyes didn't. She had raised both Fang Yuan and Fang Tian as her own sons. Her concern was carved deep into her every movement.

Fang Yuan's voice softened. "Don't worry, Aunt Jingyi."

The title, used in the midst of a formal council was rare.

It made her blink, if only for a heartbeat.

"I have already given my younger brother an artifact that can block any Nascent Soul attack for a period of time," Fang Yuan continued.

"And if he ever truly needs help, he promised me he would send a letter or come in person."

But she didn't look any more reassured.

He leaned forward slightly, his tone steady but laced with quiet certainty. "Aunt Jingyi, Fang Tian is at the Golden Core realm. The people the kingdom has sent after him are also only at the Golden Core realm. If he is in danger, he will come here.

And if, by some desperate chance, the kingdom mobilizes a Nascent Soul realm master to hunt him... we will know immediately. Every Nascent Soul in their ranks is already bound to their duties they cannot abandon without alerting us."

His words fell like a measured promise, but the flicker in Fang Jingyi's eyes made it clear, her heart would not rest until Fang Tian walked through the clan gates again.

Fang Yuan let out a slow sigh, tinged not with frustration, but with quiet amusement as he turned his gaze toward his uncle instead.

"First, I want to congratulate Uncle for reaching the Golden Core realm. You are now our clan's second Golden Core master."

Fang Chen inclined his head, pride gleaming in his eyes.

Turning to the elders, Fang Yuan continued, "I want the clan to keep running at full swing. Let the junior cultivators use the cultivation caves in the eastern ravine."

The elders exchanged glances, clearly unhappy, but none voiced dissent.

Elder Fang Sun finally spoke, "If you say so, Clan Head. The juniors are what shape our clan."

His words were agreeable, but his gaze flicked toward Fang Mei, Fang Bo, Fang Yang, and Fang Rui—the teenage "elders" of the clan.

Fang Yuan understood the hint immediately. He sighed.

"I'll provide every elder with Golden Core pills."

Several throats audibly gulped.

Then Fang Yuan turned to Fang Rui. "I want you to check in on Elder Yin. Can you do that, Elder Rui?"

The little girl nodded gently.

Looks like the kidnapping has taken a toll on her, Fang Yuan thought.

Fang Yuan next turned to Fang Long.

"Elder Long, I want you to head to SeaHeat City. Find a girl named Du Xiao and bring her back to the clan."

The old man inclined his head in acknowledgment, already stepping forward to depart—

"Wait."

The single word from Fang Yuan halted him mid-stride. Elder Long turned back, curiosity flickering in his eyes.

Fang Yuan's gaze slid to the side. "Elder Bo," he called.

The chubby young elder straightened in surprise.

"I want you to accompany Elder Long on this mission. Are you willing?"

"Yes, Clan Head! I'm willing!" Fang Bo practically bounced in place, his round cheeks flushed with excitement.

Fang Yuan gave a slow, approving nod before turning back to Elder Long.

"Elder Long, I want you to use this opportunity to train our young elder. You may take along four willing clan disciples of your choosing to train as well."

Fang Bo piped up again, eyes shining, "Clan Head, do we get merit points for this?"

Chapter 152: 152- Family Token [1]

Fang Yuan blinked, then chuckled softly. "Ah... right. That reminds me. Elder Sun?"

Elder Sun immediately rose from his seat.

"I've done as you instructed," he said. "The family tokens are currently being produced. Here's one from the first batch."

He stepped forward with measured care, placing a token upon Fang Yuan's desk.

Fang Yuan picked it up, feeling the cool, weighty surface against his fingers. Etched into its face was a soaring raven, its wings wrapped in coiling lightning—

the Fang Family insignia, fierce and alive even in still metal.

"Good... appearance-wise," Fang Yuan murmured. Then, channeling a thin stream of qi into the token, he felt the inner workings unfold. Tiny formations bloomed in his perception, so intricate and precise that his breath caught.

He looked up sharply.

"Elder Sun... you built this... alone?"

Elder Sun's eyes widened, and he quickly waved his hands. "Ah—Clan Head! If it's not up to standard, I beg your forgiveness. This loyal servant only did his best—"

Fang Yuan shook his head slowly, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

"No, no... you've got it backward. This is too intricate, too precise—I was honestly shocked. So..." he leaned in slightly, eyes narrowing with curiosity, "how did you pull it off?"

Fang Sun's face lit up, pride swelling in his voice before the question had even fully settled.

"All credit goes to Fang Kathem. I'd been searching for an assistant—someone to clean and make the family tokens reusable. But the moment he arrived, he... changed everything."

He chuckled, shaking his head at the memory.

"At first, I scolded him for meddling. But luckily, I'm a patient and benevolent elder." He puffed up theatrically. "So I let him explain. And it turns out I'm glad I did. The boy taught me about functions I didn't even know existed—concepts I'd never imagined. Before I knew it, I was the assistant, following his lead."

Fang Yuan let out a short laugh, inwardly relieved. Good thing I didn't cut him off.

"This," Fang Sun concluded sincerely, gesturing toward the token, "is entirely his work."

Fang Yuan's smile deepened. "Surely you deserve at least a fraction of the credit."

Fang Sun shook his head without hesitation. "No, Clan Head. I learned more from him in this short time than I have in years. That is reward enough."

Without another word, Fang Yuan raised the token, its polished surface catching the light.

"Once this passes purification through the Ancestral Mirror and is confirmed safe for use, I'll personally award him one hundred thousand merit points for this innovation. And," he added with a spark in his eye, "I have a surprise prepared for him as well."

A ripple of astonishment swept through the room.

One day in the cultivation cave cost a hundred merit points. One hundred thousand meant... decades of cultivation time.

Fang Yuan's gaze returned to Fang Sun. "I've seen elders steal their disciples' accomplishments before. So I'm glad you're willing to admit you're useless."

"Clan Head!" Fang Sun blurted, half-offended, half-flustered and Fang Yuan broke into open laughter, the sound warm and unrestrained.

After a steadying breath, Fang Yuan turned his gaze toward his aunt.

"Elder Jingyi, are you still in contact with Xie Lin?"

Fang Jingyi inclined her head. "Yes, Clan Head. She visits from time to time."

"Good." Fang Yuan shifted to Du Juan, his voice measured yet deliberate. "Du Juan, take the item with you and follow Elder Jingyi. When you meet the senior, tell him the Clan Head, Fang Yuan wishes to call upon the favor owed."

Du Juan bowed crisply.

"Understood." She stepped over to join Elder Jingyi.

Fang Yuan then let his gaze sweep over the elders, lingering on each face.

"To every elder here, those who have worked tirelessly for the clan's success, I want to make something clear. From this month onward, at the end of every month, each of you will receive fifty thousand merit points."

A ripple passed through the room, murmurs cut short, brows knitting.

Shock, suspicion, even disbelief flickered across hardened faces.

Fang Yuan leaned back in his chair, letting the moment stretch just enough for the weight of his words to settle.

"You've all worked yourselves to the bone for this clan's rise," he said, voice smooth but carrying a subtle iron edge.

"If loyalty is expected, so should its reward be undeniable." His gaze swept over them, lingering just long enough on each face to remind them he saw everything.

He gave a faint shrug and a lopsided smile. "I felt it needed to be said."

At his side, Fang Zhaoyue suddenly clutched his arm, her nails digging just enough to be felt.

She leaned in, voice trembling in a whisper.

"H-husband... h-how much longer must I keep silent?"

The words were soft, but the tension in them was palpable.

Fang Yuan's lips curved in the faintest, almost imperceptible smile.

He didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he laid his free hand atop hers, fingers pressing down with a quiet, controlling warmth.

"Just a little bit more if you want to be kissed like before," he murmured back, his tone a private promise.

Her grip tightened for a heartbeat, then relaxed.

Fang Yuan released her hand and addressed the room again as if the exchange had never happened.

"The details will be handled through the administrative hall," he said.

"Your records will be updated by month's end. If there are objections..."

His smile widened, but his eyes didn't match it. "...voice them now, while I'm still in the mood to listen."

A long, heavy pause followed. No one spoke.

Fang Yuan nodded once, satisfied. "Good. Then let's move on."

Fang Chen suddenly raised his hand.

Fang Yuan's brow lifted, the corners of his lips curving in mild amusement. "Alright, Elder Chen, go ahead."

The older man cleared his throat. "Clan Head... do you have any idea what rank those beasts outside are?"

A beat of silence followed.

Fang Yuan blinked. Of all the questions he'd expected, that was not one of them. He stared at his uncle for a moment, as if trying to decide whether this was a genuine inquiry or some elaborate setup for a joke.

Fang Yuan sighed, in exasperating and strangely endearing. "Yes, Elder Chen. I do know their ranks. But if you're volunteering to confirm firsthand, I won't stop you."

Chapter 153: 153- Family Token [2]

The beasts Fang Chen was referring to were none other than the Saberfangs.

Words about the Saberfangs had already spread around town. There were whispers in taverns that four Saberfangs had torn through Phungrei City a long time ago.

Back then, the beasts' ranks were made public for all to gasp at.

Their realms were no secret now, every cultivator in Phungrei still remembered the stench of blood and the screams that followed those four Saberfangs.

At the time, even the cities neighbouring Phungrei City had lived in a haze of fear, each citizen wondering if they would be next to vanish beneath those claws.

After all, the damage the city took was nothing to be scoffed at.

The best city to live in within the northern region instantly went down to the least desired place to live in after that.

And then, just as suddenly, the beasts had vanished. No one saw them again. Whispers faded into uneasy silence.

Yet now, Fang Zhaoyue stood with those very monsters at her peck and call.

Somehow, she had tamed them.

But to openly claim such creatures as tamed?

That wasn't a show of power. That was an invitation, no, a provocation to every wrong kind of attention.

The royal family's bonds with the Gu clan ran deep, especially in the military. And the Fang family... had no shortage of bad blood with them.

On his last visit to the Gu estate, Fang Yuan had not merely visited their city, he had guided the Saberfangs straight into them.

The beasts left ruin in their wake, and the Gu clan was still living amidst unrepaired scars.

And now, to crown that insult, Fang Yuan held both their clan head and his father as captives.

Then there was Gu Xie. The Gu clan head's own daughter, and, more dangerously, the personal disciple of Xiao Bai, sect leader of the Divine Ice Sect.

That sect already had all the justification it needed to move against the Fang family, if word goes out that on top of it all that they had full control of the beast that once attacked Phungrei City, the divine Ice Sect would not hesitate to come for his clan... and the Divine Ice Sect was not a foe one handled lightly.

Which was why, unless the clan itself faced a true and immediate peril, Fang Yuan decided not to deploy the "moving giants."

It wasn't just a restraint but it was also a strategy.

A way to avoid pressing every hostile force into action at once, and to keep ties alive with families the Fang clan could not yet afford to alienate.

And with Fang Yuan's earlier instructions, Fang Zhaoyue staged an encounter that didn't feel out of place.

The Saberfangs would appear on the clan's surveillance as if they were merely wandering beasts passing through.

To make it believable, she'd let the lead Saberfang, a peak Nascent Soul realm brute, slam against the clan barrier a few times before allowing its kin to tear into the soldiers laying down outside.

Fang Yuan hadn't stopped her.

He felt no pang of guilt.

Those soldiers had been plotting against the Fang Family while he was trapped in the Lin Family's northern stronghold.

Fortunately, they were intercepted before any real damage could be done. Now, they lay sprawled where they had fallen, still unconscious.

Good thing my first brother helped... Fang Yuan's lips curved in quiet relief.

There was no proof, no sightings, no whispers, no trace of rumor yet he was certain it had been his sworn brother's handiwork.

Turning back to Fang Chen, Fang Yuan's smile was polite enough to be unsettling.

"Elder Chen," he began, voice warm but laced with amusement, "as much as I admire your... ah, golden core enthusiasm, those beasts out there are Nascent Soul realm. They won't go easy on you."

Then, leaning back slightly, his grin curved into something sharper. "On the other hand, I can hold back."

The small, deliberate giggle that followed was so darkly amused it sent a cold ripple down Fang Chen's spine.

Fang Chen's eyes widened instantly at the suggestion. "Ah—no, no, Clan Head. My knees aren't what they used to be."

Fang Yuan chuckled, the sound warm but edged with amusement. "That's unfortunate, Elder Chen," he said lightly. "But if you're not well, I won't press the matter."

Then, without warning, his gaze snapped to Fang Mei.

"Mei'er," his tone was casual, but the sudden attention carried weight. "Stay behind after the meeting."

"Huh? Oh... okay," the stunted girl replied, blinking in confusion.

The discussion rolled onward, shedding its stunned silence for the grim urgency of strategy.

"For now," Fang Yuan stated, his voice cutting through the low murmur of the elders, "the royal family's gaze is fixed firmly on their border war. They lack the teeth to bite us directly."

A ripple of wary acknowledgment passed through the hall. Everyone understood the unspoken truth: this reprieve was temporary, bought with blood spilled elsewhere.

"Expect a messenger soon," he added, a flicker of cold amusement in his eyes. "Don't disrespect them and make sure to look like a worried citizen who has no clue what it is going on."

The focus shifted, landing heavily on the clan's bruised finances.

Relief, thin but palpable, eased some of the tension in the room.

"Next, let's talk about our trades, the immediate crisis is going to be resolved," Fang Yuan confirmed.

"The Lin Family trade channels will be open to us, free of use." His gaze briefly touched Fang Zhaoyue beside him. "Fully. Immediately."

For now, the royal family would not dare touch the Fang Family, not while their attention was consumed by the conflict with the neighboring kingdom.

Fang Zhaoyue rose next, her voice steady.

She announced that Matriarch Lin Xi, head of the Lin branch in Coldwind City, would relocate to Phungrei City in the north, bringing her people with her to oversee the region.

At last, Fang Yuan brought the meeting to its close. His voice dropped to a measured, almost careless drawl.

"As for the Gu Family... they're heading for ruin." His lips curled faintly. "But it won't be because of us."

Chapter 154: 154- Family Token [3]

The heavy doors thudded shut behind the last elder, leaving only the three of them in the vast, echoing hall: Fang Yuan, the eighteen-year-old Fang Mei radiating nervous curiosity, and her adopted father, Fang Chen, rooted to the spot.

Lin Zhaoyue had slipped away with surprising swiftness, Du Juan and Fang Jingyi in tow, likely already heading to Pill King Tushan's disciple.

Fang Yuan blinked at Fang Chen.

"Uncle? What are you still doing here? Don't you have..." He trailed off, genuinely perplexed. *Did the man forget where the door was?*

"Ah! Wait!" Fang Chen blurted, shifting his weight. His eyes darted between Fang Yuan and Mei. "I thought... I thought you wanted me to tell her. About... her origin."

Fang Yuan's brow furrowed. "Huh? What?"

Genuine confusion painted his features.

Fang Mei's head snapped towards her father, her earlier nervousness replaced by intense, wide-eyed focus.

"You told me," Fang Chen insisted, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "to wait until she was nineteen. She's nineteen today."

Nineteen. The number landed like a forgotten pebble in Fang Yuan's mind.

A memory surfaced: Fang Chen, years ago, fretting and wringing his hands, asking when, oh when was the right time to share the heavy truth with his adopted daughter.

Fang Yuan, buried under clan ledgers and a particularly vexing trade dispute, had waved a dismissive hand. "Nineteen," he'd muttered, plucking the number from thin air simply to end the conversation. *Why nineteen? Why not twenty? Or twenty-five? Or never?*

he silently berated his past, distracted self.

Externally, Fang Yuan's expression smoothed into one of practiced, sage-like recollection. A slight, knowing nod.

"Ah. That." He infused his voice with the warmth of remembered wisdom, hoping it masked the sheer, internal panic of the arbitrary deadline he'd invented.

"Indeed. Of course."

A thick, awkward silence descended.

Fang Chen fidgeted, looking like he wished the marble floor would swallow him.

Fang Mei stared at her father, then at Fang Yuan, her knuckles white where she gripped her robes.

Fang Yuan felt the absurdity of the moment, three people frozen, waiting for someone else to break the tension over this revelation he'd accidentally scheduled.

With a sigh that was part exasperation, part amusement at his own past folly, Fang Yuan finally broke the stalemate.

"Well, go ahead, Uncle Chen." He gestured magnanimously. "Sister Mei is certainly old enough to handle the truth now. As we... discussed." He barely suppressed a wince at the word.

Fang Chen swallowed hard, his throat working.

He turned to Fang Mei, his expression a mask of paternal anguish.

"My... my daughter..." The words emerged thick, laden with unspoken dread.

Fang Yuan rolled his eyes internally.

Gods, man, you're telling her she was found under a cabbage, not sentencing her to execution! Outwardly, he moved with decisive calm.

He stepped forward, grabbed Fang Chen's trembling hand and Fang Mei's cold one, and gently but firmly guided them both down to sit cross-legged on the cool stone floor.

With a casual flick of his wrist, he layered a shimmering, simple silencing formation over the hall's existing wards.

The air hummed faintly, sealing them in a bubble of privacy.

"Right," Fang Yuan said, settling opposite them, his tone now briskly encouraging, masking his lingering internal chuckle at the melodrama.

"Deep breaths, Uncle Chen. Out with it. Let her know the truth." He gave Fang Mei what he hoped was a reassuring look.

Fang Mei, however, had been watching her father's visible distress.

Her voice, when she spoke, was small but surprisingly steady, the opposite of Fang Yuan's push.

"Dad... if it's too hard... you really don't have to. I... I'm very satisfied, truly, that you raised me as your daughter. That's all that matters."

Fang Yuan met her earnest gaze.

He saw the fear beneath the brave words, the desperate need to protect her father from pain even as she yearned for answers.

He said nothing, just held her gaze, a silent acknowledgment of her courage.

The silence stretched, thin and brittle. Fang Chen squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them, fixing his gaze on his daughter.

His voice, when it finally came, scraped like stone on stone.

"My daughter..." He swallowed hard, the sound loud in the stillness. "You have to know."

He forced the words out, each one a battle against an invisible tide of fear.

Fang Mei leaned forward imperceptibly, her wide eyes locked on her father, unblinking.

Fang Yuan remained utterly still beside them, his own breath held.

The air itself seemed to thicken, charged with the unsaid.

Fang Chen drew a shuddering breath.

"Your mother..."

He paused, the word hanging heavy and fragile. "...she is out there. Somewhere. Alive."

The impact was physical.

Fang Yuan jerked as if struck. His head snapped towards Fang Chen, eyes wide with pure, unguarded stun. *Alive? All this time?*

The carefully maintained facade of the Clan Head vanished, replaced by sheer, personal disbelief.

The arbitrary 'nineteen' deadline felt monstrously insignificant now.

Fang Mei, on the other hand didn't move, didn't breathe.

The color drained from her face, leaving her pale as moonlight on snow.

Her wide eyes stared past her father, unseeing, as if the world had suddenly tilted on its axis.

The quiet gasp that finally escaped her was barely a whisper, more felt in her stillness than heard.

Fang Chen flinched at their reactions, his courage crumbling.

He turned desperate eyes towards Fang Yuan, his voice cracking. "Nephew Yuan, I..." He stammered, the words tumbling out in a rush of shame and terror. "I'm sorry. I was afraid. So afraid..."

Fang Yuan felt it then, radiating through their linked hands like twin currents of lightning.

Fang Chen's hand trembled violently in his grasp, knuckles white, slick with sudden sweat, the tremor of a man confessing a decades-long lie that had become his truth.

Fang Mei's hand, clutched in his other palm, was ice-cold, her fine bones vibrating with a shallow, frantic tremor, the shockwave of a foundational belief obliterated in an instant.

Nineteen years. Nineteen years believing one story, only to have its core rewritten.

The physical connection was a lifeline and a burden.

Fang Yuan instinctively tightened his grip, anchoring them both.

He felt the frantic pulse in Fang Mei's wrist, the desperate weakness in Fang Chen's arm.

The polished floor beneath them felt colder, the silence of the hall suddenly immense and suffocating.

Chapter 155: 155- Past Unravel [1]

When Fang Yuan expected some sort of retort, he instead saw Fang Mei step forward and wrap her father in a hug, one hand gently patting his head.

"Dad, don't cry. Don't cry," she said softly. "I'm sure you have your reasons for it. You're the person I love the most, please don't cry."

She smiled as she spoke, but that only made Fang Chen's tears spill faster.

"A-Ah... m-my... d-daughter... I—love... you. I I-love you... the... m-most..." Fang Chen's voice splintered between gasps, every word dragged out as though it cut him to speak.

His breath hitched, shuddering in her ear as he pressed his face into her shoulder, clinging as if afraid she might vanish.

Fang Yuan realized he had never truly seen his uncle break down like this before.

For a man of Fang Chen's temperament to weep so openly... this had to be the heaviest knot in his heart.

Am I the real monster, Fang Yuan wondered bitterly, for making him wait until she was nineteen... for never telling him when, so it happen exactly on the day she was meant to celebrate?

The thought flickered and then he forced himself back to the present.

Fang Chen and Fang Mei were still locked in that embrace, except it was the daughter comforting her father.

After a long, shaky breath, Fang Chen began.

"It... it was... fifteen years ago," he said, his voice trembling.

"I was... traveling... to the northern regions. Phungrei City. At that time... I—I was only at the Qi Condensation stage. I... wasn't even an elder yet."

He sniffled hard, blinking rapidly. "I was... supposed to meet... Fang Yuan's parents there... but... I got lost."

His hands curled into fists, knuckles whitening. "But... fate... would have it... I came across... a tent. And inside... there were... there were many... little girls. Young. S-so young. Kept as... captives."

Fang Yuan's breath caught. His chest tightened, the words in his throat turning to stone.

Beside him, Fang Mei's expression grew sober, her gaze fixed on Fang Chen.

"I... I freed them," Fang Chen said, his voice quivering.

"One by one. But then—" His eyes drifted, unfocused. "Then... I... I heard footsteps."

"I... I was scared," he admitted, the words tumbling out in uneven gasps. "What I was doing was... maybe wrong... but... I... I felt no regret. None. And... and that's when... I saw... y-you."

His voice cracked sharply.

"You... you were lying... on a table... your... your stomach—" His breath hitched, a shudder running through him.

"It had been... cut open... a few... pieces of flesh... r-removed. I... I don't know... what they were working on... but... when I saw the mark..."

His lips trembled violently, tears spilling over. "I... I... I did everything— everything I could... to close your wound."

Then, all at once, he clung to her, voice breaking into raw sobs. "I'm so— so sorry... I couldn't— couldn't hide the scar better... You... you were bullied for it... I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

Fang Mei glanced at Fang Yuan, her eyes silently pleading.

He only smiled faintly. "Family problems... are for family to solve."

She didn't hesitate.

"Brother Fang Yuan, help."

Fang Yuan let out a low, amused breath, the corners of his lips curling in faint acknowledgment.

"Alright, alright... you played the sister card well," he murmured, voice carrying a mix of dry humor and reluctant concession.

His grip on Fang Chen's hand didn't loosen, in fact, it anchored the trembling man like a tether.

Fang Yuan leaned in slightly, his gaze steady, his tone quiet but firm.

"Uncle Chen... take a deep breath for me. Then let it out. Slowly."

Fang Chen's shoulders jerked once, as if the simple instruction had taken him a moment to process.

Then, haltingly, he obeyed.

His chest rose in a shaky swell, the breath rattling as it filled his lungs... and when he exhaled, it escaped in a trembling sigh, his whole frame sagging under the release.

Fang Chen's chest swelled again, slower this time, the intake almost sounding like he was dragging the air through a knot in his throat.

Fang Mei's arms only tightened around him, her small frame pressing against his as if to keep him from falling apart.

He exhaled, long, unsteady, his breath ghosting over her hair. Another breath in.

His fingers twitched against her back, the rough calluses catching in the fabric of her robe.

Out again, softer now, but still trembling.

Fang Yuan watched without interrupting, his grip still locked around Fang Chen's wrist, not restraining, not letting go, keeping the man grounded.

With every breath, Fang Chen's rigid shoulders eased just a fraction, the storm inside him ebbing under the weight of his niece's embrace and Fang Yuan's steady presence.

By the third breath, he wasn't gulping air anymore. He was taking it in, holding it... letting it go.

Fang Chen's breathing had steadied, the ragged edges smoothed by Fang Mei's quiet presence.

Fang Yuan waited, his tone soft when he finally spoke.

"What happened next?"

Fang Chen's gaze dropped to the floor, as if pulling the memory up from somewhere deep and heavy.

"That day..." His voice was low, almost hoarse. "I was just about to finish tending to Mei's little stomach injury. Just the final stitch. Then, three Gu family guards appeared. They were the footsteps I heard."

His jaw tightened. "I panicked. I rushed the work, grabbed her, and ran. I thought they'd come to arrest me for what I'd done..."

He shook his head slowly, a bitter edge curling his mouth. "But I realized, after a few moments, they weren't there to punish me. They were there because it was their camp."

The words hung in the air. Fang Mei's grip on him loosened slightly, her eyes wide.

Fang Yuan's hand remained on Fang Chen's wrist, his thumb pressing once, quietly urging him on.

Fang Chen drew a deep breath before continuing, his eyes narrowing with old resolve.

"After I became an elder, I... used part of my earnings to figure out the truth so I commissioned the Black Widow Society."

Fang Yuan's brows lifted, "You really did go to the Black Market."

The room stilled, as if even the air was listening.

Chapter 156: 156- Past Unravel [2]

Fang Yuan's eyes lingered on Fang Chen for a long moment before he slowly shook his head.

"We'll talk about that matter another day," he said at last, voice calm but carrying weight. "You understand... it's important."

Fang Chen didn't reply. His face was shadowed with quiet sorrow, the kind that made words feel unnecessary.

Fang Yuan turned to Fang Mei. "How about this. Mei'er and Uncle Chen, you two will go and visit your birth mother."

Outwardly, his tone was decisive. Inwardly, however, his thoughts twisted into a knot.

Hah... what a dilemma. I was planning to send Mei'er to lead a group of family descendants to search for clues about Fang Tian.

"Go," Fang Yuan urged with a flick of his hand, shoos them toward the door.

The two hesitated only a moment before leaving, their figures disappearing down the hall.

Fang Yuan watched them go until they were out of sight. Then, with a long exhale, he slumped back into his chair.

Tilting his head back, he stared at the ceiling.

"I'm gonna need a break," he muttered to no one in particular.

He straightened slightly, voice low but firm. "Open system."

[System Status]

Host: Fang Yuan

Realm: Half-Step Hollow Spirit Realm

Root: Heavenly Root

Hidden Physique: None

Martial Techniques:

Swift Step Footwork (Low-grade Black)

Golden Shell Armor (Mid-grade Earth)

Tyrant's Light Sword (low-grade Black)

System Points: 12,400

Faith Points: 8,000

Currently Available Quests: None

Fang Yuan clicked his tongue. "Tsk. If only you'd give me a task every time I faced some ridiculous difficulty and reward me for it. I'd be a whole lot stronger by now. And you'd have a much stronger host."

He gave the air an unimpressed glance. "What a hopeless system..."

Still muttering, he said, "Open the faith system."

A fresh page of light bloomed before him.

[Faith System – Heavenly Mandate Scripture] (Saint Rank)

Current Rank: 0 / 9

Faith Exp Needed for Level 1: 10,000

Current Faith Exp: 6,666 / 10,000

Currently Unlocked Abilities:

Authority Domain (Passive) – Foes within one meter of you will be instantly identified and locked under your cultivation aura.

Fang Yuan blinked. "Since when was this even a function...?"

His brows drew together, a mix of confusion and annoyance. "I didn't... I never even checked!"

He took a slow breath, collecting himself. "From now on, I'm checking the system every single day."

Another section of the page shifted into view.

[Fang Clan]

Head: Fang Yuan (Strongest cultivator in Coldwind City)

Clan's Collective Faith in Their Head: 84% (High)

Daily Generation: 300 Faith Exp, 2,000 Faith Points

Exceptional Believers (Those with faith points above 99):

Fang Chen – Daily generates 500 Faith Exp, 1,000 Faith Points

Fang Yuan stared for a long moment, surprise rippling through him again.

Then, gradually, his expression eased into something more resigned, almost satisfied.

"At least I'm benefiting from this... even if it's unexpected," he murmured.

Pushing himself up from his chair, Fang Yuan straightened his robes with a decisive tug, a faint smirk pulling at the corner of his lips.

Fang Yuan froze mid-step, eyes narrowing as a flicker of realization sparked in his mind.

He scrolled back through the familiar stream of system data.... then stopped.

There it was.

His martial techniques.

Golden Shell Armor... upgraded.

From mid-stage black grade to mid-stage earth grade.

An entire realm jump.

His breath quickened, excitement flaring in his chest.

"It must be..." he murmured, lips curling into a slow grin, "because I added the third form... the one with triple damage return. It has to be."

The other techniques remained untouched, their grades unmoved, but he didn't care.

This was different. This was the system acknowledging his capabilities, by noting that what he had achieved elevated a low grade cultivation to a whole new level.

A major realm upgrade.

He savored the thought like a fine wine, letting it roll through him before another, sharper idea slid into his mind.

"...Ah." His eyes glinted. "Now that I think about it... yes. I should do that."

Fang Yuan instantly turned on his heel, cloak brushing the floor as he strode out of the room.

Eastern Ravine, Cultivation Caves:

"Hey—someone just broke through!"

"Think it's Fang Rui?"

"Maybe. She's about the same age as us and is already in Qi Transformation. She's really talented."

"That's what I keep telling you, earn merit points, buy Bone Marrow Pills. I've never seen those genius buy anything else other than that."

"Oh—shh! The person who breakthrough is coming out!"

A ripple of excitement ran through the waiting crowd.

Most were disciples biding their time in the queue for their own cave slots.

Free moments were rare, and watching a breakthrough was a treat.

All eyes turned toward the mouth of the cave, anticipation thick in the air.

But what emerged was... not who anyone expected.

A man stepped into the sunlight, broad-shouldered, muscles cut like stone under a simple robe, his every movement radiating quiet strength.

His skin glistened faintly from the lingering heat of cultivation.

And he was definitely not a Fang.

"Do you... know him?" someone whispered.

Heads shook, whispers swirling until one voice cut through.

"That's... the Clan Head's sworn brother."

"Him?"

"Yes. Benefactor Da Pang."

The murmurs shifted instantly, respect, awe, curiosity filling the air.

Xiao Pei stretched lazily, feeling his joints pop and his body hum with newfound vitality. *Golden Core Realm. Finally. A step closer to standing beside my sworn brothers as an equal.*

For others, they had to earn merit points for buying pills, and clawing for resources.

But for him...

Fang Yuan had said it was fine. The elders had agreed, it was something the Fang clan owed him for what he'd given them.

Only Xiao Pei knew the truth: how uneasy it felt to receive without giving back.

'If only Fang Yuan didn't have a knack for lying where he got his stuffs from', he thought.

Still, with the help of their generosity, his cultivation surged.

His body felt like tempered steel, every muscle brimming with power.

But as he walked away, he became aware of it, stares..

Dozens of them. More than he'd ever drawn in his entire life.

Frowning, he glanced down... and froze.

His mind screamed in wordless horror.

Who... is this?

Chapter 157: 157- Take a Bath [1]

Fang Yuan stood in his chamber, robes half-unfastened, steamy water already filling the copper tub in the corner.

Just as he dipped a finger to test the temperature, a frantic hammering rattled his door.

Thud Thud Thud Thud!

His first, weary thought flew to Lin Zhaoyue. *That woman... what does she want now?*

But then a desperate, cracking cry sliced through the wood:

"Brother Fang! Brother Fang! Help me, please! I need help!"

Fang Yuan clicked his tongue against his teeth, the sound sharp and irritated.

"Don't tell me she's learned how to mimic voices now... Is she baiting me?" he muttered, a low growl lacing the words.

His gaze narrowed on the empty air ahead, as if willing it to give him a different answer.

'Please... don't let it be her.'

A faint, desperate humor crept into his voice, almost a prayer.

'Let it be Xiao Pei... just Da Pang with some problem I can fix.'

Cautiously, he cracked the heavy door open, just wide enough to peer out.

Whoosh!

A figure blurred past him with impossible speed, a warm draft ruffling his hair.

Fang Yuan recoiled, genuinely startled for a split second, his hand instinctively flexing towards a defensive stance.

Then his eyes snapped into focus, tracking the intruder who now stood panting in the center of his room.

Broad shoulders strained against the fabric of a simple robe.

Muscles, hard and defined as river-smoothed stone, shifted visibly beneath the damp, clinging cloth.

Skin glistened with a sheen of exertion or perhaps residual cultivation heat... and the robe itself...

Recognition slammed into Fang Yuan like a physical blow.

That robe... It was undeniably Xiao Pei's.

The familiar, slightly-too-short hem, the worn stitching near the shoulder.

Instinct took over.

A wave of potent qi erupted from Fang Yuan, invisible but crushing, pinning the intruder flat against the polished floorboards with a heavy thump.

"*Urkl!*" came a strangled gasp.

Fang Yuan stepped closer, eyes narrowed to slits, radiating an aura of cold authority.

He leaned down, scrutinizing the face pressed against the wood.

Sharp jawline? Defined cheekbones? This... this wasn't right.

Silence stretched, thick and heavy, broken only by the muffled gasps of the pinned man and the distant slosh of bathwater.

"Brother Fang..." the man managed to wheeze out, voice strained but painfully familiar beneath the panic, "...it hurts..."

Fang Yuan flinched, the oppressive qi vanishing instantly as if snuffed out.

The man on the floor sucked in a ragged breath, pushing himself up onto trembling arms.

Fang Yuan just stared.

His gaze traveled slowly, incredulously, from the sweat-dampened hair plastered to a sculpted forehead, down the corded neck, across the impossibly broad and now lean shoulders, to the tapered waist where the simple robe hung loosely.

Disbelief warred with dawning, utterly absurd comprehension on his face.

"You?" Fang Yuan finally breathed, the word barely more than an exhale.

His eyes swept the man from head to toe, as if trying to reconcile two impossible images.

"You're Xiao Pei? The Da Pang I know?"

His voice rose, sharp with disbelief. "Did you... did you shed your skin or something?"

Fang Yuan studied his sworn brother's startled expression for a long beat, then straightened, face utterly deadpan.

"Brother Da Pang," he said gravely, "you can be honest with me. Are you... a snake?"

The mental image was jarring, impossible.

Barely a week ago, his sworn brother had been a mountain of cheerful flesh, a man whose very presence required wider doorways.

Not a week had passed since Fang Yuan had last seen his good brother.. who, no offense, had been built more like a prize pig than a cultivator.

Every last ounce of that bulk... gone. Overnight.

And now, here he stood: a tall, broad-shouldered, downright handsome man. Who wouldn't be shocked?

It was like this.. imagine you had an eight-hundred-kilo friend.

One weekend, you meet up to play some games or catch a movie.

You part ways, and, take note, at that very moment, your friend is still built like a walking mountain.

Then Monday rolls around.

You walk into class... and there he is: eighty kilos, he stood at 1.9 metres tall, looking fit as an ox, grinning like it wasn't something to be surprised about.

Could you imagine that?

Of course you couldn't.... you would have to start by finding a friend first.

The chamber hung thick with stunned silence.

A full minute crawled by, broken only by the frantic *drip drip* of condensation falling from the copper tub's rim into the steaming water.

Fang Yuan's gaze, sharp as honed steel, never left Xiao Pei's transformed figure.

Finally, the single, bewildered word clawed its way out of his throat, low and rough:

"How?"

Xiao Pei shuffled his massive, unfamiliar feet, the simple robe suddenly feeling like a stranger's skin.

He ran a hand, a lean, muscular hand, through damp hair, a gesture utterly alien on this new body. "I... I don't know," he stammered, genuine confusion widening his eyes.

Fang Yuan stared, the gears of his mind grinding against the impossible.

Then, he snapped back into place. "Alright," he declared, his voice regaining its usual command. "Speculation is useless. We'll have Doctor Mu examine you thoroughly."

Relief washed over Xiao Pei's newly defined features. "Yes! Yes, let's do that! Immediately!"

He took an eager step forward, the movement surprisingly fluid for someone who once moved like a landslide.

Fang Yuan tilted his head, a flicker of curiosity cutting through his shock.

"Brother Da Pang," he asked slowly, "you... don't want to be like this?" He gestured vaguely at Xiao Pei's imposing, heroic physique.

Xiao Pei paused. He looked down at his hands, turning them over as if seeing them for the first time.

He patted his flat, hard stomach, then ran palms over the broad planes of his chest beneath the robe.

A thoughtful frown creased his brow. He looked back at Fang Yuan, his expression earnest, almost sheepish.

"I suppose... it's not so bad... objectively. But..." He trailed off, searching for the right words.

"But?" Fang Yuan prompted, genuinely perplexed.

Xiao Pei met his gaze squarely, a flicker of the old, familiar warmth in his eyes despite the unfamiliar vessel.

"But... it doesn't feel like me, Brother Fang. I miss the solid ground. I miss... well, me. I still prefer the real me."

Chapter 158: 158- Take a Bath [2]

Fang Yuan blinked. A slow, unexpected smile spread across his face.

The smile softened into something fond and familiar.

"Alright, first things first. Let's get Doctor Mu to figure out what happened. Then we'll figure out the rest. Deal?"

Xiao Pei beamed, the expression dazzling on his new face. "Deal! Let's go now, Brother Fa—"

Whoosh!

Before the words were fully out, Fang Yuan moved with startling speed and purpose.

He planted a hand firmly on Xiao Pei's solid chest, still marveling internally at the unyielding muscle beneath his palm and pushed.

"Wha—?!" Xiao Pei yelped, stumbling backwards like a felled tree caught off guard.

His arms pinwheeled for balance, the simple robe flapping around his suddenly awkward limbs.

He hit the doorframe with a soft thud, eyes wide as saucers, genuine alarm flashing in them.

"Brother Fang! Brother Fang! Did I do something? What! What are you doing?!" His voice pitched higher, laced with confusion and a touch of fear.

He clutched at the doorframe, peering back into the room like a confused, oversized puppy banished from its bed.

Fang Yuan stood framed in the doorway, one hand still on the heavy wood.

His expression was serene, almost amused. "Alright," he stated, calm cutting through Xiao Pei's panic.

"I need to take a bath first. You," he pointed a finger directly at Xiao Pei's nose, "should also go take a bath. You're gleaming like a freshly oiled statue and you smell like shit right now. We can't meet Doctor Mu reeking like sweat. Go clean up. I'll meet you at the infirmary shortly."

With that, and before Xiao Pei could muster another sputtered protest, Fang Yuan firmly shut the door.

The heavy thunk of the bolt sliding home echoed in the hallway.

Inside the chamber, Fang Yuan let out a long, slow breath that seemed to deflate him.

He walked back to the copper tub, the steam now curling thickly in the air.

Without ceremony, he shed his half-unfastened robes, letting them pool on the floor.

The near-scalding water finally leached the tension from Fang Yuan's muscles.

He leaned back, eyes closed, steam wreathing his face.

He scrubbed briskly, clearing his mind as much as his skin.

Minutes later, refreshed and dressed in a simple indigo robe pulled carelessly from his closet, he strode out, the lingering warmth of the bath a stark contrast to the cool stone corridors of the estate.

He emerged into the sun-dappled outer courtyard, a place usually alive with the disciplined drills of junior disciples.

Today, however, a different kind of energy crackled in the air.

A dense, giggling throng of young Fang clan girls, disciples barely into their teens, had formed a tight, buzzing circle near the practice dummies.

Their whispers were high-pitched, excited, punctuated by stifled squeals.

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow.

Curiosity piqued, he approached.

The moment his presence registered, a ripple went through the crowd.

Like startled sparrows, they parted instantly, pressing themselves respectfully against the courtyard's flowering shrubs or the weapon racks.

A chorus of breathy greetings fluttered towards him:

"Clan Head!"

"Greetings, Clan Head!"

"Honored Clan Head!"

Their eyes, however, kept darting back towards the center of their former circle.

And there he stood.

Xiao Pei.

Bathed, yes, and wearing fresh clothes looking profoundly uncomfortable.

He seemed to be trying to shrink his imposing new frame, shoulders hunched slightly, hands clasped awkwardly behind his back.

A faint flush painted his newly defined cheekbones.

He looked less like a triumphant Golden Core cultivator and more like a magnificent stag cornered by overly enthusiastic hounds.

"Brother Fang," Xiao Pei blurted out, his voice a mixture of relief and profound embarrassment. He shifted his weight, avoiding eye contact.

"You're... uh... late." The attempt at casualness was utterly betrayed by the pink tinge creeping up his neck.

Fang Yuan couldn't suppress a low chuckle.

He made a subtle, sweeping gesture with one hand, an unspoken command.

The girls, though visibly reluctant, their gazes lingering longingly on Xiao Pei's sculpted form, dared not disobey.

With disappointed sighs and backward glances, they melted away into the garden paths, leaving the two men alone in the suddenly quiet courtyard.

Fang Yuan turned his full attention to Xiao Pei, a slow, knowing smirk spreading across his lips.

"Well, well, Brother Da Pang," he drawled, his voice rich with amusement. "Seems the new appearance came with... unforeseen benefits. You're quite the spectacle now. Popular, even."

Xiao Pei flinched as if struck. The flush deepened to crimson, spreading down to his collarbones.

He wrung his hands, a gesture so incongruous with his powerful new physique it was almost comical. "Brother Fang, please," he pleaded, his voice tight with distress.

"This is no joking matter! It's... it's terrifying! What..."

He swallowed hard, genuine fear flickering in his eyes. "...What if... what if I managed to... to attract a lady's attention like this? And then..."

By the time he finished, he was breathing hard, shoulders tense, looking utterly mortified at his own imagined disaster.

Fang Yuan just stared at him for a beat... then nodded slowly. "Right. Well then. Shall we?"

"Yes!" Da Pang blurted, seizing the chance to move on.

Fang Yuan turned and led the way until they arrived at a worn, weather-beaten thatch hut.

Da Pang frowned. "Brother Fang... don't you think Senior Mu deserves a better house?"

Fang Yuan shook his head. "Nah. He prefers this place, and I don't mind either. Trust me, this is one of the most protected spots in the entire Fang Family estate."

He clicked his tongue inwardly. *Tch. Safer than my own chambers, for sure... especially now that Lin Zhaoyue's moved in.*

He pushed the door to the thatched hut open—

BANG!

A metal bowl shot past his head like a missile, followed by a furious shout.

"Pervert!"

Off to the side, Xiao Pei froze in perfect, horrified silence. Fang Yuan, unfazed, slammed the door shut with a sharp thunk.

"What in the hell..." he muttered, rubbing his temple. "Is everyone taking a bath today?"

Chapter 159: 159- Doctor Mu's Place.

Inside the Thatched Hut:

The thick wooden door muffled the outside world, leaving only the faint scent of herbs and the crackle of a small brazier.

Fang Yuan sat cross-legged directly on the well-swept packed earth floor while his expression was a mixture of exasperation and weary patience.

Before him, was Fang Lian, prostrated so low that her forehead literally just touched the ground.

Her short, practical hair fanned out slightly, and her shoulders trembled with the fervor of her apology.

"Master! This unworthy disciple begs forgiveness! To raise a hand, to throw weapons at you... it's utterly unforgivable! Please punish this foolish, impulsive disciple of yours!" Her voice was thick with remorse.

Fang Yuan sighed, the sound soft in the quiet hut. He waved a dismissive hand.

"Get up, Lian. Enough groveling. It was my fault barging in without warning. Anyone would react poorly to an intruder during a middle of taking a bath."

He offered a small, wry smile. "It was my mistake, not yours so you shouldn't be the one apologising here."

Fang Lian lifted her head slightly, her eyes wide and earnest.

"No, Master! It doesn't matter! A master is like a father for life! You can't be replaced! I should have my full faith in you, recognized your presence instantly! My failure was in doubt, even for a second!" Her voice cracked with conviction.

Fang Yuan shook his head again, a fond yet slightly tired gesture. "Lian. If your master tells you to stand up, then stand up. Right now."

Instantly, like a released spring, Fang Lian shot to her feet.

She stood ramrod straight, hands clasped tightly behind her back, chin slightly lifted, though her eyes remained downcast respectfully.

"See?" Fang Yuan said, his tone softening. "Not that hard, is it?"

Fang Lian gave a quick, sharp nod. "No, Master."

A brief silence settled, filled only by the brazier's pops.

Fang Yuan's gaze, sharp and observant despite his relaxed posture, scanned her. His eyes lingered almost imperceptibly near her midsection.

"So," he asked, his voice deceptively casual, "how's your injuries? Does it still hurts?"

"I'm doing much better now, Master! Thank you!" Fang Lian replied promptly, her voice bright. "Truly! The pain is minimal."

Fang Yuan hummed, noncommittally. "If you say so."

Another beat of silence stretched, thicker this time.

Fang Yuan leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping to a near whisper that still carried clearly in the small space. "It still hurts, doesn't it?"

Fang Lian flinched.

"No! No, Master! I'm all fine! You can trust me! Here," she insisted, her hands flying to the neat bandages visible beneath the simple tunic tied at her waist.

Fingers fumbled to untie the knot. "You can see for yourself, it's healing cleanly—"

Thwack!

Fang Yuan's knuckles rapped quickly but not harshly against the top of her head.

"Stop that, you little witch!" he chided, though the worry was clear beneath the gruffness.

He lowered his hand. "Where's Doctor Mu, anyway? Is he also taking a bath?"

Fang Lian rubbed her head sheepishly. "Ah, no, Master. After tending to my wounds this morning, he... he said he had a strong feeling you'd be paying a visit today. So he packed a small bag, said he was going outside the estate walls to 'eat and enjoy the sunshine'... and that he'd stay there for the day." She winced slightly, anticipating his reaction.

Fang Yuan blinked.

Once. Twice.

His mouth opened... then shut again.

"...He's avoiding me?"

"What... what?" The words slipped out before he could stop them, pure disbelief robbing him of anything more coherent.

And oh, the nerve of it, he wasn't even subtle about it!

Fang Yuan could only stare, struck dumb by the sheer pettiness of this old man.

He slowly turned his head, his gaze shifting to Xiao Pei, who had been standing rigidly near the doorway like a particularly handsome, nervous statue throughout the entire exchange.

Fang Yuan took in the man's wide, panicked eyes fixed on him.

A slow, deliberate smile spread across Fang Yuan's face.

"Well, Brother Da Pang," Fang Yuan sighed dramatically, spreading his hands.

"Guess you get to stay strikingly, muscle-boundly, fangirl-magnet handsome for your lifetime now. Doctor Mu's officially on a Holiday."

Xiao Pei jolted as if electrocuted. "Wha—? What do you mean?!"

The statue came to life, hands clenching at his sides. "Brother Fang! Don't jest! What's gonna happen to me?!"

Fang Yuan leaned back, enjoying the performance.

"It's the curse!" he declared gravely, though a spark of humor danced in his eyes.

"Once the Curse of Phasa takes hold, unless you undo it within the next twelve hours... well..."

He gestured expansively at Xiao Pei's entire form. "...You'd be stuck like that. Forever."

"Curse?!" Xiao Pei's voice cracked. Panic radiated off him in waves. He took a step forward, eyes wild. "Brother Fang! What... what is this 'Curse of Fasa'?! How do we break it?! It hasn't been twelve hours yet, right?! RIGHT?!"

Fang Yuan realized he had pushed things a bit too far but somehow, explaining himself felt even more troublesome.

So, with the smoothness of a practiced liar, he spun another thread of nonsense.

"Alright, alright, Brother Da Pang. Sorry not, the cure for the curse exists. It's rare to achieve, sure, but not impossible. Once you reach the Hollow Spirit Realm, you can

change your appearance at will even if the curse has taken root deep inside. Don't panic, you'll be back to normal in no time."

Xiao Pei's knees gave out, and he slumped to the floor.

"In no time? Brother Fang, have you ever met someone who reached the Hollow Spirit Realm? Forget meeting, have you even read about them in a book? No right? I'm stuck like this until I die!"

Fang Yuan's gaze drifted to Fang Lian. He was... baffled.

Back in his old world, people were desperate to be taller, fitter, more handsome yet here, he'd stumbled into the exact opposite.

And strangely enough... a part of him thought he could understand why. Which only made the whole thing more puzzling.

Fang Lian, feeling the weight of his stare but having no idea what ran through his mind, blinked in confusion.

"Master?" she asked softly.

Chapter 160: 160- Find the One.

Fang Lian, feeling the weight of his stare but having no idea what ran through his mind, blinked in confusion.

"Master?" she asked softly.

Her voice tugged him back to the present, breaking the odd spell of his thoughts.

Fang Yuan blinked, shaking off the momentary bewilderment at Xiao Pei's despair over becoming handsome.

Right. Different world, different priorities.

"It'll be fine, Brother Da Pang," Fang Yuan said, his voice regaining its usual calm authority.

He clapped a hand on the despondent man's shoulder.

"Look at it positively. Here, let me tell you something." He gestured vaguely at Xiao Pei's form. "The current you? This is you after metamorphosis."

Xiao Pei sniffled, wiping his nose with the back of his hand, a gesture jarringly incongruous with his sculpted features. "M-Meta... what? What's a 'metamorphosis'?"

Fang Yuan adopted a patient, explanatory tone. "It's a natural process. Think of it like... a caterpillar."

He held up his hands, miming something small and wriggly. "It wraps itself in a cocoon, sleeps for a while, and then..." He spread his hands wide, dramatically.

"...it emerges as a beautiful butterfly! A complete makeover! That's you right now, Da Pang. You've shed your old... uh... cocoon."

Silence fell in the hut.

Fang Lian tilted her head, her brow furrowed in intense concentration, clearly trying to picture a hairy worm turning into a fluttering insect.

Xiao Pei just stared blankly, the concept failing to penetrate his fog of misery.

Fang Lian spoke first, her voice hushed with realization.

"Master..." she ventured slowly, "...you're making up words again, aren't you?"

Fang Yuan's carefully constructed patient expression faltered for a split second.

He cleared his throat. "I am not 'making up words,' Lian. It's a perfectly valid... natural phenomenon."

Fang Yuan deflected, turning back to Xiao Pei. "The point is, Da Pang, this new form is just another stage. An improved stage. Embrace it! Think of the advantages!"

"Advantages?" Xiao Pei looked at Fang Yuan, his expression a mix of misery and utter disbelief. "What advantages?"

Fang Yuan leaned forward, trying to inject enthusiasm. "Yes! The advantage of being handsome! Strength, presence, the way people look at you..."

"But I feel fake," Xiao Pei whispered, the words raw and honest, cutting through Fang Yuan's attempted pep talk.

He looked down at his large, powerful hands as if they belonged to someone else. "This isn't me, Brother Fang. It feels... wrong. Like I'm wearing someone else's skin."

Fang Yuan went silent. He couldn't argue with the deep-seated discomfort radiating from his friend.

The "metamorphosis" angle had failed, the "advantages" were clearly not advantages to Xiao Pei, and the Hollow Spirit Realm was a cruel reality check. He was momentarily at a loss.

DING!

Suddenly, a shimmering rectangle of pure golden light materialized in the air directly before Fang Yuan's eyes.

[New Quest Arrived: Get a girlfriend for your brother Xiao Pei.]

[Reward: Access to the weaponry]

[Note: It's a sub quest and can be declined.]

Fang Yuan's eyes locked onto the third line: Access to the weaponry.

His breath hitched. *A weaponry? Just when he thought he felt like he needed an upgrade for a weapon? This is too easy.*

Before conscious thought could intervene, a single, explosive word burst from his lips:

"YES!"

The shout echoed in the small hut, startlingly loud. Fang Lian jumped, hand instinctively going to her bandaged stomach.

Xiao Pei snapped his head up, wide-eyed, momentarily shocked out of his despair by the sheer, unexpected volume and fervor.

Fang Yuan froze. He could feel two pairs of bewildered eyes burning into him.

He quickly schooled his features, smoothing away the frantic excitement, replacing it with an expression of calm authority.

He cleared his throat, straightening his robe with unnecessary precision. "Ahem. As I was saying..." he began, his voice forcibly level, "...being handsome comes with a lot of advanta—..."

He trailed off as the air in the place hung heavy with unspoken questions.

Fang Lian blinked rapidly, exchanging a confused glance with Xiao Pei.

Xiao Pei just stared, his earlier misery temporarily replaced by pure bafflement.

Neither dared to ask.

The sheer incongruity of their usually composed Clan Head shouting "YES!", followed by this immediate, transparent act of pretending it never happened... it was too strange, too jarring.

Fang Yuan, on the other hand, turned his attention back to the screen in front.

His eyes scanned the glowing golden notification.

Access to the weaponry.

With a thought, he mentally commanded: **Accept!**

To be thorough, he raised a hand and quickly tapped the air where the "Accept" prompt hovered in his vision.

This action, unfortunately, looked utterly bizarre to the onlookers.

Fang Lian gulped audibly, her eyes wide with alarm.

She leaned slightly towards Xiao Pei, whispering in a trembling voice, "Senior Xiao... is Master... possessed?"

Xiao Pei had no words. He stared at Fang Yuan tapping empty space with focused intensity.

He'd never seen Brother Fang act like this, not after facing demonic beasts, not even during clan crises.

Panic, different from his own body horror, began to bubble within him. *Was the idea of me wishing to be fat instead of this... that crazy? Did Brother Fang snap? Did my complain actually cause his mental breakdown? Oh heavens, this is probably all my fault!*

Just as Xiao Pei was spiraling into a vortex of misplaced guilt, Fang Yuan lowered his hand, the phantom notification dismissed.

He turned to Xiao Pei, his expression now one of unnerving determination, completely devoid of his earlier awkwardness or the bizarre excitement.

His voice cut through the tense silence, calm yet carrying the weight of an immutable decree.

"Alright, Brother Da Pang," Fang Yuan stated, his gaze locking onto Xiao Pei's terrified eyes.

"We'll get you a girlfriend. One way or the other. By hook or by crook. You will be getting one."

It wasn't a suggestion. It wasn't a question seeking his opinion or consent.

It was an undisputed statement of fact.

The sheer, unexpected absurdity of the proclamation, combined with its absolute certainty, momentarily short-circuited both Xiao Pei's guilt and Fang Lian's fear of possession.