

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

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Chapter 41: Secrets.

The scent of crushed herbs still clung faintly to Lian'er's sleeves as they approached the guest wing of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion.

Soft light spilled from the tall, paper-screened windows, casting gentle shadows over the stone path.

The courtyard was quiet, deliberately so.

Fang Yuan had instructed the servants to avoid this section of the residence until further notice.

Felicia waited at the door, hands folded in front of her. She bowed immediately upon seeing them.

"Master Fang Yuan. Doctor Mu. The girl is inside, resting. Her condition stabilized somewhat after the elixir you gave, but her fever hasn't dropped."

Doctor Mu nodded without pause, already stepping inside with the sure-footedness of a man who had walked through too many thresholds between life and death.

The room within was warm, quiet and dimly lit. A single lantern glowed on the table beside the bed where the girl lay.

She had been changed into clean robes, her wounds hastily bandaged, her face still pale beneath the linen.

Lian'er stepped forward without a word, gently placing her satchel on the side table and beginning to unpack gauze, tinctures, and salves.

Doctor Mu moved to the bed, examining her with firm, professional detachment.

He took her wrist, felt her pulse, then peeled back the cloth to examine her injuries.

"Deep lacerations... and there's signs of internal bruising," he muttered, pressing lightly across her side.

"Her meridians are damaged, but not severed. Remarkable she even made it this far."

Fang Yuan stood a short distance from the bed, arms crossed loosely, watching in silence.

"She may have been running for days," he said quietly. "Found her collapsed on the outer path."

Doctor Mu raised a brow. "Cultivator?"

"Nascent Soul Realm... or she was, once. Her core's fractured."

There was a beat of silence.

A long one.

Doctor Mu's hands froze mid-check. His bushy brows twitched.

Lian'er, in the middle of unrolling bandages, accidentally pulled the entire bundle off the table. It hit the floor with a soft thud.

"...Nascent Soul?" Doctor Mu repeated slowly, as if trying to make sure his ancient ears hadn't betrayed him.

Fang Yuan nodded casually. "Mm."

The old doctor stared at him, then at the unconscious girl, then back at Fang Yuan.

He blinked once.

Twice.

Then doctor Mu made a sound somewhere between a cough and a squeak.

Lian'er straightened up slowly, trying very hard not to show the way her hands had started trembling. "She... looks younger than me..."

Fang Yuan shrugged. "She might be. Or she might just be cursed with a baby face. Who knows? Just treat her as best you can."

"Yes, yes, of course." Doctor Mu snapped back into motion.

Lian'er had already unrolled a fresh sheet of bandages, hands moving gently but efficiently.

Fang Yuan's gaze swept over her in passing.

Though her eyes remained focused on the patient, there was a subtle change in her movements, more deliberate now.

Her breath came slower, steadier, anchored by the act of healing.

In caring for another, she had tucked her feelings away.

"Her wounds aren't infected, which is a miracle," Doctor Mu muttered. "Lian'er, spirit salve."

"Yes, master."

She moved to the bedside, dabbing the salve gently across the girl's shoulder.

The injured woman stirred faintly at the touch, but didn't wake.

Doctor Mu looked toward Fang Yuan again.

"She'll live. But I'd advise no sudden qi flow through her meridians for at least a month. If her core doesn't stabilize, she'll never cultivate again."

Fang Yuan nodded once. "Do what you can."

"Of course." The old man glanced at him with a twinkle.

Once Lian'er finished, she straightened and reached for the nearby tray, careful not to jostle the bandages.

Just then, the doors flew open with all the subtlety of a charging bull.

Fang Jingyi burst in like a gust of wind wearing boots, her sleeves fluttering and hair wild from her rushed journey.

A smudge of black soot streaked across one cheek, and her robe was dusted with ash.

"What's this I hear about you bringing home a girl?!" she demanded, eyes wide with scandal and curiosity. "Fang Yuan, you sly fox!"

Fang Yuan, looked up in mild horror. "Aunt—?"

"Ah, there you are, hubby!" she beamed the moment she spotted him, skipping over.

Fang Lian, who had just finished laying out medicinal salves beside the bed, nearly dropped the entire tray. Her eyes flicked to Fang Yuan in visible alarm.

Fang Yuan froze.

"Don't listen to her," he said immediately, waving a hand like a man trying to dispel a very specific curse. "She's joking. She always jokes. We're aunt and nephew. There's no way I'm her husband. You understand right?"

Fang Jingyi smirked, brushing a loose lock of hair from her cheek, the soot doing nothing to hide her naturally delicate features. "Aww, I only said 'hubby,' not 'husband.' You want me that badly, little Yuan?"

Fang Yuan stared at her like a man watching a mountain collapse in slow motion.

He wanted to cry.

But then, a sudden realization struck him.

...Wait. He blinked. She's probably the only one in this whole house who doesn't think I'm gay... hey that still doesn't justify whatever she's doing!

Jingyi grinned wider, clearly enjoying the chaos.

She bounced closer, peering around him toward the patient on the bed.

"So, little Yuan," she cooed, folding her hands behind her back with mock innocence, "who's the girl? I'm dying to see what my little brother's taste in women is like. Where did you two meet?"

Fang Yuan, now visibly exhausted, pressed a hand to his forehead. "Aunt... I'm not your 'little brother' either. And she's just someone I brought it because I was curious."

She ignored him completely, skipping forward with a twinkle in her eye and a giggle in her throat.

Fang Yuan sighed, long and soul-weary as Jingyi began humming to herself, casually inspecting the unconscious girl on the bed.

And then he noticed Fang Lian was watching him.

Her expression was unreadable at first, but her hands moved before her mouth did. She made a simple gesture, subtle but clear.

She pointed two fingers at her eyes, then at Jingyi... and then at him.

Her brow lifted in amused accusation.

So... you two?

Fang Yuan straightened, aghast. "No. It's not like that. I just said—"

But she was already turning away, waving him off with a knowing smile.

"Ah, right. Got it. Say no more. I'll keep your secret," she said lightly, carrying the tray in her hand as she headed toward the door.

"You can trust me."

He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

Words failed him.

Fang Yuan watched her disappear into the corridor with a bounce in her step and that infuriatingly calm smile on her face.

He gave up.

Completely.

He caught a last glimpse of her face before she left.

She had a smile on, clearly not the fake one from earlier, but a genuine one.

After her earlier silence, after the painful encounter with Fang Tian and Fang Mei, it was the first genuine smile she had worn during the whole night.

Fang Yuan exhaled and allowed himself a quiet, crooked smile of his own.

"...Well. At least someone's feeling better."

Chapter 42: Fire [1]

Doctor Mu fingers moved with calm precision, wrapping a fresh strip of gauze over the girl's wrist as he spoke in a dry, matter-of-fact tone.

"Young lady. If you're going to chatter, do it outside. I need silence while I work."

Fang Jingyi froze mid-step, one hand halfway raised as if she had been about to point at something.

Her lips parted to reply but then she stopped.

A heartbeat passed.

And then she lowered her hand.

"...Understood, Doctor Mu," she said quietly, nodding once.

She didn't say another word.

Fang Yuan blinked in surprise. He turned to glance at her, Fang Jingyi, whose mouth usually ran faster than most sword strikes.... now standing perfectly still, like a scolded child.

Fang Yuan leaned slightly closer to the old physician, voice hushed with honest admiration.

"Doctor Mu," he whispered, "...you're amazing."

The old man merely grunted, focused on adjusting a splint. "Hmph. About time someone noticed."

Fang Yuan wisely kept the rest of his awe internal, lips twitching as he suppressed a laugh.

Not even high-level cultivators could tame Fang Jingyi but a mortal doctor?

Apparently, all it took was one stern sentence and a lifetime of earned respect.

After all, Doctor Mu wasn't just anyone.

Years ago, when Fang Jingyi's father, his grandfather, lay dying of a rare illness, it had been this same quiet old man who had reversed the impossible with a handmade tonic and a week of sleepless care.

Since then, their family owed him more than gratitude.

And clearly, even Fang Jingyi hadn't forgotten.

She stood back respectfully, not another peep escaping her lips.

Fang Yuan gave the unconscious girl one last glance, then turned to leave.

"I need to return to my office," he said casually over his shoulder.

Jingyi's lips curled upward almost instantly. "Alright, alright. Work hard, dear husband. Our baby's future depends on it~"

Fang Yuan nearly tripped.

He didn't turn back, just waved a hand stiffly and muttered under his breath, "I'm not your husband... and there is no baby... stop spreading lies."

But Jingyi was already giggling behind him, clearly pleased with herself.

Shaking his head, Fang Yuan picked up his pace, robes swishing as he fled the scene with as much dignity as he could muster.

The quiet hush of the pavilion returned as he stepped back into the main estate.

Evening had deepened further, and the halls were bathed in soft lantern light.

He made his way to his office, the scent of ink and old parchment greeting him like an old companion.

Stacks of fresh parchment waited neatly by his desk.... all requiring his attention.

With a sigh, he rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

Meanwhile, in the quiet of the treatment room, time passed gently.

Doctor Mu, after a final check of the patient's pulse and a firm reminder not to move her for the next few hours, packed his tools.

His joints cracked softly as he straightened.

Fang Lian bowed deeply to him. "Thank you, Master."

He gave her a rare, approving nod. "You did well today. Walk with me."

She smiled faintly and followed without hesitation, offering a polite wave behind her. "Take care, Miss Jingyi."

Fang Jingyi, seated near the corner with one leg tucked beneath her, waved lazily in return. "Bye-bye, Lian'er. Bye-bye, Uncle Mu~"

Doctor Mu didn't even glance back, only grunted in acknowledgment.

Once the door slid shut behind them, the room was quiet again.

Fang Jingyi slowly stood and stretched, arms arching overhead.

Then she turned her gaze toward the still-unconscious girl on the bed.

She walked over with casual grace, her feet barely making a sound against the polished floor.

Her expression, for once, was unreadable.

She stood there for a while, arms folded, head tilted slightly as if studying a rare painting rather than a wounded stranger.

"...So you're the one who made Little Yuan carry a woman into the house," she murmured softly.

The girl didn't stir.

Her breathing had steadied, but her face remained pale, lips faintly parted in exhausted sleep.

Jingyi crouched beside the bed, propping her chin on one hand.

"You don't look like much. No offense," she said.

She tilted her head again, this time with a fainter smile.

"But still... What is it about you, I wonder?"

Her voice was quieter now, not teasing, just curious.

"There's something there. Something familiar about you. I can feel it." She reached out but stopped just short of touching the girl's hand.

Then, with a breath, she stood up again, brushing invisible dust from her sleeves.

"...Guess I'll figure you out sooner or later," she muttered with a grin.

And with that, she turned, strolling to the window where the moonlight spilled softly across the floor, bathing the room in silver hues.

Fang Jingyi leaned lazily against the window frame, chin resting in her palm as she gazed out at the peaceful night.

Her eyes drifted casually to a distant glow at the edge of the estate grounds.

Flickering orange light danced against the rooftops.

"Hmm?" she blinked. "Is that... firelight?"

The corners of her lips curled upward.

"Eh? A festival? This late? And they didn't invite me? How rude~"

She sat on the window ledge, basking in the warmth of moonlight and imagined celebration, eyes dreamy.

That is, until—

"RUN, YOU SLOWPOKE! THE FIRE'S SPREADING!"

"IF ANOTHER BUILDING BURNS DOWN, THE FAMILY HEAD'S GOING TO KILL US!"

A sudden burst of shrieking shattered the stillness.

Fang Jingyi sat upright.

From the direction of the flickering orange glow, she spotted a pair of frantic silhouettes, two servants in scorched robes, each staggering under the weight of sloshing water buckets.

One was still patting out smoke from the hem of his robe as he ran.

Their pace was less heroic and more chaotic, water spilling with every panicked step as they dashed toward the flames.

"WHY ARE THE BUCKETS THIS HEAVY?!"

"HEAVY? SHUT UP! THE PUNISHMENT WILL BE HEAVIER!"

Jingyi blinked, her dreamy smile freezing in place.

"...Wait a second," she muttered.

She squinted harder.

"...Aren't those servants from our house?"

Chapter 43: Fire [2]

Fang Jingyi didn't hesitate.

In one smooth motion, she leapt straight out the window.

The breeze caught her as she hovered mid-air, robes fluttering around her like petals in the wind.

Though only mid-stage Qi Transformation, she held herself aloft for just a moment, long enough to cast a sharp glance toward the growing fire below.

Then she dropped cleanly to the courtyard with a firm thud, landing with the grace of someone far too used to dramatic entrances.

The ground cracked faintly beneath her heels.

Dust puffed around her slippers as she straightened, sweeping her hair back with a sigh.

Without a word, she strode toward the rising flames, the glow dancing in her sharp eyes as servants scrambled around her in panic.

"Make way!" one of them cried.

Another screamed, "Lady Jingyi's here!"

"Thank the heavens!"

"Wait—does this mean we're not getting punished?!"

"No, you fool! But she's the most reasonable one!"

Fang Jingyi ignored the chaos, lifting her sleeve to shield her face as she pressed forward into the smoke.

Fang Jingyi stepped closer to the blaze, eyes narrowed against the swirling smoke.

The servants were doing their best, buckets sloshing, sleeves soaked, panic painted on every face but the fire had already eaten through the outer beams of the old warehouse, and the embers danced like hungry spirits in the night.

"Step aside," she said lightly.

The servants parted instantly, as if the wind itself obeyed her voice.

Some stumbled over each other to make way, barely managing a breathless, "Yes, Lady Jingyi!"

She lifted her right hand.

Spiritual energy surged up her arm, warm and radiant.

The air around her shimmered with golden light as she drew a slow breath, two fingers raised like a conductor preparing a final note.

"—Misty Radiance: Rainfall Silk."

The air cracked.

And then, water.

Not from a well or a bucket, but from the very qi in the air, condensing in shimmering threads of silver mist, weaving themselves into a curtain of rain that gently but thoroughly fell upon the blaze.

Hissing and steam erupted in every direction as the fire choked and spluttered.

In seconds, the flames shrank back, doused beneath the glow of her qi technique.

When it was done, all that remained was the scent of wet ash, a few smoking timbers, and a stunned silence.

She exhaled slowly, the mist dissolving back into the night.

The servants stared.

Then someone muttered, "She's so cool..."

Fang Jingyi turned toward them with a smug little smile, brushing soot off her shoulder with all the poise of someone adjusting an accessory.

"Well, that was refreshing," she said cheerfully. "Now. Which one of you set it on fire?"

A dozen servants immediately dropped to their knees.

"IT WASN'T ME!"

"WE WERE JUST MOVING THE FIREWOOD—"

"PLEASE TRUST US, IT WASN'T US—"

She blinked innocently, hands behind her back.

"Oh? So you're saying it happened all on its own?" She stepped forward, voice smooth. "How magical."

Fang Jingyi only sighed dramatically and looked up at the moon. "Honestly. The amount of trouble I save this family... someone should marry me already."

Then she turned back toward the pavilion, hair swaying, shoes tapping confidently on the wet stone.

"Now... I'd better go tell little Yuan the warehouse didn't entirely collapse."

She paused at the edge of the garden path and added with a grin, "...Only half of it did."

Fang Jingyi strolled through the quiet halls of the main pavilion, her steps light now that the fire had been dealt with.

The soft glow of lantern light spilled from under the door of Fang Yuan's office.

Still working?

She pushed the door open without knocking, of course.

Inside, the room was gently lit by the steady burn of spirit candles.

The scent of ink, old paper, and mountain pine filled the air.

Scrolls lay piled on the desk, neatly arranged in the way only someone obsessive about order would maintain.

And behind the desk, seated like an emperor who lost a war with sleep, was Fang Yuan.

Head tilted slightly, arms folded over a stack of reports, he was dozing, peacefully, for once.

His breath was slow and steady, long lashes casting faint shadows on his cheekbones.

Even the line between his brows, normally creased from all that brooding, had relaxed.

Jingyi leaned in, elbows resting on the desk as she peered closer.

She reached out and gently poked his cheek with a single finger.

"So soft..." she whispered with a sly grin.

Then, in a quieter breath, half to herself:

"...You look so cute when you're sleeping, you know that?"

She stepped back, hands on her hips.

A beat passed, and then she tilted her head, muttering, almost like she had said it a hundred times before:

"I still can't believe you're gay, my dear nephew."

Her voice was teasing, but not unkind.

"I've tried so hard to make a man out of you... but nope. You're as cold as a block of ice.." She huffed, crossing her arms. "What a waste of such a handsome face."

She looked back at him again, softened.

"Still... you work too hard," she murmured.

Then, reaching out, she carefully draped the light cloak hanging over the back of his chair around his shoulders.

Her fingers lingered for a moment, gentle, almost hesitant.

And just as she turned to leave, her gaze landed on a folded letter resting near his hand.

The seal caught her eye first. Delicate red wax, pressed with a familiar sigil.

"From the Gu family...?" she murmured, brow knitting.

She picked it up with two fingers, tilting it toward the light.

The wax had already been broken, Fang Yuan must've read it earlier.

Still, her curiosity tugged.

She unfolded it slowly.

Her eyes moved line by line, the flicker of the spirit lamp dancing across her face.

The playful glint faded from her expression, replaced by something quieter, somber, thoughtful.

By the time she reached the end, her lips had drawn into a thin line.

She folded the letter again, slower this time.

Then, carefully, she placed it back where she found it, precisely as it had been.

Her fingers brushed the edge once, lightly.

And she stood there in the silence, the soft rustle of paper the only sound in the room.

Chapter 44: Clan Meeting [1]

Next morning:

The Phoenix Soul Pavilion buzzed with tension and hushed murmurs.

Servants moved briskly through the halls, while a low hum of voices echoed from the meeting chamber.

"Is it completely gone?" Elder Yin asked in a low voice, glancing around the room.

Elder Sun shook his head, his brows furrowed. "Not entirely. The main structure's lost, but it didn't spread to the other warehouse."

"How?" Elder Ra leaned in, voice tight. "That fire was massive."

"Elder Jingyi," Elder Sun replied, his tone lightening just a bit.

"She got there just in time. Snuffed it out before it reached the second building."

"You're telling me she stopped it alone?" Elder Yin blinked.

"With her usual flair," Elder Chen added dryly.

"Phew... That's a relief," muttered Elder Yin. "If both had gone up, we'd be counting spirit herbs by the ashes."

"Let's just be glad she likes making dramatic entrances," Elder Chen chuckled under his breath.

Then, the sliding doors opened with a faint creak.

Fang Yuan stepped in and the room fell silent at once.

Every elder present rose to their feet.

Even Fang Mei had a seat among the elders this time.

Her posture was calm, hands folded neatly in her lap, but a faint glimmer of excitement sparked in her eyes as Fang Yuan entered.

Beside her sat Fang Chen, his wide grin impossible to miss. The old man looked as if he had swallowed a sunbeam.

Every now and then, his fingers reached out to pinch Fang Mei's arm, earning a subtle glare from the girl.

But he didn't stop.

He simply chuckled each time, as if reassuring himself that she was really there, that this moment wasn't a dream.

Fang Yuan couldn't help but smile faintly.

Adopted or not, Fang Mei was truly loved like a daughter by his uncle.

He reached the head seat of the chamber and gave a small nod.

"Sit."

The elders obeyed, settling back into their places. The rustle of robes and the creak of old wood followed.

And just like that, the meeting began.

And with it, the first formal report came from Elder Jingyi.

Of all the elders, she was often the most animated but at times like this, you could expect her to be calm, composed and almost stately.

She stepped forward and bowed lightly.

"Patriarch Yuan," she began, her tone measured, "last night, one of our warehouses burned down."

Fang Yuan nodded slowly, motioning for her to continue. His face remained placid, though inwardly he braced himself.

Elder Jingyi continued, "The fire consumed a significant portion of our spirit herb stores. As you know, this has heavily impacted our alchemy division's production capacity."

She swept her gaze across the room. "We request aid—both in rapidly replenishing ingredients and in relocating the storage facility to the inner pavilion, where formations can better protect it."

A quiet murmur passed through the elders. The alchemy branch wasn't just important, it was their greatest source of wealth.

And now...

Fang Yuan's inner thoughts were screaming.

The finances are tanking. Our earnings—collapsing! How terrible!

Outwardly, however, he maintained a composed, thoughtful expression.

Why was no one else panicking?

He glanced subtly at the other elders, none of them looked particularly shaken.

Fang Chen stood up once Elder Jingyi returned to her seat.

After greeting Fang Yuan with a respectful nod, he began, "While overseeing the spirit pond in the eastern ravine, we've had some breakthroughs."

That caught everyone's attention.

"We've collected a substantial quantity of spirit stones this month," he continued, voice rising slightly in pride.

"The pond's output has stabilized, and with the new formation enhancements, we estimate monthly earnings of—"

He paused for effect.

"—ten thousand spirit stones. All high-grade."

The room froze.

Even Fang Yuan blinked.

"Ten thousand?"

Fang Yuan's mind reeled.

A spirit pond of their size, on its best day should've brought in seven thousand.

Eight, if the heavens were feeling generous.

And that alone would've been more than enough.

More than enough for the family.

More than enough to fund expansions, arm the guards, stock the alchemy labs, and still have coins to throw at auctions in Coldwind City.

But ten thousand?

High-grade spirit stones, no less?

The room had gone still.

Every elder's breath seemed to catch in their throat. Eyes widened. Lips parted in silent awe.

Fang Yuan leaned back slowly, trying to maintain a neutral expression.

But inwardly?

His thoughts were screaming again.

We're rich. We're saved. Thank heavens!

The elders exchanged glances of barely-concealed awe.

Fang Chen added, "We request another squad of elders to aid in guarding the perimeter. Strangers have been seen in the surrounding forests."

Fang Yuan nodded, relief mixing with pride. "Very well. Approved."

His eyes swept the chamber, lingering on the seated elders.

"Elder Chen. Elder Sun. Elder Yin. Elder Jingyi. Elder Ra. Elder Joshua. Elder Long. Elder Mei..."

He frowned slightly. "There's only eight of you?"

The elders scratched their heads or looked away, their silence vaguely sheepish.

Fang Yuan sighed and reached into his sleeve.

With a soft clack, he placed a small ornate box on the table and opened it, revealing ten gleaming pill jades.

He flicked one into the air.

"Come and claim a pill jade," he said calmly. "Each contains six Qi Transformation Pills."

The room stilled.

Even the air felt heavier.

Even one pill jade like this could buy a small estate in Coldwind City—six?

That was enough to tempt even a Golden Core cultivator.

Fang Chen squinted. "...Where did you get these, Nephew?"

Fang Yuan casually waved his hand. "That old gift box from the Divine Ice Sect. You remember the one, right? The one with the formation flags."

Fang Chen fell silent.

First the formation flags. Now rare pills?

He rubbed his chin, brow creased. *Is the Divine Ice Sect fattening us up for something?*

But he said nothing more and stood.

Fang Yuan smiled faintly. *What a convenient scapegoat. Divine Ice Sect here, Crown Prince there... I could hide a whole fortune under those excuses.*

Without another word, he stepped forward and began distributing the pill jades personally.

One by one, he called their names.

"Elder Chen."

"Elder Jingyi."

"Elder Long."

Each elder stepped up with reverent hands, accepting their jade as if gifted a piece of the heavens.

For all his calm, Fang Yuan chuckled inwardly.

Nothing motivates elders like spirit stones... except, maybe, high-grade pills.

Chapter 45: Clan Meeting [2]

As the pill jades were distributed, the mood in the room subtly shifted.

The initial tension surrounding the warehouse fire had given way to a more practical atmosphere, one of planning, delegation, and resource assessment.

Discussions flowed between elders, their tones now brisk but measured.

Elder Ra raised concerns about the trade caravans returning late from the Western Border.

Elder Joshua proposed new tariffs for foreign merchants passing through Coldwind City.

Elder Long suggested increasing security around the talisman workshop following rumors of theft in nearby shops.

One after another, they reported, debated, and noted.

Fang Yuan listened quietly, his expression unreadable but his mind taking in every detail.

He scribbled the occasional note, nodded at wise suggestions, and only spoke when necessary.

Then, near the end of the meeting, Elder Sun cleared his throat.

His gaze, sharp and a little amused, cut across the table.

"Patriarch Yuan," he said, hands folded on the table, "I heard something rather curious yesterday."

Fang Yuan raised a brow slightly. "Oh?"

Elder Sun's eyes gleamed faintly. "That your younger brother, Fang Tian, was seen entering the family treasury wing. Twice. Without escort."

The room stilled.

A few elders blinked. Some exchanged puzzled glances.

Fang Yuan tilted his head. "...So?"

Elder Sun leaned forward, his expression unreadable, tone calm but heavy with implication.

"It's just that treasury access, especially unsupervised, is strictly reserved for the Patriarch.

And... I was under the impression that such privileges required formal decree and written authorization. But I heard you gave him permission?"

A heavy silence settled over the chamber.

Several elders subtly straightened in their seats.

Fang Yuan blinked once.

Then twice.

His gaze remained steady, but a faint tension formed behind his eyes.

"...I did?" he murmured under his breath, too quiet for most to hear.

Then, without missing another beat, he adjusted his sleeves and sat straighter, his voice calm and composed.

"Yes. I did."

He looked directly at Elder Sun.

"I authorized Fang Tian's entry."

There was no hesitation now. No room for doubt in his voice.

"As Patriarch, I granted him provisional access for a specific task relating to internal logistics. It was urgent, and I made the call personally."

Elder Sun studied him for a long moment before offering a faint nod.

"...Very well."

The air in the room remained still.

Fang Yuan glanced across the elders, none of them spoke, but he could feel the shift.

From surprise to wariness, from questioning to measured trust.

He allowed the silence to stretch for a breath longer, then continued, voice even.

"I will ensure the proper documentation is filed retroactively. There will be no ambiguity in the records."

Only then did the elders finally begin to nod in assent, one after the other.

The meeting continued, slower, heavier now but the matter had been acknowledged.

Fang Yuan lowered his gaze briefly to the reports in front of him, mind sharp, back straight.

And somewhere deep in his thoughts—

I really need to start reading those damn treasury logs.

As the final matter was addressed and no further voices rose from the circle, Fang Yuan slowly stood.

"The matters for today are concluded," he said clearly. "This meeting is adjourned."

The elders rose in unison, robes rustling as chairs scraped gently against the polished floors.

Some bowed low, others offered polite nods, but all of them filed out in the orderly manner expected of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion's inner court.

Even Fang Mei, seated among them for the first time, mirrored their solemnity with grace.

Though young, she carried herself with the poise of someone born to this seat, a teenager, yes, but unmistakably one of them.

Fang Yuan remained standing for a moment longer, watching the elders quietly disperse beneath the soft lantern light that streamed through the high lattice windows.

The chamber, once filled with voices and tension, now echoed with stillness.

Just as he turned to leave, he paused.

Two figures remained behind.

Fang Chen and Fang Jingyi.

His uncle and his aunt. The two were watching him with unreadable expressions.

"...Something wrong?" he asked, his tone even.

Fang Jingyi rose to her feet slowly, folding her hands behind her back. "Nephew, it's about the message from the Gu family."

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed slightly. He looked at her, gaze calm but probing. "You read it?"

She nodded without shame, her expression serious for once. "It was left out. So I got curious...."

Fang Yuan let out a soft sigh and turned back to his seat, robes whispering as he lowered himself into the chair once more.

"Well," he murmured, rubbing his temple. "Now that you've read it, I suppose I have no options to hide the matter anymore, do I?"

Fang Chen gave a solemn nod, arms crossed over his chest. "That's right, Nephew. This is no small issue. We can't afford to delay it."

Fang Yuan let his eyes linger on the table for a moment, the weight of decisions pressing down harder than usual.

Then, in an uncharacteristically quiet voice, he said,

"Can you give me some time to consider?"

There was a rare flicker of vulnerability in his tone, just enough to make the air feel still again.

Fang Jingyi walked over without a word, her steps light but purposeful.

She knelt beside his chair and wrapped her arms gently around him from the side, resting her chin lightly on his shoulder.

Her fingers found his and curled around them.

"Nephew," she said softly, voice as warm as spring sunlight, "there's no time left to hesitate."

Fang Yuan closed his eyes for a moment, drawing in a slow, deep breath, half for strength, half for composure.

And that was when she smirked.

"Oh my, nephew! You can't just go sniffing me like that," she whispered playfully near his ear, "especially not when my dear brother is right there watching. Bad boy."

"Huh?" Fang Yuan recoiled slightly, blinking in stunned disbelief.

Across the room, Fang Chen coughed into his sleeve and looked away.

"Jingy..." Fang Yuan said through gritted teeth.

She just grinned, mischievous and unrepentant. "Well, if I don't tease you now, you'll get too broody and collapse under the weight of being 'Patriarch' again."

Chapter 46: New Task!

Fang Yuan let out a quiet sigh, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"You really are the worst sometimes," he muttered, though his voice lacked any real bite.

Fang Jingyi just smiled like she had won a small, private war.

But the atmosphere slowly returned to sobriety as Fang Chen walked forward and placed a sealed scroll on the table in front of Fang Yuan.

"This came in early this morning," he said. "Directly from Gu Lanyue's personal courier. That makes two messages total, all marked urgent."

Fang Yuan's gaze lingered on the scroll.

The wax bore the crest of the Gu family, an orchid carved into obsidian, delicate but cold.

He did not open it right away and instead kept staring at it for a while.

Fang Jingyi watched him closely, her earlier playfulness fading to a quiet concern.

"If we delay too long, they may take offense," she said.

"And offense, from the Gu family, isn't the kind we can pay off with a few spirit stones. They recently got a second Nascent Soul Realm cultivator after all."

Fang Yuan nodded faintly. "I know."

He finally reached for the scroll, unsealing it carefully.

The parchment inside was crisp and clean, the handwriting elegant, each character brushed with refined clarity.

But beneath the formal tone, Fang Yuan could almost hear the chill and smugness in Gu Lanyue's voice.

He read silently for a time, eyes flicking across the lines.

Then he lowered the scroll, placing it back onto the table with quiet precision.

"They want to have a meeting with me, alone," he said.

Fang Chen leaned forward. "When?"

"Three days from now," Fang Yuan replied. "At the Riverlight Bridge near Lake Forest. It's a neutral ground."

"It's a good choice," Fang Chen murmured. "But they're forcing your hand."

Fang Yuan's lips twitched.

"I suppose I should. Uncle Jian will be there too, I trust with him around they won't try anything funny," he said finally, his voice even.

Fang Chen gave a firm nod, arms crossed. "Alright, nephew. But you're certain you'll be fine going alone?"

Fang Yuan nodded without hesitation. "Trust me, Uncle. When have I ever disappointed you?"

From the side, Fang Jingyi let out a soft snort.

"All the time, Yuan'er," she chimed in.

"Brother was so disappointed when you rejected all the girls he found for you. Remember Lady Lin from the Silver Hall Sect? Or that sweet girl from the Jade Orchard Pavilion? You cold hearted man who didn't even meet them a second time."

Fang Chen turned sharply toward her, eyebrows raised. "Jingyi—"

But before he could get another word in, Jingyi burst into open laughter, hands on her hips as she practically danced backward toward the door.

"Don't worry, don't worry!" she grinned, already halfway out the room.

"Your 'disgraceful' nephew will make a fine politician yet. He's just romantically hopeless."

And with a wave and a wink, she slipped out, still laughing.

Fang Chen sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That girl... one of these days I swear..."

Fang Yuan chuckled under his breath and patted his uncle's arm. "Don't worry, Uncle. For what it's worth... I don't regret any of it."

Fang Chen gave him a long, serious look, brows knit with a mix of worry and familial concern.

"Yuan'er... I know you only recently stepped into Nascent Soul, but Uncle Jian has been in that realm for over a year now. Would you really not reconsider?"

Fang Yuan shook his head slowly.

His voice was calm, steady. "Uncle Chen... My father and Uncle Jian were sworn brothers."

Even though his daughter has severed ties with my junior brother, Uncle Jian has never broken his bond with my late father."

The room went still for a moment, a hush settling like a breath held between generations.

Fang Chen let out a long sigh, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Hah... I suppose so. Blood or not, old friendships run deep. But still... remain cautious, Yuan'er."

"I will," Fang Yuan said with a nod, his tone firm but grateful.

Fang Chen gave him a final pat on the shoulder before turning toward the doors.

Just as he reached the threshold, Fang Yuan called out—

"Ah, Uncle—could you tell the guards to send my brother to the office when he's free?"

Fang Chen paused, chuckling as he glanced back over his shoulder, only to catch a glimpse of Fang Yuan already hurrying down the corridor, a stack of papers tucked beneath his arm, his robes fluttering slightly with each step.

Typical.

Still, as he stepped outside, the elder didn't delay. He flagged down a passing guard without hesitation, waving him over with a casual flick of the wrist.

"Hey, guard."

The young man halted and bowed respectfully. "Yes, Elder Chen?"

"Go find Fang Tian," Fang Chen said, his tone relaxed but firm. "Tell him the Family Patriarch wishes to see him in the office."

The guard straightened, fist to chest. "Understood."

Without wasting a moment, the young man turned and headed briskly down the stone path, disappearing behind a bend.

Fang Chen exhaled slowly and looked up at the morning sky for a beat, then he also walked away.

In the meantime, Fang Yuan burst into his office with his robes fluttering, a stack of reports half-tucked under one arm and his breath only just catching up with him.

He practically kicked the door shut with his heel, made a beeline for his desk, and—

Ding!

The system interface floated into view, its sleek golden font shimmering above the table.

[New Quest Alert]

Coldwind City Championships — Countdown: 2 months (time dilation may apply)

Task 1: Cultivate 1 disciples of the younger generation to reach Golden Core Realm.

Reward: 100,000 SP

Task 2: Cultivate 2 disciples of the younger generation to reach Qi Transformation Realm.

Reward: 60,999 SP

Task 3: cultivate 10 disciples of the younger generation to reach Qi Condensation Realm.

Reward: 30,999 SP

[Note: Pick 1 Task Only. Failure yields no reward.]

Chapter 47: Task Chosen.

Fang Yuan inhaled sharply.

That... was a lot of SP.

His gaze darted to the corner of the interface. The Nascent Soul Pills in the shop glimmered temptingly.

Price: 5,000 SP each.

He was already at the peak of Nascent Soul.

To break through to the Hollow Spirit Realm without relying on a traditional Hollow Spirit Pill, he'd need ten Nascent Soul Pills, just to stabilize himself.

That meant at least 50,000 SP just to prep.

"Okay, okay... task 3, huh?" He tapped his fingers against the table.

Task 3 was already done... ten Qi Condensation juniors? He had that in the bag. Instant reward. Easy points.

But... his eyes drifted back to Task 1.

100,000 SP.

So. Tempting.

He gnawed the inside of his cheek, staring hard at the line like it might blink and turn into a freebie.

But reality slapped him in the face just as quickly.

Fang Mei had only just stepped into the Qi Transformation Realm.

Her foundation was still unstable, her breathing rhythm uneven, she was far from ready to advance again, let alone leap into Golden Core.

It would be reckless to even consider pushing her so soon.

As for Fang Tian... that boy wasn't even at Qi Transformation yet.

He lingered at the peak of Qi Condensation, teetering on the edge but never quite crossing it.

Yes, Fang Yuan admitted, the boy had secrets.

There were signs, unusual speed in cultivation, instincts getting too sharp for someone at his stage but the most important of them all, a quiet confidence that bordered on arrogance.

But secrets alone didn't make a cultivator.

Not when it came to breaking into Golden Core.

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes.

Even if Fang Tian was hiding some miraculous trump card, some hidden inheritance or forbidden technique... would it really be enough?

To reach Golden Core?

In two months?

He sighed.

Unlikely. Too unlikely.

Then, a sudden thought occurred to him—

Why not wait?

There were two months. If by then he had two Qi Transformation juniors, he could pick Task 2.

If not, he could settle for Task 3 and still walk away with 30k SP.

And if somehow, miraculously.... Fang Mei hit Golden Core?

Jackpot.

Just then, the system flickered and a timer appeared in the upper corner.

60...

59...

58...

57...

Fang Yuan squinted. "Wait... What's this? What are you doing?"

The system chimed coldly:

[If no task is selected within 60 seconds, Task 3 will be automatically chosen.]

45...

44...

His jaw dropped. "WHAT?!"

He leapt up from his chair. "You manipulative, rotten—! I hate you! I hate you! You dirty, cheating—"

40... 39...

He clutched his hair. "I can't do Task 1 yet—Mei isn't ready—Tian's a maybe—I need more time!"

28...

27...

"I can't pick Task 3! It's a waste of potential!"

14...

13...

"AAAAAAAARGH—FINE! Pick Task 2!"

The system pinged:

[Congratulations. You have selected Task 2.]

Fang Yuan slumped into his seat, exhausted.

The glowing golden text faded from view, but the decision hung heavy in his chest.

Now, he had two quests weighing on his mind.

The first:

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

Reward: 100,000 SP

+ Divine-Grade Cultivation Manual

And the second:

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

Reward: 60,999 SP

Fang Yuan sighed, dragging a hand down his face.

Two quests. One for glory. One for groundwork.

And both very tempting.

But then again... he allowed himself a small smile.

"At least it's sixty-one thousand spirit points," he muttered.

A fortune to most. A step toward the next realm for him.

He leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling.

"...How can a single man be this greedy?"

Just then, a knock tapped softly against the office door.

Fang Yuan sat up straighter.

"Come in."

The door creaked open, and in stepped Fang Tian, calm, casual, hands tucked behind his back.

"Brother," he greeted, voice light. "You called for me?"

Fang Yuan studied him in silence for a moment.

The boy looked the same as ever, slightly disheveled hair, faint smile, eyes that gave away nothing but hinted at everything.

"Yes," Fang Yuan finally said. He gestured for him to sit. "I did."

Fang Tian raised a brow but obeyed, perching lightly on the chair across from the desk.

Fang Yuan didn't waste time.

He leaned forward slightly, fingers steepled.

"What are you up to lately?"

Fang Tian blinked. "Up to?"

"You've been snooping," Fang Yuan said calmly, "around the family treasury."

That wiped the faint smile off his brother's face.

Fang Yuan's gaze didn't waver.

"Unsupervised and not once but twice. And you didn't even bother to get my permission. I'll need an explanation for this."

A long pause followed.

Fang Tian didn't speak. Just tilted his head a little, as if weighing something.

Then, he smirked.

"...Snooping is such a strong word, Brother."

Fang Yuan's voice dropped to a dry murmur. "Would you prefer 'breaking and entering'?"

Fang Tian raised both hands quickly. "Okay, okay, Brother, I'm sorry. I'll tell you why."

He rubbed the back of his neck and offered a sheepish grin. "I was looking for the family ring."

Fang Yuan didn't respond immediately.

Instead, he reached into the drawer of his desk and pulled out a small red box, dark wood, inlaid with silver threads that shimmered faintly in the light.

The crest of the Fang Clan was carved proudly into the lid: a **soaring raven entwined in crackling lightning**.

He placed it on the table between them with a quiet thud.

"You mean this?"

Fang Tian's breath caught.

His eyes locked on the box, his body instinctively leaning forward but before he could reach out, Fang Yuan slid the box back toward himself in one smooth motion.

"Like I said," Fang Yuan said quietly.

His tone, calm but edged with steel, was the most serious Fang Tian had ever heard from him.

"An explanation."

Fang Tian sat frozen.

There was no room for jokes or smirks.

Just the weight of silence between them and Fang Yuan's eyes watching him like a hawk.

This time, he knew... dodging wouldn't work.

Chapter 48: Comedic Chaos.

"Brother, I have a secret," Fang Tian said quietly.

Fang Yuan didn't blink.

He simply stared at his younger brother and then gave a small nod.

"I know."

Fang Tian's eyes widened just a bit. He hadn't expected that.

"...You're not curious?" he asked, cautiously.

"I am," Fang Yuan replied with a faint smile. "But I also have my own secrets."

Fang Tian hesitated, then leaned forward slightly. "That you're at the peak of the Nascent Soul Realm?"

Fang Yuan's body stiffened.

He stood up slowly, eyes narrowing. His thoughts surged like a tide.

How did this boy know that?

He's not even at the Golden Core stage yet. Did he recently acquire some artifact that lets him see through realms or lies? No... with that pitiful qi of his, that's far from possible.

Which left only one reasonable explanation in his head.

"And you," Fang Yuan said, voice cold and clear, "have a soul trapped inside that ring hanging from your neck, someone clearly guiding your cultivation."

His finger pointed directly at the ring tied around Fang Tian's neck.

A beat of silence.

Then Fang Yuan blinked.

And inwardly winced.

Ah... what a blabbermouth.

Why did I say that?

He didn't even know if it was true!

It just slipped out in a moment of panic because his own secret got exposed.

He only meant to deflect... not deliver a monologue ripped straight from a cultivation novel!

Now I look like a fool.

This isn't some modern novel! What am I saying—"a soul inside your ring"? Really?

His gaze flicked to Fang Tian, who was just... staring at him.

Wide-eyed. Unmoving.

Yep. He thinks I've lost my mind.

Fang Yuan could already feel the secondhand embarrassment brewing for himself.

He's probably wondering if the pressure of being Patriarch finally cracked my brain.

He still kept a straight face though.

Barely.

But inside he was already screaming again.

Why... why couldn't I just say something normal like, "Are you cultivating something strange lately?"

No, I had to sound like I'm high on crack!

Now my brother probably thinks I'm not a reliable brother, look at him staring at me like he's never seen a 'whimsical clown'.

Sure enough, Fang Tian just kept staring at him.

Wide-eyed.

As if Fang Yuan had suddenly grown three heads.

But inside his mind, the soul sealed within the ring stirred.

"How marvelous," Qin Shi Huang's voice echoed in Fang Tian's consciousness.

"His perception is quite extraordinary. Even I'm impressed."

Fang Tian, however, was anything but impressed.

"Master, how did he figure it out?!" Fang Tian screamed inwardly, his face frozen in a stiff half-smile.

"I was careful! I made sure no qi leaked out! I never spoke out loud! I even wore the ring inside my clothes!"

The response was slow... calm... frustratingly serene.

"Hmm."

The voice of the ancient emperor echoed lightly in his mind, completely unfazed.

"That does pose a problem. If your brother can sense me as a Peak Nascent soul realm cultivator, then anyone in the Hollow Spirit Realm might sniff me out just as easily."

"What do you mean 'pose a problem'? This is catastrophic! I'm dead! If Brother figured it out so casually, what happens when I meet someone really strong?! They'll see right through me! Master, aren't you even a little worried?!"

There was a pause.

Then Qin Shi Huang replied, sounding vaguely amused—

"Why worry... when one could only be impressed by what's in front?"

Fang Tian's soul deflated.

"This isn't the time to be impressed!"

He knew about your existence without me even saying that! And I've been hiding you for weeks now!"

Inside his chest, his heart thumped like a drum.

Outside, he barely blinked still locked in eye contact with his older brother, who looked far too calm for someone who just exposed his master existence.

Meanwhile, Qin Shi Huang simply sighed with an air of poetic admiration.

"What eyes. What intuition. Your brother... he is not ordinary."

Fang Tian groaned internally.

"You should be worried not impressed!!!"

Outside, Fang Tian opened his mouth to speak. Closed it again.

Opened it once more.

Still no words came out.

The two brothers stared at each other in utter silence.

One frozen in quiet panic.

The other trying very hard not to smile at his own accidental slip.

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the faint rustling of the scrolls on Fang Yuan's desk.

Fang Yuan cleared his throat lightly, brushing away the awkward silence.

"Ahem. Well... we both have our own secrets, don't we?" he said, folding his arms as if that made everything balanced again. "But that's not what I'm asking about."

He gestured subtly toward the red box now sitting silently on the desk between them.

"I want to know... why do you need this ring?"

Fang Tian blinked once, then exhaled slowly.

"...Brother already knows about you, Master. Let's just tell him."

The voice in his head responded with ease, calm and imperial.

"Yes, perhaps it's for the better. Who knows? Your brother might even be able to offer some insight."

Taking a breath, Fang Tian looked up.

"Brother," he began, placing a hand lightly over the box, "the family ring... it's not just a relic. It's a symbol. A sign of approval from the immortals. Have you heard about immortals?"

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed slightly. "...Immortals?"

Of course he'd heard of them or rather, of course he'd read about them.

Correction:

Of course he had read about them in his past life.

Honestly, who told those authors to write so many good cultivation novels back then?

Ahem. He refused to blame himself for binging hundreds of them. It was educational. Research, even.

After Nascent Soul came Hollow Spirit.

Then Spirit Severing.

Then Void Return...

And finally... Immortality. That elusive, godlike realm that every cultivator, fool or genius, dreamed of reaching.

Immortals...

Gorgeous women drifting through the clouds, skin like flawless jade, eyes sparkling like stars, the faint scent of lotus blossoms clinging to their sleeves.

Yes...

Wouldn't it be nice to have an immortal wife?

Someone to gently call him 'Dao Companion' as they dual cultivated under moonlight, bodies glowing with heavenly light, their hearts in tune with the dao—

Wait.

Hold on.

What if...

What if she turned out to be his great-great-great-great-grandmother?

Chapter 49: Threaten A Nascent Soul Realm.

Fang Yuan's face twitched.

He had read those plotlines. Thought they were ridiculous.

But then again... he had a system.

If that existed, what else could?

Well, he would not have believed it either until his own life started to feel like one of those novels he read about.

Nope.

Absolutely not.

"Brother?" Fang Tian's voice cut through his thoughts.

Fang Yuan snapped out of his reverie like a man waking from a dream.

"No—no! Absolutely not!" Fang Yuan blurted, face twisting in something between panic and secondhand embarrassment. "Immortals are... immoral!"

Fang Tian blinked.

"...What?"

The silence that followed was heavier than a mountain.

Fang Yuan coughed violently into his sleeve, trying to bury both the moment and his soul at once. "Ah... I mean... Ah..."

Fang Tian didn't make a move. Not did he make a pipsqueak.

He just stared at his brother, his expression unreasonably unreadable.

Fang Yuan wanted to sink into the floor and dissolve into spirit mist.

After a painful beat, he cleared his throat and reached into his desk.

"...Take the ring and leave right away." Fang Yuan muttered, sliding the carved box across the table. "Do what you will but make sure it's not harmed. It's a family heirloom."

Fang Tian blinked.

Wait... what?

He stared at the ornate box sitting between them like it weighed a million kilograms.

The shift in Fang Yuan's tone had come too fast. And... he hadn't even got to explained himself yet!

Wasn't his brother supposed to reject his request? Question his motives? Or outright test him to see if he was an imposter? This was a family heirloom for heaven's sake! How can one be so careless!

Why was he... handing it over so easily?

"Master?" Fang Tian asked inwardly, not moving to touch the box just yet.

The calm voice of Qin Shi Huang echoed through his mind.

"Your brother definitely knows our end goal. He even understands the Immortal Code. So just take it and let's leave while he's giving it without a resistance."

Immortal what now? Fang Tian blinked again. *What's an Immortal Code? Master?*

But before the soul could answer, Fang Yuan's voice cut through the air.

"Tian," he said suddenly, brisk, dismissive, urgent.

That tone. It was not laced with anger, but it definitely screamed: *take the box and get out before I change my mind.*

Fang Tian hesitated only a second longer and then resolving himself, he then carefully reached forward and picked it up.

As soon as the box left the desk, Fang Yuan nodded firmly and said, "Good. Now shoo, out, out right away."

Fang Tian opened his mouth, but Fang Yuan raised a finger without looking at him.

"And don't forget," he added flatly, "our family's still in a financial crisis. Don't go doing anything expensive, you also promised to help, remember?"

"...Right," Fang Tian muttered, thoroughly confused.

With the box cradled under his arm and several questions still unanswered, he quietly turned and left the office.

Fang Yuan watched his brother walk out the door, probably confused, maybe suspicious or possibly even both.

And as the door gently clicked shut, Fang Yuan slumped back in his chair, rubbing his temples.

"...What's wrong with me today?"

The room felt too quiet now.

The weight of responsibility, of secrets, and expectations hung heavy in the air.

He leaned back, eyes drifting toward the lantern-lit ceiling.

Then, in a low whisper, almost afraid of his own voice, he said,

"Am I being stressed out because of the message of the Gu family? Do I really have to meet the Gu family...?"

Fang Yuan stretched his arms with a sigh, leaning back in his chair as the quiet hum of evening settled across the compound.

"...Ah, right," Fang Yuan muttered, rubbing his temples. "I forgot to check the treasury logs, hmmm I'll just sign a paper and say it's done, I suppose.."

He let out a long sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose.

There was always something.

Still, he glanced at the stack of scrolls beside him and waved dismissively at them.

"I'll check it tomorrow. Tonight... I'm taking a break."

With that decisive declaration, wholly unbecoming of a hardworking patriarch, he stretched his limbs, groaning as his joints popped.

Lazy?

Maybe.

But even cultivators needed sleep.

He didn't always cultivate, thank you very much.

Yawning, Fang Yuan left the office and wandered to his chambers, letting the warm lantern light guide him down the quiet halls.

The night passed without incident.

No mysterious letters.

No emergency meetings.

No assassins.

Not even a single elder knocking at his door with 'one more concern.'

It was... nice.

Suspiciously nice.

The next morning, the sun filtered gently through his window, and for once, Fang Yuan woke without a headache or a crisis.

He resumed his duties at a leisurely pace, sorted through the reports, gave a few commands, and finally, finally finished reviewing the last of the clan's accounts.

Leaning back in his chair, he stared at the ceiling and allowed himself the rarest of luxuries:

A moment of genuine satisfaction.

Everything, miraculously had gone according to plan.

"...Huh," he murmured, a small smile tugging at his lips. "So this is what peace feels like."

He didn't trust it for a second.

Then—

Knock knock.

"Come in," he said without looking up.

The door creaked open and in walked Fang Lian, the girl who handled minor affairs for Doctor Mu.

"Oh?" Fang Yuan lifted a brow. "What brings you here?"

Fang Lian stepped in, straight-backed and formal. "Family Head," she said softly, "she's awake now."

Fang Yuan gave a small nod. "Good."

He was about to return to his work when he noticed Fang Lian hesitating, her gaze lingering, fingers curling slightly at her sides.

He tilted his head. "What is it?"

Fang Lian's face turned a shade pinker.

"Family Head..." she began hesitantly. "I—may I also receive cultivation resources? I'd like to begin training."

Fang Yuan blinked in surprise, already halfway to giving a casual 'sure' but then she bowed deeply, hands clenched and voice trembling with sincerity.

"I—I promise to keep your aunt's... and your secrets safe, so... please!"

She said it so seriously, with such reverent weight, as if she were striking some profound bargain between gods and men.

Fang Yuan stared.

Then he broke into laughter.

Genuine, startled, amused laughter that echoed in the room.

He leaned forward, bracing a hand against the table.

"You..." he chuckled, "you're threatening a Nascent Soul realm cultivator?"

There she was, small, meek, without an ounce of cultivation to her name trembling slightly, yet resolute.

And so painfully earnest that it was almost adorable.

Fang Yuan shook his head, still smiling.

"Well," he said at last, resting his chin on one hand, "aren't you brave."

Fang Lian looked up, eyes wide with hope and fear.

He smiled and gestured to the chair across from him.

"Come. Tell me how far you're willing to go with this cultivation path."

Because, truth be told, he was already planning to give her a chance.

Fang Yuan studied her, head tilted slightly, expression unreadable until the faintest grin curled at the edge of his lips.

She had no idea what she was getting into.

But he liked her spirit.

Chapter 50: Surprise [1]

Fang Lian stepped forward hesitantly, the tips of her shoes just brushing the edge of the carpet. Her fingers clenched the fabric of her sleeve tightly, and her voice trembled as she tried to speak.

"Family Head..." she stammered. "I... I wish to be of help to the family."

Fang Yuan gave her a soft, patient look. "You already are," he said calmly. "You've been taking care of Doctor Mu all this time."

She lowered her head, voice barely more than a whisper. "I... I wish to do more."

Fang Yuan's expression didn't change. He set aside the scroll in his hand and leaned forward, resting his arms on the desk.

"And?" he asked quietly.

Fang Lian bit her lip. Then, after a long moment, she said the words she had been holding back.

"I... I want to make amends. For what my adopted father did."

The room fell into silence.

Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed slightly.

Fang Guo.

The man who had led the charge to impeach him as Patriarch. Who had tried to fracture the clan's unity during its most vulnerable hour.

And now here stood the daughter he left behind—soft-spoken, fragile in frame, yet braver than half the elders.

Fang Yuan didn't answer immediately. But inside, something softened.

He didn't believe in punishing the younger generation for the sins of the old. The world already did that enough.

"I'll allow you to cultivate," he said finally, "but not for that reason."

Fang Lian's head snapped up, eyes wide with confusion.

"Not... for that reason?" she repeated.

"You'll need a better one."

She blinked, startled.

Then, almost reflexively, she looked down again, biting her lip harder. She seemed lost for a moment, and then the words spilled out before she could stop them.

"Then... can I be a cultivator so I can become a doctor?"

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow in curiosity.

She quickly explained, her voice tumbling over itself with sudden urgency.

"Doctor Mu always said... if he'd been a cultivator, he could've sensed inner qi better. Could've saved more people, healed them faster. He always told me—don't be like him. Don't settle. So I... I want to learn. I want to be better than he ever was. I want to be a healer people can rely on."

Her words came fast now, her sincerity tripping over her nervousness like stones in a river.

"I don't want to just watch people suffer—I want to do something about it!"

Fang Yuan's lips slowly curled into a smile.

He stood up, hands brushing his robes down.

"What a beautiful goal," he said warmly. "That's a good reason. A very good reason."

She blinked up at him in surprise.

"Now then," Fang Yuan added as he began walking toward the door, "follow me."

"Huh?" Fang Lian looked up, confused.

But Fang Yuan was already gone from behind the desk, stepping into the hallway.

Still clutching her sleeves, she hurried after him.

Down the corridor they went, light footsteps echoing behind the calm, steady stride of the Patriarch.

She had no idea where they were going.

Fang Yuan led her silently through the winding halls of the main estate. His pace was steady, unhurried—but to Fang Lian, every step felt like a death march.

She followed him with hesitant steps, her cheeks burning. Each glance at his back stirred another wave of chaotic thoughts.

"W-We're heading to his chambers... right? No way, no way... right?"

Her heart pounded in her chest. The halls felt hotter with every turn. "No! Fang Yuan isn't like that... right?"

But the direction was unmistakable.

They passed the guest wing.

Then the elder's quarters.

Straight toward the secluded part of the manor.

"...This is bad. This is really, really bad."

Her fingers trembled as she clutched the sleeves of her robe. "I'm already seventeen... I suppose... if it comes to that... maybe I should... be ready?"

Each step seemed to stretch eternity. Her mind continued to spiral.

"Fine. If this is what I have to sacrifice to cultivate, then so be it."

By the time they reached the door to his chambers, she had mentally prepared herself for death, shame, or worse.

Fang Yuan opened the door and stepped inside. She followed—her eyes closed in submission to her imagined fate.

He turned around.

"Alright," Fang Yuan said, rolling up his sleeves. "Let's get started."

With trembling fingers, Fang Lian began to untie her sash.

Fang Yuan blinked.

His brow twitched.

"...What are you doing?" he asked flatly.

Fang Lian paused, half-shouldered robe slipping.

She blinked up at him in confusion. "I-I'm... preparing?"

Fang Yuan looked at her like she'd grown a second head.

"...Preparing to check your spirit roots?"

"...My what?"

Without another word, he pulled out a polished, translucent stone and held it between his fingers.

A glimmering spirit stone.

"Spirit root assessment stone," Fang Yuan said calmly. "What else did you think we were doing?"

Fang Lian stared.

Then her face turned red. Not pink. Not rose.

Full, explosive crimson.

Every trace of imagined nobility, sacrifice, and tragic resolve exploded in a puff of embarrassment.

"I—I—I—I!"

"You—?" Fang Yuan arched a brow, lips twitching. "I can't believe you actually thought—?"

"I'm sorry!" she squeaked, dropping to her knees and slamming her forehead against the floor.

"I misunderstood everything!! Please forget everything I thought! No—wait! I mean—forget everything I didn't say! No—I mean—!"

Fang Yuan sighed and dropped the spirit stone into her palm. "Just hold this and circulate your breathing. Let's see what we're working with."

Fang Lian didn't dare look up and instead tried to circulate her breathing as she grabbed the spirit stone.

Fang Yuan watched closely as the spirit stone in Fang Lian's hand began to glow.

It started with a dull yellow, common enough.

Then, faint wisps of black crept in along the edges.

Fang Yuan's brows drew together. He expected it to stop there.

But it didn't.

The glow deepened into a warm, muddy brown.

Then came the surprise.

The brown gave way to a soft, glimmering white—pure, radiant, and exceedingly rare.

The light pulsed faintly, holding for a breath.

And then, impossibly, the color shifted once more...

To his growing astonishment, it pulsed and deepened into a vivid blue.

The stone stilled. The blue light remained.

Fang Yuan's mouth slowly fell open.

"...Blue?" he muttered, his voice almost a whisper.