

Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! #Chapter 91: Clan Meeting [2] - Read Clan Building System: I'm not the Protagonist?! Chapter 91: Clan Meeting [2]

Chapter 91: Clan Meeting [2]

After Fang Jingyi took her seat, Fang Yuan swept his gaze across the assembly, his eyes calm, yet commanding.

"Does anyone have anything to add... before we turn our attention to the Gu family?"

Elder Sun rose from his seat.

He clasped his hands behind his back, voice calm but firm.

"There needs to be a reform in the patrol routines of our family guards," he said.

"And more hands should be stationed near the spirit mines."

As he spoke, his gaze shifted toward Elder Chen. The older man met his eyes and gave a small nod in agreement.

"For now, Elder Chen and I are managing it personally, watching it around the clock."

Fang Yuan gave a brief nod, acknowledging their diligence. His eyes then scanned the room and landed on a younger cultivator.

"You there," he said, gesturing with a subtle flick of his fingers. "What's your name?"

The youth immediately stood and offered a respectful bow.

"Clan Head. My name is Fang Bo, second son of Fang Khaifu."

Fang Yuan gave a curt nod of approval.

"You'll be stationed at the Eastern Ravine. Any objections?"

"None, Clan Head," Fang Bo replied, his voice steady. "It is an honor to serve the clan."

Fang Yuan's lips curled slightly.

"Good. Though I warn you, you'll likely be bored out of your mind from the constant lectures of the old geezers."

That drew a scoff from Elder Sun and a mock-grimace from Elder Chen.

"Hey now, Nephew," Fang Chen protested, narrowing his eyes with playful indignation.

Fang Yuan ignored him and turned to another youth, a slightly taller boy with a composed bearing.

With a beckoning motion, Fang Yuan said,

"You. Come here."

The boy stepped forward and gave a polite bow.

"Clan Head."

Fang Yuan leaned back slightly, putting on a deeper tone that mimicked something from his former life.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Fang Yang," the youth replied clearly. "the only son of Fang Lily."

"Good, good," Fang Yuan mused, reaching for his chin in an attempt to stroke a goatee that quite clearly didn't exist.

"You'll also be assigned to the Eastern Ravine. Assist in guarding the spirit mine that houses the Spirit Pond. Any objections?"

"None, Clan Head."

Fang Yuan gave another nod of approval and turned toward the elders. "Elder Sun, train these two on the proper path. And you—" he gave Elder Chen a sidelong look, "try not to corrupt them."

That earned a laugh from Elder Sun.

"Don't worry, Clan Head. I'll train them properly, your uncle won't have an influence."

Fang Yuan straightened his posture.

"Now then, if no one else has—"

Ahem.

Elder Yin stood up, brushing off her robes with a composed air as she prepared to speak.

Fang Yuan's brow twitched ever so slightly as he stared at her.

"Anyone else?" he asked, voice cool and clipped. "Because I'd rather not be interrupted every few moments."

A round of silent glances circled the room. One by one, the elders shook their heads.

Fang Yuan exhaled slowly. "Good. Go ahead, Elder Yin."

She gave a polite bow before clearing her throat delicately.

"The village I currently oversee... is facing a rather serious issue, clan head."

She paused.

Fang Yuan's expression didn't change, but internally—

Here we go.

He waited. And waited.

She still didn't continue.

His fingers twitched ever so slightly on the armrest.

Woman, speak already! What issues?

But outwardly, his voice remained smooth as jade.

"What happened?"

Elder Yin nodded, as if relieved to finally be nudged along.

"Well, clan head, it's like this. And—well, it's not really their fault. But you see... there's this one river, and um, the thing is—uh—the river water doesn't exactly flow into their fields, and so... because the water doesn't reach the fields..."

Fang Yuan closed his eyes briefly.

So they can't irrigate, which means they can't farm—

He cut in, his tone still polite, but firm.

"So. They need help diverting the river toward their farmland. Is that it?"

Her eyes brightened instantly. "Exactly! That's exactly it, clan head! I knew you'd understand me."

Fang Yuan offered a thin smile, leaning back slightly.

Ah. Now I understand why Father assigned her to a remote village.

She really did struggle to get to the point.

Fang Yuan tapped his fingers on the table in thought.

"A river that flows near the fields, but doesn't enter them... huh."

He narrowed his eyes.

"Then why not dig narrow trenches—small canals—starting from upstream and guiding the water where it's needed?"

Elder Yin blinked, confused. "Trenches...?"

Fang Yuan nodded calmly. "Yes. Carve shallow paths from the river and direct the water using the slope of the land. A system of channels—controlled paths. That way, even if the river itself doesn't shift course, the water still reaches the fields."

Elder Yin's jaw dropped slightly. "Clan head... that's... that's brilliant!"

She clapped her hands together, stunned. "Trenches... as water paths... I never thought of that! So simple, yet so... elegant! Even children can dig with proper tools. And we don't have to rely on spirit beasts or formation stones!"

The other elders glanced at each other, some murmuring, clearly impressed.

Fang Yuan gave a lazy shrug, as if it were nothing.

"It's a small idea. But if executed right, it'll save your village a lot of effort. Assign a few cultivators to oversee it, and get the villagers to help dig."

Elder Yin's eyes lit up with realization, and she spun toward Fang Rui seated in the corner.

"Fang Rui! Quick, write that down—this method! From this day forth, let it be known as the Flow Guidance Technique!"

Her voice practically sang with excitement as she gestured with both hands, as if envisioning flowing rivers across farmlands.

"If it works in my village, who's to say it won't work elsewhere? We could bring life to every dry patch of land the clan owns!"

Fang Rui quietly nodded, scribbling the new term down.

Elder Yin bowed low, looking genuinely grateful. "Thank you, clan head. You've saved that village more than you know."

Fang Yuan remained composed, but a faint flicker of amusement glinted in his eyes.

A simple irrigation ditch suddenly became a legendary cultivation technique. Hah... so be it.

Fang Yuan gave a dismissive wave, but a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Sometimes, the simplest knowledge from the old world... is worth more than a hundred spirit stones here.

Chapter 92: Clan Meeting [3] [pt.1]

Fang Yuan watched as Elder Yin finally took her seat, her excitement over the so-called Flow Guidance Technique still lingering in the air.

At last, he could begin.

He clasped his hands on the table before him and said, voice cool and steady, "Now then. As most of you have likely heard, the Gu family has sent us a letter. And it's not a request... but more like an order, for financial aid. We can't ignore this since the imperial seal was also used in this situation."

A collective shift of posture spread through the assembly.

Fang Yuan's eye twitched slightly as, from the corner of his vision, Elder Yin began fidgeting again.

He sighed internally.

"Elder Yin," he called, his voice flat but patient.

She immediately straightened up, hands raised in surrender. "Ahh! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *hehe*, please, please continue..." she said, hurriedly sitting down again.

But her nervous glances to the side made it clear she hadn't finished.

Fang Yuan rubbed his temples, then leaned back in his chair with a long breath. "Speak your mind, Elder Yin."

She hesitated, then slowly raised her hand. "So, uh... Clan Head... is it true you... lost the fight against, *um* I mean no offense! Really! Please don't kill me."

Fang Yuan tilted his head. "I won't."

"Promise?" she asked in a sheepish whisper, lowering her head while peeking up with one squinted eye.

He let out another sigh. "I promise."

Her smile returned in full bloom. "So... did you really lose the fight against Gu Lanyue and Gu Jian? I mean, I'm sure you actually won, but they're saying otherwise, so I was wondering if it's true?"

Fang Yuan blinked at her, almost dazed. *How is someone like this even an elder...?* He wanted to cry... not because of the question, but the way she spoke.

Still, he waved a hand and said calmly, "I was up against two Nascent Souls, so yes. I lost."

Elder Yin beamed. "Well, even if you lost, you're still my *hero*, Clan Head!"

That word, *hero*, landed in his heart like a rogue spiritual arrow.

Fang Yuan quickly lifted his right hand to cover his face, eyes twitching slightly as he tried to suppress the grin that threatened to betray his usual cool facade.

The entire council saw it.

Chuckles rippled through the elders.

From the side, Fang Chen leaned over and whispered to Fang Jingyi, "At least our Little Yuan is still human, eh?"

Jingyi nodded, a soft smile playing on her lips. "Mn."

Fang Yuan slowly lowered his hand from his face, the smile gone as swiftly as it came.

His gaze swept across the room, returning to that same cold sharpness that made even the core elders sit straighter.

"Enough," he said. "Let us return to the matter at hand."

A silence settled over the room.

"The Gu family has ordered us for financial aid with the imperial seal," Fang Yuan repeated.

"Because four Saberfang Spirit Beasts attacked their estate. Because half their spirit stone reserves were spent driving them off. Because now... they are weakened."

He leaned forward slightly, fingers steeped before him. "And now, in that weakness, they turn to us."

No one spoke, but the unspoken tension in the room thickened.

Fang Yuan's voice dropped a fraction, calm, but unyielding.

"Understand this: they did not ask out of goodwill. Nor did they lower their heads in humility. They expect assistance, as if the debts of the past mean nothing."

Elder Chen's brows drew together. "They still hold grudges for the Blackroot Mountain incident. We extended a hand then, too."

"And they bit it," Fang Yuan said coolly.

His eyes flicked to Fang Jingyi. "Aunt, read the message aloud once more."

Jingyi unfurled the scroll and stood, her voice even as she read:

"To the Fang Family of Coldwind City,

In light of recent calamities suffered by our Gu Estate, chiefly the invasion of multiple Saberfang Spirit Beasts, we request cooperation and financial support to stabilize the southern trade routes.

Let us set aside our grievances and act in the spirit of unity.

— Gu Jian, Gu Patriarch."

As her voice fell silent, Fang Yuan smiled but it was all cold teeth.

"Unity," he echoed. "Convenient word. When we were in trouble, they ignored us. When they are desperate, they remember we are 'fellow clans.'"

He stood slowly, the room watching him with rapt attention.

"I don't plan on sending spirit stones," Fang Yuan began, his voice calm yet laced with quiet cunning.

"But since they intend on using the imperial family, I will give them hope. Hope that we've sent help. A caravan will set out by dawn, loaded with crates of spirit stones..."

He paused, and a faint, dangerous smile touched his lips.

"...But no spatial storage will be used."

Murmurs rose among the elders, their eyes sharpening with dawning realization.

"We will let the Gu family see the help. Let them watch it crawl over roads, inch through mountains, guarded, escorted, and paraded like some great act of benevolence," Fang Yuan said, his gaze sweeping across the chamber.

"Let them celebrate prematurely. Let them prepare to grovel."

He stepped away from his chair, pacing slowly. "Then... something will happen. Maybe a beast attack, maybe bandits. Perhaps the wagon tips over a cliff. Who can say? It's a big world out there."

A few elders chuckled under their breath. The rest watched in awed silence.

Fang Yuan stopped, turning back. "Now. Do any of you carry a spatial item to offer?"

Everyone instinctively clasped their sleeves tighter, shaking their heads.

Everyone... except one.

Elder Yin lifted her hand proudly.

Fang Yuan pinched the bridge of his nose. "Put your hand down."

She blinked. "But, I—"

"Elder Yin," Fang Yuan said patiently, his tone softening, "your spatial ring is your private property. The clan has no right to claim it. I'm not confiscating anyone's ring."

As he spoke, he cast a sidelong glance at Fang Jingyi, a silent plea in his eyes.

She met his look with a knowing smile and gave a small, graceful nod, as if to say, Leave it to me.

"I'm willing!" Fang Yin said brightly, puffing her chest out. "For the sake of the clan, I—"

Before she could finish, Fang Jingyi leaned over and whispered something into her ear.

Chapter 93: Clan Meeting [3] [pt.2]

Elder Yin froze.

Her cheeks turned a vivid shade of pink, and she quickly lowered her hand, glancing up at Fang Yuan with wide, bashful eyes.

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow, gaze sliding to Jingyi.

She merely smiled innocently, one arm still draped around Elder Yin like an older sister teasing a younger one. "She's just eager to help," Jingyi said sweetly, as if that explained everything.

Fang Yuan sighed, muttering under his breath, *"This is my clan... these are my people..."*

He rubbed his temple, then returned to his seat with the weight pressing down on him.

"Alright then," he said at last. "As we are all too broke to even own a spatial ring."

His fingers brushed against the spatial ring on his hand, as he leaned slightly forward, "We can only do this the long way, the loud way, and the deliberate way."

He glanced to the map displayed on the jade screen beside him.

"Let the Gu family hear the footsteps of every mule. Let their ears ring with the clatter of every wheel."

A beat of silence followed.

Then, as if the spell were broken, the meeting shifted toward more mundane business.

Fang Yuan began the formal ordination of new elders.

Fang Bo, Fang Yang, and Fang Ruì stood proudly as their names were called, joy and awe flashing in their eyes.

Each received their titles with clasped hands and deep bows.

Then came Fang Tian.

Fang Tian stood up, calm and composed. "I would prefer to be named an honorary elder... Clan Head."

Fang Yuan's brow lifted slightly in surprise.

"Why?" he asked simply, voice neutral.

"I plan to go on treasure hunting after this," Fang Tian replied, unflinching. "I won't be able to participate in clan affairs."

Before Fang Yuan could say anything, another voice broke the silence.

"That is totally irresponsible of you." Elder Fang Ra stood, stroking his beard, his voice heavy with disapproval.

"The clan is in a precarious situation. Every helping hand is needed, and you wish to leave? Now, of all times?"

Fang Yuan said nothing.

He didn't agree, but he didn't object either.

The truth was plain: the clan's finances were thin. Their number of active elders could nearly be counted on one hand. Every extra hand right now mattered.

Then Elder Fang Long rose from his seat.

"Young man," he said, voice low and heavy with age-earned weight, "I understand the desire to explore. I once did too. But tell me, why request the title of honorary elder? Do you wish to enjoy the name without the responsibility? To help only when it suits you?"

He took a step forward, turning toward Fang Yuan with a rare look of defiance.

"Clan Head," he said, bowing respectfully, "forgive me, but this should not be entertained. He may be your brother, but leaving the clan to chase personal ambitions as of now only sends the wrong message."

He was firm but not rude.

But before his words could carry further, Fang Yuan raised a single hand.

Fang Long paused, falling respectfully silent.

Fang Yuan turned to look at Fang Tian, eyes sharper now.

"Brother," he said softly.

The word echoed.

A few heads turned. Titles and formality were the standard in clan meetings. To use familial address here was rare, it *usually* meant seriousness.

Fang Tian stiffened slightly. He also understood as his brother never joked when it came to clan affairs.

So he knew his brother was not addressing him as Clan Head right now... but as blood.

"Do you truly understand what you're asking for?" Fang Yuan said.

The question held no anger, only a quiet weight. Something heavy and unspoken lingered behind it.

Fang Tian took a breath as he stood straighter.

"Yes," he said. "I believe this place is holding back my cultivation. If I stay, I'll rot in comfort. I want to grow stronger, and I can't do that here. I need to spread my wings."

A hush fell across the room.

For a brief moment, Fang Tian caught what seemed like a flicker of sadness on his brother's face, subtle, almost imperceptible before it vanished beneath the familiar, unreadable coldness he always wore.

"...The family is holding you back, huh?" Fang Yuan murmured, almost to himself.

Then he nodded, slowly, expression unreadable.

"Very well."

He looked out at the elders, not raising his voice but making sure each word hit its mark.

"If that is how you feel... I'll grant you the title of honorary elder."

He turned his gaze directly to Elder Ra and Elder Long.

"And I will hear no objections."

The two elders exchanged glances, gritted teeth and furrowed brows but remained silent.

Faint murmurs rippled through the seated crowd, uneasy but muted by Fang Yuan's absolute tone.

A ding echoed faintly in Fang Yuan's consciousness.

[System Notification: -7 Faith Points (Elder Ra). -5 Faith Points (Elder Long).]

He ignored it.

Because at the end of the day, every cultivator must find their own path even his little brother.

He waved the screen away, lips tightening.

He leaned back in his chair again. "Anyone else want to be an honorary elder before we finish the meeting?"

There were a few nervous chuckles but no hands raised.

"Good."

He stood again, brushing down his robes with practiced ease. "This meeting is adjourned."

Fang Yuan watched silently as the elders filed out of the hall, their footsteps echoing faintly behind him.

What was meant to be a joyous day, a day of appointments, unity, and new beginnings had somehow turned sour.

The weight of leadership pressed against his shoulders like an unseen chain.

He stared at the report lying on the table before him.

Without a word, he picked it up, eyes scanning the inked figures, though his mind was elsewhere.

Just then, the door opened with a soft creak.

Felicia stepped in, graceful as ever in her pale servant uniform, her steps silent against the polished floor.

Fang Yuan looked up, his expression still dulled. "What brings you here?"

She bowed politely. "Family Head, a young man by the name of Da Pang from the Xiao family is requesting to see you."

"Da Pang?" Fang Yuan blinked, confused. "As in... Great Fatty?"

And then it hit him.

His eyes lit up with sudden recognition.

"Ahhh—it's Xiao Pei!" His mouth broke into a rare smile.

"Send him in! What are you waiting for!"

The gloom that clung to him lifted in an instant.

Chapter 94: Meeting Da Pang.

Just as Felicia stepped out to fetch Xiao Pei, a sudden flash of golden light lit up the chamber.

A system notification shimmered before Fang Yuan's eyes.

[New Quest: Eliminate the bandits near Tushar Village.]

Reward: 500 SP

Failure: Village Faith Loss

Almost immediately after, another message blinked into existence.

[Host, would you like to activate the Faith System in full view?]

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes at the prompt, then exhaled softly.

"...Yes," he whispered.

The moment the word left his lips, the golden light surged, brighter, warmer, almost divine.

[Integrating The Heavenly Clan Building system with Faith System...

1%... 2%...]

He stared at the numbers ticking upward.

Still staring at 26%.

"...Tch."

With a sigh, he waved the screen away. "It'll keep loading whether I watch or not."

The golden light of the system had already faded from his eyes.

Adjusting his robes, Fang Yuan left the meeting room and made his way toward his personal chamber, his steps unhurried.

He pushed open the door to his quarters and stepped inside.

Shedding his ceremonial robes, he changed into something simpler, comfortable dark inner robes, loose at the sleeves, and tied with a thin silver cord at the waist.

No armor and no emblems, just Fang Yuan, as he preferred to be.

He took a moment, adjusting the cuffs with practiced ease.

Then, with a faint sigh and a flick of his sleeve, he stepped out to greet an old friend.

Fang Yuan stepped out into the garden, the gentle splash of water and the lazy swirl of koi in the pond greeting him like an old lullaby.

The breeze was cool, carrying the faint scent of lotus blossoms.

His gaze drifted to the distant southern mountain range, veiled in a soft blue haze.

"I wonder what that old man is still up to..." he muttered under his breath, eyes narrowing slightly at the peaks beyond.

The thought passed like a shadow, and he quickly shook it off.

From the pathway near the inner gates came a familiar laugh, boisterous and unmistakable.

Fang Yuan turned, just in time to see a plump figure waddling beside Felicia, buried under what looked like a small mountain of baggage.

Yet despite the clear burden, the man still found the breath to chatter animatedly, throwing exaggerated compliments at Felicia, who merely smiled with polite indifference.

"Hah... still old Da Pang..." Fang Yuan muttered with a faint smirk, watching the way Xiao Pei angled his head a little too close to hers. "Perverved as always."

He stepped forward, hands behind his back.

"Long time no see, Xiao Pei!"

Xiao Pei froze mid-sentence, eyes lighting up as he turned.

"Shou Ge?!"

The bags clattered slightly as he stumbled forward, arms spread wide like he might attempt a dramatic embrace until he remembered who he was dealing with.

He stopped just short, panting slightly. "Shou Ge... you haven't aged a day, but I swear these bags have added twenty years to my back!"

Fang Yuan chuckled. "That's your fault for packing your entire house whenever you leave."

"I packed modestly!" Xiao Pei declared, puffing up his chest. "Just a few daily essentials—pill furnace, seven cauldrons, emergency snacks, one spiritual duck..."

Felicia glanced sideways. "You have also tried to pack your family's ancestral altar before."

Xiao Pei looked wounded. "It's a good luck charm!"

Fang Yuan just shook his head, lips twitching.

Yes... some things never changed.

Fang Yuan crossed his arms with a slight grin. "So? Did you succeed this time?"

Xiao Pei sighed dramatically, shoulders slumping. "Nope. My grandpa caught me red-handed and gave me a good beating."

Fang Yuan burst out in hearty laughter. "Pfft again?! You never learn!"

Xiao Pei pointed a chubby finger at him in mock offense. "How dare you laugh at my suffering, you vile fox! No wonder you're still single!"

Still chuckling, Fang Yuan turned to Felicia. "Felicia, go get some of the servants to carry his luggage to the guest room."

She gave a graceful bow. "Understood, Clan Head," she said before turning and walking away swiftly.

Xiao Pei's eyes followed her with exaggerated admiration. "So her name is Felicia... She's beautiful, Shao Ge. Where'd you find her?"

"Me? No, no," Fang Yuan waved a hand dismissively. "My parents adopted her."

Xiao Pei blinked. "Huh? So she's your sister?"

"Yup," Fang Yuan nodded. "So if you're eyeing her, I can't help you."

"Seriously?" Xiao Pei frowned, disappointed.

Fang Yuan suddenly laughed louder. "Are you stupid? If she were truly my sister, I wouldn't have her working as a servant."

Xiao Pei stared at him, slack-jawed.

"But," Fang Yuan continued with a smirk, "she is one of the very few servants I trust, so you can't have her either way."

"Tch. Stingy." Xiao Pei muttered.

"Come on," Fang Yuan gestured, leading him along the paved path through the courtyard. "What brings you here anyway?"

Surely not because he misses me, Fang Yuan thought with a hint of suspicion. *That'd be too weird. That's gay.*

"Because I missed you, brother Shao Ge," Xiao Pei said cheerfully.

Fang Yuan stopped in his tracks, his expression turning to horror. "Ugh, I'll kill you."

Xiao Pei clutched his heart, pretending to be wounded. "Okay, okay! Sheesh. I got kicked out, alright?"

Fang Yuan blinked. "What? I thought you were already kicked out of the Xiao family ten years ago."

Xiao Pei turned away dramatically. "Tch. Should've known better than to come crawling to you..."

Fang Yuan laughed, quickening his pace to catch up. "Hahaha! Brother Da Pang, come on, I was joking! Don't be so dramatic."

He slung an arm around Xiao Pei's shoulder. "I'll treat you to my best wine. Let's go, cheer up before I make you run laps."

Xiao Pei perked up. "You still have the plum wine?"

"Of course I do. You think I'd run out on that?"

They walked off together, bantering as they vanished deeper into the estate, two friends, reunited at last.

**

[Quick Side Note: Lukas von Avetide is now Qin Hai.]

Chapter 95: A Beauty [1] (edited)

Early the next morning, the sun had barely risen over the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, casting golden light across the dew-kissed stone courtyard.

Fang Yuan and Xiao Pei sat within the open-air garden pavilion, its elegant roof supported by red lacquered columns, surrounded by blooming lotus ponds and trimmed spirit bamboo.

A carved stone Xiangqi board lay between them, pieces already scattered in the midst of a fierce match.

The black and red pieces were sculpted from polished obsidian and crimson jade, clearly of high quality.

Xiao Pei squinted at the board and wiped sweat from his forehead as if he were in battle.

"Alright... your horse is wide open. Don't think I don't see that!" he huffed, sliding his red chariot forward along the central file. "Chariot to 5-4!"

Fang Yuan didn't even look rattled. With a serene flick of his fingers, he moved his black elephant diagonally. "Elephant to 3-5. Blocking your attack."

"Damn it," Xiao Pei muttered. "Why are you always so calm?"

Fang Yuan sipped from a porcelain cup of spiritual tea. "Because I'm always winning."

"Oh yeah?" Xiao Pei smirked. "Watch this, horse to 8-7!"

He tapped his red horse forward, trying to create pressure from the right flank.

But Fang Yuan countered immediately. "Cannon to 2-5. Check."

Xiao Pei froze, staring at the black cannon that had suddenly lined up with his general through a screen piece.

"...Again?" he groaned.

"Again," Fang Yuan said lightly. "You've left your flank exposed since move five."

"You're cheating," Xiao Pei accused, narrowing his eyes.

"I'm smarter," Fang Yuan replied with a smirk.

They continued the match for a while longer, but it was no use.

The final tally on the scorestone stood clear and brutal: 10–0.

Xiao Pei leaned forward, his face flushed with frustration and disbelief, while Fang Yuan gently placed the last chess piece down, ending yet another game.

Fang Yuan looked at him, not smugly, not mockingly, but with a gaze that could only be described as gentle pity.

"...How about we stop for today?" Fang Yuan suggested, his voice calm.

"I think we've played enough. You need time to reflect on your..... strategic creativity."

But Xiao Pei wasn't done.

"No!" he blurted out, eyes wide and hand already reaching to reset the pieces.

"Shaoge, one last game. Trust me! I've got the hang of it this time. You can believe me, I'm seriously getting better!"

Fang Yuan raised a brow, hiding his amusement.

Then a sudden idea struck him.

"You know..." he began slowly, "there's a certain beauty I've been meaning to introduce you to."

Xiao Pei practically teleported to his feet, eyes gleaming with interest.

"What are we waiting for, Shaoge?" he exclaimed. "You said we were stopping the game already, right? Come on! Let's go!"

Fang Yuan chuckled, folding his hands behind his back as he rose from the stone seat. "Right... indeed. Let's go."

Just as the two walked out of the garden pavilion, a slender figure rounded the corner, and quite literally walked straight into them.

Soft fabric brushed against Fang Yuan's arm, and the faint scent of plum blossoms lingered in the air.

The girl stepped back quickly, her expression calm but apologetic, eyes widening just slightly in surprise.

Fang Yuan's gaze landed on her and for a brief second, his mind paused.

She looked familiar. He could swear he had seen her before... yet everything about her felt new.

As if she were someone he had once passed by in a dream.

Before he could say anything, Xiao Pei had already lunged forward, not aggressively, but with both arms open in dramatic awe.

"Oh, great beauty," he declared with a completely unnecessary bow, "what thou is your beautiful name?"

Fang Yuan resisted the urge to slap the back of his friend's head.

The girl, however, did not seem offended in the least.

Instead, she smiled softly and gave a polite bow, her tone as composed as a spring breeze. "Greetings. My name is Du Juan. I am currently residing here under the protection of the Fang clan."

Her voice was like a soft chime, clear and unhurried.

Xiao Pei, unfazed by her calm demeanor, clasped his hands together. "Du Juan... ah, as graceful as the calling of a cuckoo bird in spring! What a poetic name! Did the heavens bless me today?"

Du Juan tilted her head, still smiling. "You must be a friend of the clan head."

"Indeed! His best friend. Closest companion. Brother-in-arms," Xiao Pei declared, puffing up proudly.

Fang Yuan finally spoke, his tone dry. "You were kicked out of your house just a few days ago, have some shame."

Xiao Pei's shoulders sagged. "...Shaoge, must you always bring up old wounds?"

But Du Juan only giggled softly behind her sleeve.

Fang Yuan, meanwhile, narrowed his eyes slightly.

He had seen her before. *That face.... Was she not the one he brought in just because he was curious?*

"Du Juan," he said, stepping forward. "You've recovered well, I see."

She turned to him and bowed again, respectfully. "Yes, clan head. Thank you for your kindness that day. I've been taken care of very well."

Fang Yuan narrowed his eyes slightly.

Indeed, it was her. That face... he had seen it before. Yes, beneath the soot, the blood, the ragged robes he remembered now.

The girl he brought in out of curiosity. That broken thing, unconscious, barely hanging by a thread.

And yet... this wasn't the same face, was it? Or rather was this what lay beneath all that grime?

No... something felt off.

Fang Yuan's brows twitched slightly.

Still staring at Du Juan, he couldn't help but feel a strange dissonance.

When he had brought her in off the streets, her robes had been torn, her face marked by soot and blood.

He remembered thinking she looked... plain, almost forgettable. Fragile, even.

But now, under the daylight, with clean robes and the soft glow of spiritual energy faintly visible in her skin she looked like someone entirely different.

Too different.

Was she in disguise back then? Or is she in disguise now?

A simple illusion technique? Or maybe her current state was her original appearance...?

He didn't like not knowing.

But before he could dwell further, Xiao Pei's voice cut through the tension like a rusted blade.

"Shaoge," he said, nudging Fang Yuan's arm with his elbow and grinning like a fool. "Is this the beauty you told me about earlier?"

Du Juan tilted her head slightly, curious.

Fang Yuan slowly turned to Xiao Pei, eyes narrowing.

"I must say," Xiao Pei continued with a smirk, "I didn't expect your taste in women to be even better than mine. Truly, you are a man of hidden depths."

Fang Yuan gave him a flat stare.

"I was talking about introducing you to a demoness who bites."

Xiao Pei blinked. "Huh?"

Du Juan coughed softly, politely covering her mouth, but her eyes shimmered with amusement.

Fang Yuan sighed. "This is Du Juan. She's not the one I meant."

"Then..." Xiao Pei leaned in dramatically toward Du Juan. "Lady Du Juan, may I have the honor of—"

"No," Fang Yuan said flatly, stepping between them.

"But—"

"She's recovering under clan protection."

"I'm also recovering!" Xiao Pei pointed at his own chest dramatically. "From heartbreak. From poverty. From—"

"From brain damage, clearly."

Du Juan let out a soft laugh.

"You two are very close," she said, looking between them.

Fang Yuan didn't answer that.

Instead, he turned to her, his tone subtly shifting, more serious. "Du Juan, when you're free, come see me at the Moonview Pavilion. I have some questions."

Du Juan nodded gently. "Of course, clan head."

Xiao Pei looked between them suspiciously. "Why do I feel like I'm the third wheel?"

"Cause you are, now come along, we got another beauty to meet," Fang Yuan said, already turning away.

Chapter 96: A Beauty [2] (Edited)

Xiao Pei hurriedly followed as Fang Yuan strode ahead without waiting.

He gave Du Juan a hasty wave, flashing his best grin. "We'll talk later, my lady!"

Du Juan merely offered a polite nod in return before turning and walking off with the same graceful composure.

Meanwhile, Fang Yuan and Xiao Pei made their way toward the southern wing of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion, the part of the estate housing the alchemy branch.

As they walked, Xiao Pei grew visibly tense, shuffling forward with a dry gulp.

"Shaoge..." he began, voice unusually nervous. "We're still friends, right?"

Fang Yuan gave a light chuckle. "Of course we are. That's exactly why I'm taking you to meet a real beauty."

Xiao Pei paled. "It's not your au—"

But before he could finish, a new voice overlapped his.

"Brother!"

Both men instantly turned their heads.

Fang Tian and Fang Mei were walking toward them from the opposite side of the path.

Fang Tian gave a casual wave while Fang Mei offered a polite smile.

Fang Yuan grinned. "Well, look who it is."

Xiao Pei bowed with exaggerated politeness, "Young Master Tian, Lady Mei."

Fang Yuan clapped Xiao Pei on the shoulder. "Let me introduce you properly. This is Xiao Pei—the man who helped the Fang family during our financial crisis ten years ago. Without him, we might've already been swallowed by our enemies long ago."

Fang Tian's brows lifted as realization dawned. "Ah! So you're Uncle Da Pang! I've heard the name."

Xiao Pei's face darkened. He turned sharply to Fang Yuan. "Uncle?! Am I really that old now?"

Fang Mei giggled behind her sleeve, trying to suppress her laughter.

Fang Yuan just chuckled and waved his hand. "Titles come with merit, Brother Xiao."

Then, his gaze fell on Fang Tian again, expression softening. "What brings you two here so early in the morning?"

Fang Tian stepped forward, expression unusually serious. "Brother, I have something I wish to share with you. Before I depart."

Fang Yuan's smile faltered for a brief second, and a touch of melancholy seeped into his voice. "...So it's finally happening."

The mood shifted instantly.

Even Xiao Pei, moments ago full of grumbling and complaints, stood quietly.

Fang Tian hesitated, then added, "Brother, before I go... there's something I truly wish to confide in you. Please, don't turn me away."

Fang Yuan looked at him for a long moment, then smiled faintly and nodded. "Alright. I'll be at the Moonview Pavilion. When the sun is at its highest."

"Okay, Brother."

With a respectful nod, Fang Tian turned and left with Fang Mei quietly trailing behind him.

Fang Yuan stood still for a moment, watching their figures retreat.

He let out a slow sigh, then straightened up followed by a cheerful grin.

"Brother Xiao. Come, let's go meet this beauty I promised you."

Xiao Pei, who had just been silently watching everything with genuine sympathy for Fang Yuan, felt all that pity evaporate in an instant.

He muttered under his breath, *"Tch... I was pitying a devil in disguise..."*

Then said louder, "No no, Brother Fang, I suddenly... don't want to meet this beauty of yours anymore."

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow. "Why not? You tried to flirt with her ten years ago. Backing out now?"

Xiao Pei backed away with both hands raised in defense. "I knew it! It's your aunt, isn't it?! No no no! I refuse. Brother, let's go do something more productive instead. Sparring, alchemy, digging holes, anything but that!"

Fang Yuan couldn't hold back his laugh as he pulled Xiao Pei along anyway.

Xiao Pei, still stuck at the early stage of Qi Transformation, didn't stand a chance.

To Fang Yuan, pulling him was as effortless as tugging on a sack of radishes.

"Brother Fang!" Xiao Pei cried out, heels skidding against the stone path. "We're friends! Brothers! You can't bully me like this—ahhh! Stop!"

Fang Yuan only smiled wider, completely ignoring his protests. "You'll thank me later."

Xiao Pei kept squirming in Fang Yuan's grip, still being dragged like a sack of spirit potatoes.

"Brother Fang!" he cried again, desperate. "I know you're not the type to bully people with your power! You're just joking, right? Please, let me go!"

Fang Yuan chuckled, clearly enjoying himself. "Ah... It seems you don't know me well enough after all."

Just then—

"Husband!"

Fang Yuan jumped. A genuine shock.

That voice, it hit him like thunder.

He spun around on instinct. And there she was.

Lin Zhaoyue.

Wearing a radiant smile, glowing like a thousand suns, and looking entirely too pleased with herself.

Fang Yuan gulped.

Xiao Pei also gulped. His voice came out in slow, stunned fragments.

"Brother Fang... You... are... already... married?"

Before Fang Yuan could even open his mouth—

"Yes!" Lin Zhaoyue beamed, stepping forward gracefully. "You must be Xiao Pei! I've heard so much about you."

"You... know me?" Xiao Pei blinked, caught completely off guard.

Fang Yuan interjected quickly, slipping between them like a shield. "She's a stalker. Ignore her."

But Lin Zhaoyue only giggled. "Of course I know you. You're Fang Yuan's best friend. And as his wife, shouldn't I know who he spends his time with?"

Xiao Pei stood there blinking, lost, and just nodded dumbly.

Fang Yuan sighed and gave her a sideways glance. "What brings you here?"

She pouted slightly and said in a sheepish voice, "I ran out of resources."

"Resources?" Fang Yuan raised a brow, confused.

"Mhm. The supplies in the cave... they're all gone."

"What!?" Fang Yuan's eyes widened. "Are you mad? Those were just random junk I tossed in there years ago! Half of it should've turned to powder by now!"

He stepped forward in a flash, pressing a palm to her forehead with rising dread.

"You didn't actually eat any of it... did you?"

His mind was already racing, expired beast cores, molding pills, dried spirit meat...

"Xiao Pei!" he shouted, alarmed. "Go call Doctor Mu! She might've poisoned herself!"

As he frantically checked her condition, Lin Zhaoyue leaned in, wrapping her arms around him and sniffing.

"Mmm~ husband... you really do care for m—"

Suddenly, her expression froze.

Her nose twitched faintly.

She glanced at Fang Yuan, her eyes widening just a touch then quickly turned her head away.

"...I-I'm fine," she mumbled, her voice suddenly meek. "Really. I'm okay."

Chapter 97: A Beauty [3]

Fang Yuan looked at her, confused, his hand still resting on her forehead.

Just as he was about to pull away—

She lunged forward and hugged him tightly, arms wrapping around his waist like a vice.

Her nails dug into his back with eerie precision, piercing through the fabric of his robes and grazing skin.

"H-Husband..." she whispered, breath warm against his chest. "Hold me... I feel dizzy..."

Fang Yuan winced. Not from her words but from the sharp pain biting into his flesh.

This woman...!

He gritted his teeth, gaze lowering to her arms clinging to him like a starving beast.

Blood didn't drip, but he could feel the crescent-shaped dents forming.

"Zhaoyue," he began slowly, with the careful patience of a man about to defuse a land mine. "Are you trying to stab me with your nails—"

But before he could finish, she abruptly collapsed in his embrace like a wilting flower.

Her head lolled against his chest with an exaggerated sigh of frailty.

"Don't worry, Xiao Pei..." she murmured faintly, her tone as tragic as a dying heroine in dramas. "My husband will take care of me..."

Xiao Pei, still rooted to the ground like a frozen carrot, just blinked, eyes darting from Fang Yuan to Lin Zhaoyue's pale, trembly act.

Then she tilted her face up toward Fang Yuan, her large eyes shimmering with forced innocence.

"You are my husband, right?" she asked sweetly. "You won't let your wife suffer... would you?"

Fang Yuan stared down at her. His mouth twitched.

Not from affection.

From shock. Disbelief. A little pain.

And mostly, existential dread.

This woman...

In his head, the ranking of women he absolutely needed to avoid had just been reshuffled.

Out of nowhere, the girl clinging to him snatched the number one spot—

Effortlessly pushing his Aunt Jingyi down to second place.

And no, there wasn't a number three!

He sighed as he turned to Xiao Pei, "Xiao Pei, stop standing there and go call Doctor Mu. She's definitely hallucinating."

Xiao Pei, who had been halfway between pity and terror, jolted like a rabbit.

"Y-Yes!" he shouted, nearly tripping as he dashed off in a blur of panic. "D-don't die, Miss Zhaoyue! Brother Fang, stay alive!"

He was gone in seconds.

Fang Yuan sighed. Deeply. Weighed down.

And slowly looked down at the clinging girl whose grip refused to loosen.

"...Zhaoyue."

"Hm?" she blinked up at him, all fluttery lashes and wide eyes.

"Are you done pretending to faint yet?"

She smiled sweetly. "Nope."

Lin Zhaoyue then leaned in, her voice soft and sweet as a spring breeze.

"Husband, you smell like faint plum blossoms today."

Fang Yuan pushed her away with a flick of his sleeve.

"What are you trying to do here?"

Her expression faltered for a heartbeat, hurt flashing in her eyes but it vanished just as quickly beneath a smile too smooth to be innocent.

"Ah well... Husband, would you mind giving me some resources? Just enough to stay *alive*, at the very least?"

Seeing Fang Yuan still staring at her in silence, she leaned forward slightly, voice soft, almost pitiful.

"You wouldn't want your beloved wife to freeze or starve to death out there... right?"

Her eyes shimmered faintly beneath lowered lashes, the trace of a smile curling at her lips.

A smile that seemed both fragile and laced with something far darker, as if daring him to say no.

Fang Yuan sighed as he then reached into his sleeve and pulled out a hairpin and spatial ring both of which he had taken from her during his trip to the dark forest.

"Here. These should suffice."

Lin Zhaoyue took the items, turning them in her hands briefly before sighing.

"Husband... look inside my spatial ring. There's nothing in there I can use to survive."

Fang Yuan blinked.

Now that she mentioned it, he realized he had never once checked its contents. He extended his spiritual sense into the ring and frowned.

All he saw were clothes. Dozens of sets. Elegant robes, delicate undergarments, embroidered veils, and scented sachets.

Not a single spirit stone. No pills. No rations.

"...Why not rob a person or two along the way?" he asked, a bit annoyed.

She smiled sweetly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Oh, husband. Stealing is wrong..... unless it's your heart."

Then, as if it had only just occurred to her, she said, "But are we really going to stand and chat like this? Why don't we take a seat?"

They made their way to a small garden pavilion nearby and took a seat at the stone table.

The air between them thickened with unspoken tension.

The moment she sat down, Lin Zhaoyue folded her hands neatly on her lap and tilted her head, her gaze never leaving his face.

"So... You sent Xiao Pei away just to speak with me?"

Her voice was gentle, but there was something unsettling in how unwavering her eyes were.

Fang Yuan didn't look away.

"No. You sent yourself to speak with me. So tell me, what are you really doing here?"

She blinked innocently.

"Oh, I live around here."

Fang Yuan's brow twitched.

"You live around here?"

"Mhm." She nodded, her eyes never once leaving him, unblinking, devoted and far too steady.

As she spoke, her delicate fingers began to idly trace circles on the stone table, slow and deliberate, like she was drawing invisible seals only she could see.

"What a coincidence, right?"

She tilted her head ever so slightly, lips curled into a soft smile that never quite reached her eyes.

Under the table, her leg shifted slightly. Just enough.

Her knee brushed against his.

Then, just a little more, her leg slid deliberately to press against his under the table, smooth and warm through the fabric.

Her expression didn't change, but her fingers halted for the briefest second, like a predator gauging a reaction.

Fang Yuan's brows twitched faintly.

He leaned back a fraction, calm on the surface but already preparing a dozen contingencies in his mind.

She, of course, pretended not to notice at all.

Or rather, *pretended* to pretend not to notice.

Chapter 98: A Beauty [4]

Lin Zhaoyue leaned forward just a little more, her leg still pressed uncomfortably close against Fang Yuan's beneath the table, as if anchoring herself to him.

Her finger ceased its idle tracing and tapped the stone surface.

"Since I live around here now, Husband..." she began, her tone featherlight, dripping with faux innocence but beneath it, a quiet steel rang clear.

"...it's terribly inconvenient, you know. To keep traveling back and forth... just to catch a glimpse of you."

Her lashes fluttered dramatically, like a delicate bird pretending to be wounded.
"Especially when I feel so... faint."

She lingered on that word like it was a performance, sighing softly as if she might collapse again right there.

Then, slowly, her head tilted, and her gaze locked onto his, steady, unwavering, too intense to be playful.

"Wouldn't it be simpler," she continued sweetly, "if I just stayed... here? In the Fang estate."

Her voice dipped, warm as honey but just as sticky. "Just for a little while, of course. Until I recover my strength... and my resources."

That final word was wrapped in silk but carried a weight behind it, a veiled blade behind the fan.

Her smile didn't waver.

But her eyes made it clear: *If you say no, I'll make myself even more inconvenient elsewhere.*

Fang Yuan stared at her, unmoving, while his mind churned at full capacity.

This girl was spouting absolute nonsense.

No—bullshit of the highest quality. The kind spun from silver words and silk smiles, the kind meant to entangle.

Yet even as that thought crossed his mind, another more pressing one crept in behind it.

The crisis loomed. The Fang family had just severed all trade ties with the Gu. So resources, support, influence were now in a precarious position.

And now, seated just across from him with stars in her eyes and hidden knives in her sleeves, was a solution.

A volatile, seductive, terrifying solution.

The Lin family.

Even now, the name carried weight across the northern regions like thunder on a clear day.

When he was seven, he still remembered it clearly, when the Lin clan came to visit Coldwind City, even the five great families had gathered at the gates in full ceremonial dress to greet them.

A clan that didn't knock when it entered; it announced.

Fang Yuan's gaze hardened slightly as he stared at Lin Zhaoyue.

And as if sensing it, not the contents of his thoughts, but the intensity of his focus, her expression shifted.

She beamed brightly and eagerly.

Like a cat thrilled that the mouse finally looked back at her.

She had no idea what calculations ran behind his eyes, but to her, that look alone was enough to make her heart flutter.

He was watching her.

And in her mind, that could only mean one thing.

He was starting to give in.

Fang Yuan He simply meets her unnerving stare, calm, steady, and unreadable.

For a long moment, the silence between them is taut as a bowstring, her leg still pressed shamelessly against his beneath the stone table, her finger poised like a dagger that had yet to strike.

To any outsider, it might look like hesitation.

But within Fang Yuan's mind, the calculation was swift and cold.

This was inevitable.

Resisting a Nascent Soul cultivator, especially this one... head-on would be like trying to dam a flood with a paper fan.

It wasn't bravery. It was idiocy.

And Lin Zhaoyue, for all her honeyed words and fluttering lashes, wasn't here to play fair. She was here to win.

So he stopped thinking in terms of rejection.

Instead, he started seeing her for what she was, an opportunity cloaked in obsession, a weapon wrapped in silk.

Dangerous, yes. But if wielded correctly...

He could bleed the Gu family dry and feed the Fang clan's roots all in one elegant move.

Fang Yuan leaned back slightly, a thoughtful frown ghosting his lips, not irritation, but the silent rhythm of a strategist calculating variables.

"Stay here?" he repeated, voice calm and almost distant. "The Fang estate isn't an inn, Lin Zhaoyue."

She opened her mouth, likely ready to pout, plead, or press—

But he didn't give her the chance.

"However..." his tone shifted, cool and surgical, slicing straight to the bone, "coincidences can be mutually beneficial."

His eyes sharpened.

"Your Lin Clan," he continued, "has influence far beyond Coldwind City. Especially along the Jade Serpent Trade Routes in the north, if memory serves."

He paused just long enough for her pupils to tighten. She was listening.

"The Fang family," he went on, tone growing almost bored in its precision, "finds itself at a disadvantage recently. Severing ties with the Gu family has left a few... logistical inefficiencies. Tiresome little things."

He leaned forward again, not threatening but the shift in weight carried weight.

His voice lowered, measured, deliberate.

"I dislike inefficiency, Zhaoyue."

Lin Zhaoyue's smile stayed perfectly in place, sweet and composed but behind it, something shifted.

A glint, sharp and unmistakable, lit up in her eyes. The kind of look that flickered when a cat found a bird that wanted to be caught.

She watched, with the unblinking stillness of a predator sizing up something rare: not prey, but a mate that might finally bite back.

His words weren't rejection. They were negotiation.

And to her, that meant everything.

He saw her as useful. As someone who mattered. Someone tied to his plans.

And to Lin Zhaoyue, nothing sounded more romantic.

"Oh, you want access to those trading routes through our owned channels?" she asked, her voice a slow purr.

Her hand fluttered lazily in the air, "Mmm... I find them terribly boring, so I wouldn't know much."

But even as she spoke, her leg remained firmly pressed against his under the stone table a quiet insistence, as intimate as it was unyielding.

Then she turned her head just slightly and looked at him.

Her gaze locked with his like a chain snapping tight, unwavering, burning, hungry.

"If it pleases my husband to have smoother trade," she said softly, her voice dropping an octave as if sharing a secret only the shadows should hear, "I suppose... I could speak to Father about it."

She leaned forward just a breath, the space between them thickening.

Her breath ghosted faintly against his neck, and her next words barely crossed the line between threat and promise:

"I can be very persuasive... especially when it concerns my husband's needs."

Her nail tapped once more on the stone table, a soft, deliberate click like a dagger being set on a board before the first move of a very dangerous game.

Chapter 99: A Beauty [5]

Fang Yuan sighed, long and quiet.

"...Fine," he said, followed by a curt nod. "I'll have you settled in the eastern wing of the Phoenix Soul Pavilion."

"Eastern?" Lin Zhaoyue's eyes lit up.

Her smile bloomed, "Husband... maybe we could even share a room?"

Fang Yuan turned to look at her, his gaze utterly flat, like a salted fish lying under the sun.

"...No."

He fished out his spatial ring, flicked his finger, and transferred a neat sum of spirit stones into hers before handing it over.

"Take it," he said. "But first, inform your father. Once you get a proper confirmation from him, come back and let me know."

Then, as if regretting every word that left his mouth, Fang Yuan pinched the bridge of his nose and added with grave reluctance,

"If this succeeds..." he sighed, "Maybe, just maybe, I'll consider the room-sharing."

That was all she needed.

Lin Zhaoyue sprung to her feet like a girl promised the moon.

She smoothed out her sleeves, cleared her throat with all the grace of a palace maiden, and declared, "Ahem. Alright then. I'll contact my father immediately."

She turned and began walking away, posture elegant and movements controlled—

But Fang Yuan's eyes narrowed.

Despite her poise, her shoulders were visibly trembling.

He could see the joy leaking out from her back.

"...Did I do the right thing?" he muttered to himself, rubbing his temples.

Before he could sink deeper into regret, a familiar voice rang out—

"Brother Fang!"

Xiao Pei came sprinting in, panting slightly, followed closely by Doctor Mu, who, despite his age, was somehow keeping up with surprising stubbornness.

The old physician was already adjusting the strap of his medicine kit as he arrived.

Fang Yuan raised an eyebrow at Xiao Pei. "At the very least... you could've carried him."

Doctor Mu wheezed a laugh. "Indeed! This fatty could use the exercise. Ran the whole way at my speed, an old man's pace!"

Xiao Pei's face turned red. "H-Hey! I was being considerate, alright? I was matching your speed out of respect, not because I couldn't run faster!"

Fang Yuan chuckled, and even the old doctor shook his head with a grin.

But then—

A chill sliced through the air like a sword.

Xiao Pei froze.

He turned, slowly.

Lin Zhaoyue was still nearby, standing by the corridor with perfect posture... and staring directly at him.

Her eyes were cold.

Her expression: emotionless. But that deadpan gaze carried the weight of a thousand threats.

Xiao Pei gulped audibly.

"...Did I say something wrong?" he whispered.

"Oh, you did nothing wrong."

Lin Zhaoyue stepped forward with perfect grace, her sleeves fluttering like petals in the breeze.

Her eyes remained on Xiao Pei just long enough for him to flinch before her gaze shifted, warm and poised, to the elderly man beside him.

"You must be Doctor Mu," she said with a gentle smile, bowing slightly. "I've heard many tales of your brilliance. Thank you for saving my husband's grandfather. That was... a miracle. Especially coming from a mortal."

Her voice was silk-wrapped steel, humble in tone, yet subtly sharp with every carefully chosen word.

Doctor Mu let out a hearty, chest-deep laugh that echoed through the courtyard. "Aiya, I like this one! Is this the girl who needed treatment?"

He leaned forward, squinting at her with a mix of curiosity and approval. "Good, good. You've got manners, girl. Hard to find that these days."

Xiao Pei twitched, a protest dying on his lips as if strangled. He forced a stiff nod.

Of course. Doctor Mu was a mortal. He couldn't feel the quiet, razor-edged pressure that wrapped around her like silk hiding steel.

Still, Xiao Pei swallowed hard and inched back, one cautious step at a time.

Lin Zhaoyue offered a demure tilt of her head, her smile as gentle as moonlight on water.

But then, a flicker.

Her gaze slid to Fang Yuan for just a heartbeat.

Not a word was spoken, but in that single glance, there was a whisper:

"See? I can be perfect, just for you."

Fang Yuan stared back, unblinking.

And then sighed.

Doctor Mu clapped his hands. "Come now, let's go take a seat. The wind's no good for frail meridians."

Lin Zhaoyue nodded with the obedient grace of a model disciple and began walking toward the wooden bench, her steps featherlight.

As she passed Xiao Pei, close enough for her breath to frost his neck she leaned in ever so slightly and whispered something, soft, almost musical.

Xiao Pei froze. His eyes widened a fraction as if her words had tickled the base of his spine with a cold feather.

Then, without another word, he shuffled over to Fang Yuan, clutching at his cloak like a child grabbing the edge of a parent's sleeve during a thunderstorm.

Meanwhile, Doctor Mu eased himself down onto the seat with a grunt, patting the empty space beside him. "Alright, girl. Open your mouth. Stick out your tongue. Let me take a look."

Lin Zhaoyue came to a soft halt, lashes lowered. A breath passed, quiet.

Then a flicker.

Her spiritual pressure stirred, barely a pulse, like the shimmer of a blade unsheathing in the dark.

It wasn't strong enough for a mortal like Doctor Mu or a cultivator like Xiao Pei to notice.

But Fang Yuan felt it, that brief ripple of indignation beneath her graceful exterior.

She smoothed it away a heartbeat later, her poise never wavering.

Her eyes, however, told the truth.

Just for a second, her eyes narrowing, not at the request, but at the fact that a mortal dared to examine her.

It was a glance that could've frozen spring blossoms mid-bloom.

Still, she complied with an air of amused indulgence, tilting her chin and slowly sticking her tongue out as if she were humoring a strange, stubborn grandpa.

Fang Yuan watched all this unfold, then turned to Xiao Pei, whose hand still clutched his sleeve in a death grip.

"...What did she say to you just now?" he asked.

Xiao Pei shuddered. "I-I don't know. She asked something weird. Really weird."

He glanced sideways at Lin Zhaoyue and quickly leaned in close, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"B-Brother Fang... why would you...? She's a beauty, sure, b-but her eyes—they look I-like they've already seen how I die!"

Fang Yuan nearly sighed.

He almost told him that the 'beauty' he meant for him was never Zhaoyue, it had always been Aunt Jingyi.

But he glanced at his friend's pale face, the tremble in his voice, and decided against adding more emotional trauma to the poor guy's day.

Instead, he said gently, "Alright, alright. Just tell me what she said. I'll handle the rest, Da Pang."

Xiao Pei hesitated, then muttered, still stammering, "...She asked me if I knew any girl... who smells like plum blossom."

Fang Yuan's eyes sharpened.

Plum blossom? He recalled, clear as day—Lin Zhaoyue had once leaned into his robes, breathed in deep, and murmured that he smelled like plum blossoms.

His gaze snapped to her.

And sure enough, Lin Zhaoyue was already looking his way, tongue stuck out like a diligent patient but her eyes were anything but innocent.

A hunter's glint sharpened in her eyes, patient, possessive, and perilously pleased.

Chapter 100: A Random Family [1]

Meanwhile, at the Gu Family Council:

Gu Jian sat high upon the patriarch's seat, expression carved in stone as chaos churned beneath him.

The great hall echoed with the clamor of over sixty elders, their voices overlapping in heated argument.

The matter at hand: whether or not to confront the one known as the Sword Demon, Khai Sang of Ghost Cliff Pass.

One by one, the elders voiced their discontent, their agitation growing louder than reason.

Even among them, ten bore the title of Grand Elder, Golden Core cultivators, their status commanding both reverence and stubborn pride.

Gu Jian exhaled slowly, fingers stroking his pointed goatee in restrained frustration. *These old fools... They've grown so used to power, they've forgotten prudence.*

In all the Northern Regions, only two clans wielded the fearsome power of the Nascent Soul realm, his own Gu Family, and the Lin Family.

And now, that fragile balance had been disturbed.

The meeting's true catalyst wasn't Khai Sang. No—it was Gu Zhen, his son.

Gu Jian's gaze darkened.

Days ago, that ungrateful brat had the gall to storm out without permission, dragging the family's finest young cultivators to ambush Lin Zhaoyue, the Lin Family's only Nascent Soul cultivator.

And then... he came back humiliated, blaming everything on Khai Sang's interference.

"If that Sword Demon hadn't appeared," Gu Zhen had said, standing proud despite the disgrace, "I would've captured her with ease!"

Gu Jian's knuckles whitened on the armrest.

Captured her? Lin Zhaoyue, the so-called Queen of Ice was no mere woman to be trifled with.

She would be turning thirty in less than a month, and had already reached mid-stage Nascent Soul.

That alone was a terrifying feat.

Even Fang Yuan, for all his renown, was rumored to be at the early stage at best.

Rumored.

But Gu Jian knew better.

Because unlike the rest of the empire who dismissed the truth as madness, the Gu Family and the Royal Qin Clan knew the horrifying secret: Fang Yuan wasn't just at the early stage of Nascent Soul.

He was hiding it. They knew he wasn't merely at the early stages of Nascent Soul. He was beyond it!

As the elders' voices escalated again, Gu Jian raised his hand.

"Enough," he said, his voice calm but edged with steel.

The hall fell silent.

Gu Jian slowly rose to his feet, robes pooled around him like spilled ink, voice cutting through the noise like a drawn blade.

"Think, all of you," he said, tone laced with disdain. "Khai Sang is not who we should be focusing on."

An elder slammed his palm on the table. "But Patriarch, this is a matter of pride! Our family's reputation was dragged through the mud by that Sword Demon!"

Murmurs of agreement followed, dozens of wrinkled heads nodding, fists clenched, old blood boiling with wounded ego.

Gu Jian's eyes narrowed. His voice cracked like thunder.

"Pride? Then let's talk about pride!"

He jabbed a finger forward, silencing the hall with sheer force of presence.

"What about the Fang Family? We demanded spirit stones to aid in our recovery. Reasonable, wasn't it? And how do they answer?"

He sneered.

"Not with quiet submission. Not with respect. No, they announce they'll send it by caravan, of all things!"

The elders blinked, uncertain.

Gu Jian stepped down from the dais, voice rising, scathing and scornful.

"A caravan! To crawl its way through a dozen mountain passes, through bandit lands and monster dens. They want the world to see it. Want everyone to hear: 'Come, take it from us. Rob the Gu Family blind.'"

His fist slammed into the table with a dull boom.

"If that's not a blatant act of disrespect, then tell me, what is?!"

The room trembled under his fury.

He swept his gaze over the stunned elders, lips curling.

"So shut the fuck up... and get your priorities straight."

Silence. Heavy and suffocating.

No elder dared breathe, much less speak. Their anger fizzled under the weight of cold, brutal logic.

Gu Jian's voice rang out once more, sharp as a sword and heavy with meaning.

"Yes, Khai Sang humiliated our young geniuses," he said, letting the words hang in the air. "But did he kill any of them?"

He swept his gaze across the elders.

"Not a single one returned as a corpse."

He paused.

"Not a single one."

His voice dropped to a whisper that scraped like gravel over stone.

"Is that not enough to show he still holds some respect for the Gu Family name?"

Then his tone sharpened, scornful and cold.

"Now imagine! imagine if it had been Fang Yuan instead of Khai Sang."

He let the silence stretch, and then:

"None of them would have returned."

Murmurs of unease rippled through the room.

"Our clan's future would have been crippled. Our name dragged through the mud. We'd be the laughingstock of the empire."

He took a deep breath, voice steadying as he addressed the elders again.

"Fellow elders... your sons were raised on elixirs, not on experience."

His eyes flicked toward a few familiar faces, elders whose pride in their sons had grown too loud too fast.

"They flaunt their cultivation, but even a seasoned Qi Transformation rogue could humble them in the wild."

His voice turned firm, almost fatherly in tone.

"Curb their ego. For their sake and ours."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, the gesture of a man wearied by fools.

"Elixirs can raise cultivation. But only hardship can raise a cultivator."

Gu Jian then exhaled, slow and deep.

He reached for a silk tissue, dabbing his lips with deliberate calm as if wiping away the last trace of emotion.

When he spoke again, his tone was composed but no less dangerous.

"Back to topic, the Fang Family has recently severed all business ties with us," he said quietly, voice as sharp as a blade sheathed in velvet. "But they are not invincible."

He swept his cold gaze across the elders.

"They've struck first. Fine. Let them."