

Immortal 1001

Chapter 1001: An Unexpected Acquaintance

Over the following two days, Sang Hong visited the Governor Manor and King Yan Manor from time to time to express his concern and sympathy toward his colleagues. But whenever they really did ask him to do anything, he would always refuse in an experienced manner.

On the third day, the imperial envoy fleet officially set off, continuing on their predetermined path.

Zu An would summon Daji as his model to train his drawing skills according to the 'Face of a Thousand Identities' technique whenever he had time. Unfortunately, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't obtain any Rage points from her again. It was to the extent where he even wondered if the few points he had gotten from her were just his imagination.

However, something that was worth being happy over was that his drawing skills were improving visibly. He was a cultivator after all, so his grasp over his power and its use wasn't something ordinary people could compare to. Furthermore, his powerful mental strength made learning anything much faster.

From the Down's syndrome patient he had initially drawn, his drawing was now seventy to eighty percent accurate. But whenever Zu An looked at the real Daji and compared her to his drawing, he would always sigh and think that no matter how great his artistic skills became, it would still fail to truly reflect this woman's beauty.

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Their ship continued north for a while before the imperial envoy fleet went ashore, changing directions and heading west by horse. Cloudcenter Commandery was in the northwest. There was no waterway that could take them straight there.

Unlike other commanderies, Cloudcenter Commandery was vast, but sparsely populated. Its size was vast; its area was several times larger than many of the southern commanderies added together.

The surrounding scenery was completely different from what they had seen along the way. They first traveled through a large desert that was so desolate, there were only rocks there. Forget about trees, it was difficult for them to even see a single stalk of grass.

Fortunately, they were all elites from the court, and the bodies of cultivators were tough. They had guides sent by the local officials, so even though the trip was difficult, there wasn't any danger.

The only small episode they encountered was a group of ignorant bandits. This place was so poor that the bandits were forced to take a risk out of desperation. They attacked at night to try and steal some goods.

In the end, the bandits were no different from ordinary guards. Zu An and Sang Hong didn't need to lift a finger; Gao Ying and Pei You were able to easily wipe them out with the Armed Escort Army. The two of them actually felt a bit disappointed that the bandits didn't put up more of a fight. After all, they had traveled with the fleet for so long, and it was finally their turn to do something. All of this was military service they would accumulate!

Only Sang Hong alone picked up something strange from the bandits' weapons. Many of them were government army standard issue.

After chatting with Zu An for a bit, the conclusion they reached was that either the bandits had robbed a small troop and stolen the weapons, or some people had resold the weapons to them.

If it was the latter, there were huge problems with Cloudcenter Commandery. But the two of them knew that it was useless even if they worried about such things now. They could only slowly investigate things once they arrived at Cloudcenter Commandery.

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Once they left the desert, the scenery was no longer as bleak. They even passed by some scattered towns along the way. As they continued west, grassland, mountains, and other such things appeared before them. Of course, since it was winter, the grasslands were dried up and there was snow everywhere.

The imperial envoy was mostly composed of people from the capital who had never seen such scenery before. They all found the area novel and interesting. Even Sang Hong often voiced his praise toward the magnificence of the area. He explained to the others the fact that several hundred years before, this place was still the domain of the fiend races. Later on, as successive generations of human emperors expanded their territory, they seized the land from the fiend races bit by bit, turning it into the human race's land. Sang Hong sounded extremely proud when he spoke of that.

From time to time, Gao Ying and Pei You egged Zu An on to write something new. They had already had a taste of glory, so they were trying to see if they could have their names added onto new works of poetry. If they could, that would be fame throughout the ages!

Zu An refused without the slightest hesitation. All the people traveling with them were already old acquaintances. Who would he even be trying to show off to here? All of his concentration was on improving his artistic skills. When the others were setting up camp, he would take Daji some distance away to practice his sketching.

Perhaps it was because of the stunning scenery, or maybe it was just Daji's devastatingly beautiful self, but he could sense that his artistic skills were advancing by leaps and bounds. It seemed he was going to reach the standard of 'Face of a Thousand Identities' soon.

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Just like that, half a month passed, and the group finally arrived at Cloudcenter Commandery. What they had seen along the way were just some small towns, so when they saw towering city walls, they all found it a bit hard to get used to at first. Cloudcenter City was quite a bit larger than even Yi Commandery!

But that was understandable. Cloudcenter Commandery produced large amounts of ki stones, so it was extremely wealthy. Furthermore, it was the political, economic, and military center of the vast northwest region; all of these factors naturally made it flourishing and majestic.

Cloudcenter Commandery's officials had already received news of their arrival. They greeted the imperial fleet outside the city. "We respectfully welcome the imperial envoy!"

There were three people at the very front of the welcoming group. The one in the center was Cloudcenter Magistrate Zuo Su. One look at his big-bellied figure made Zu An immediately think he was the textbook definition of a corrupt official.

However, his attention quickly shifted to the man with a neatly trimmed mustache next to him. He was tall, and he had long, sharp brows that gave him a strong and valiant air. However, his meticulous mustache, his fingernails, and eyebrows had all been trimmed carefully. Even though all of that could be considered scholarly and elegant, Zu An still felt he was trying too hard and a bit cringey.

The reason why Zu An was paying attention to him wasn't because he was interested in the man, but rather because he had seen him before in the valley outside Brightmoon City in the past. He had only known that this was Yu Yanluo's brother-in-law. Only now did he discover the person's real identity. He was Cloudcenter Commandery's acting Commander-in-Chief Jian Taiding!

Due to Cloudcenter Commandery's location in the northwest, they would encounter invasions from the fiend races from time to time. It was usually the Martial Supervisor who was in charge of military affairs in other commanderies—for example, Yi Commandery's Yang Sheng—but Cloudcenter Commandery had a higher Military Governor Manor.

Cloudcenter Commandery's Martial Supervisor position was held by Jian Yanyou. Normally, he was in charge of ensuring the safety of Cloudcenter Commandery, while also fending off the invasions of the fiend races and others in the border.

After Cloudcenter Duke's disappearance, his younger brother, the former chief historian of the Military Governor Manor, had temporarily taken his place.

Zu An thought to himself, Someone like this actually came all the way to Brightmoon City without alerting anyone. Not even Brightmoon City's local officials or Brightmoon Duke Chu Zhongtian noticed anything.

The first time they had met, Zu An's cultivation was so low that he couldn't see a thing about the other man. But upon closer examination, the other party's aura was reserved, and there was a divine glow within his eyes. The other person seemed to already be at the master rank.

The emperor really thinks way too highly of me... He actually sent me all the way here to deal with the Jian clan! Even though Sang Hong is the imperial envoy, he only has eight ranks of cultivation. The imperial envoy's biggest asset in strength is Golden Token Eleven, and Golden Token Eleven is me!

Zu An couldn't help but look down on Chu Zhongtian when he thought of that. He was also a duke, yet look at how impressive this Cloudcenter Dukedom was! Just a little brother was already at the master rank.

But Chu Chuyan seemed to have told him before that Chu Zhongtian was injured severely in the past, causing his cultivation to drop. Otherwise, there was no way the court would have been able to treat him the way they did.

With Sang Hong present to take care of all the formalities, there was no need for him to do such tiresome things. He only had to nod and smile.

But as they introduced themselves to each other, Zu An's attention shifted to a square-faced, upright-looking middle-aged man. He was Cloudcenter City's City Lord Pei Shao.

His official rank was one thing. More importantly, his surname was Pei. Paired with how Pei You was cheerfully chatting with the man, this was probably Pei Mianman's father, whom Pei You had mentioned before.

"Big Manman, I can finally see you again." Zu An's gaze became passionate when he looked at the distant Cloudcenter City. After they had separated the last time, it had already been a long time since he had received any messages from her.

The imperial envoy fleet was welcomed inside the city by many officials. They were led in and settled down by people who specialized in that role. As for the other officials, they went their own way. They had to prepare a welcome party at the magistrate manor in the evening.

Soon afterward, Sang Hong called over Zu An in private. He said, "You've just met Jian Taiding. What's your impression of him?"

Zu An replied, "He doesn't seem to be the type to show off his abilities. He's clearly a master rank, yet he yields to the magistrate. If he doesn't truly have absolute loyalty and devotion to the court and doesn't dare to step out of line in the slightest, he's someone who is harboring a huge disaster."

"Sigh, that was what I was thinking too." Sang Hong was full of worry. "I wonder if that Golden Token Eleven can deal with him. I just consulted with Xiao Jianren, but he replied to everything with 'I don't know'. He doesn't even know if Golden Token Eleven has arrived in Cloudcenter Commandery."

"I think he's probably arrived," Zu An said with an embarrassed chuckle. He asked, "By the way, can you contact the local golden token envoy? I believe it'll be much easier to deal with him if we have more people to help us."

Sang Hong shook his head and replied, "I already asked Xiao Jianren. Cloudcenter Commandery doesn't have any other Golden Token Envoys. Only kingdoms have golden token envoys overseeing them. Cloudcenter Commandery's situation is special and it doesn't have any golden token envoys here."

Zu An thought to himself, Looks like the emperor is more worried about the royal family rebelling.

The two of them chatted for a bit longer. Then, Zu An told Sang Hong that he wanted to take the chance to look around Cloudcenter Commandery and familiarize himself with his environment.

Sang Hong nodded, saying, "My objective is too great. We'll work separately in tandem, one overt and one covert. I'll draw the attention of the major clans over here from our temporary residence, while you'll investigate in private."

Zu An had a strange look on his face. He had actually just been planning to meet with Pei Mianman. But because of Sang Qien, he couldn't just tell Sang Hong that. He could only vaguely agree.

After leaving the temporary residence, Zu An walked through a remote alley. His appearance quickly became entirely different. After training the entire time on the way, even though he couldn't change his appearance to become like a specific person, it wasn't too difficult to use 'Face of a Thousand Identities' to change his appearance a bit. That way, he didn't have to always wear disguise masks in the future.

The City Lord Manor was easy to find. Zu An felt a bit moved when he saw the words 'Pei Manor' on the entrance. Of course, with his current identity, he couldn't enter through the front entrance. He took a detour and snuck inside through a place with relatively weaker security.

With the jade badge to observe his surroundings, Mirror Mirage hiding his aura, and Grandgale's instantaneous movement, even though the security there was tight, it wasn't too difficult for him to deal with.

Zu An was looking for Pei Mianman's room when Pei Shao's voice suddenly came from a distant corridor. "Young heir has come from afar. I must apologize for not heading out to greet you earlier."

"Young heir?" Zu An's eyes narrowed. Was this an old acquaintance?

Chapter 1002: Mysterious Swordsman

Zu An kicked off lightly, silently flying through the air and landing atop a large tree off to the side. He looked into the distance through the dense treetop.

A group of people slowly walked over from the other end of the corridor. The one in the lead was precisely City Lord Pei Shao, whom Zu An had seen earlier. He was talking to a young man about something. Even though he wasn't engaging in excessive flattery, he had a huge smile on his face and his words were polite. It was clear that he greatly respected the other party's status.

Upon closer inspection, Zu An noticed that the young man's clothing was extravagant, and his collar was embroidered with gold and jade designs. He had a handsome and confident appearance, but there was a kind of indescribable pride in his eyes.

"It's fine; you all had to receive the imperial envoy. This young heir doesn't wish to cause too much of a scene and let too many people know of my arrival." The young man suddenly frowned in the middle of his sentence, subconsciously moving his legs a bit. His gait occasionally turned a bit awkward as he walked. Whenever that happened, a gloomy expression flickered through his eyes.

Pei Shao obviously noticed what was happening. He asked out of concern, "Was the young heir injured? We have many medicines that should be of help to the young heir's injuries."

"Do you think my King Qi Manor lacks medicines?" The young man rolled his eyes. "It's just the residual effect of a small injury; it won't hinder anything." Even though that was what he said, he was gritting his teeth in anger. It was obvious that he wasn't as calm as he was trying to appear.

You have successfully trolled Zhao Zhi for +444 +444 +444...

Zu An almost burst out laughing. It was, of course, King Qi's heir Zhao Zhi! This guy really is my lucky star, haha! He's donating so many Rage points right after we meet again.

As for the awkwardness in Zhao Zhi's gait, it was because Zu An had broken his legs before. Even though they had already healed, there was still some pain whenever it was too windy or rainy. The weather in the northwest was quite chilly, so that feeling was even more pronounced than before.

Zu An's eyes shifted off to the side. An elder was following several feet behind Zhao Zhi. His silver hair was combed neatly and tidily; his eyes were sharp as he scanned the surroundings, as if on guard against any hidden enemies.

He was also an old acquaintance: King Qi Manor's protector, with cultivation at the peak of the ninth rank, Han Fengqiu.

Zu An thought to himself, Being a protector of King Qi Manor really is a bitter fate. The other famous attendants had all died in Westhound Tomb's secret dungeon. Now, only Han Fengqiu alone was left. Zu An wondered if he was feeling any pressure deep down.

Pei Shao immediately realized that the injury was a sore spot King Qi's heir wasn't willing to talk about. He felt a bit of regret over his rudeness and naturally didn't keep asking about it, but said, "With the king and young heir's ability, even more severe injuries must not be a problem."

Zhao Zhi gave a few absent-minded replies, then glanced over to the side. "By the way, I've been hearing about Miss Pei's beauty for a long time. Why has she not made an appearance yet?"

Zu An's eyes narrowed when he heard that. This fella actually came for Big Manman? Kid, you're heading down a road you don't want to take!

Pei Shao replied, "I've already sent someone for her."

Suddenly, a maid rushed over and said, "Master, the miss is unwilling to come out. She said she was going into isolation and did not wish to meet anyone."

Pei Shao's smile froze. He exclaimed, "You useless thing... Tell her to come out again!"

"Understood!" The maid felt wronged. However, she didn't dare to argue with the master when she saw him angry. She quickly turned around and left.

Pei Shao then explained to Zhao Zhi, "My clan's daughter has been spoiled too much by her mother. The young heir has seen a poor side of us. I hope you do not take offense."

Zhao Zhi waved his hand and said, "It's fine. Either way, the main objective of this trip isn't to meet her..."

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Even though Zu An really wanted to continue listening in on their discussion, it wasn't as important as Pei Mianman. When he saw the maid leave, he secretly followed along. Meanwhile, Han Fengqiu sensed something and turned around to look at the tree Zu An had been hiding in earlier.

"What is it?" Zhao Zhi asked out of curiosity when he sensed that Han Fengqiu was acting strange.

"It's nothing." Han Fengqiu felt a bit strange too. He seemed to have sensed a figure darting out, but when he looked closer, there was nothing. Am I starting to see things?

But he soon threw away those suspicions. He had been on guard the entire time. With his cultivation, the number of individuals who could escape his detection in all of Cloudcenter Commandery could be counted on one hand. Furthermore, all of them were important figures; why would they come to Pei Shao's home to cause trouble? It must be because I've been too tense recently.

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Meanwhile, Zu An followed the maid into the inner courtyard. His brows gradually furrowed. Big Manman is an important member of the clan, so why is the place she lived in so remote? No wonder he couldn't find it earlier.

The maid quickly arrived at a small, tattered courtyard. Compared to how splendid the other courtyards in the City Lord Manor were, the place could indeed be considered tattered. However, it was rather quiet and peaceful, giving off a bit of a transcendent feeling.

"Young miss, young miss!" The maid began to knock on the door, calling out, "The master says that your respected self has to go out at least once!"

"I'm not going!" A familiar voice replied from inside. It was still as lovable as Zu An remembered, but the voice now carried a hint of fatigue.

"Big Manman!" Zu An could no longer hold back his emotions when he heard the familiar voice. He walked over with large steps.

"Which scoundrel dares to enter the young lady's residence?!" a voice called out from off to the side just then, accompanied by a cold snort.

Zu An immediately became alert. He quickly moved several zhang to the side. A vicious longsword instantly stabbed into the spot he had just been standing in.

He wiped off a handful of cold sweat. If he had been even a moment slower, there might already be a huge hole in his body. He had been able to stop Yi Commandery City Lord's grand ki sword with just two fingers, but he wouldn't dare to try the same thing with this sword. His first reaction was to evade.

"Huh?" The other party clearly hadn't expected Zu An to evade so quickly. However, his sword didn't stop at all, instead continuing to thrust out precisely and accurately.

Zu An was immediately on high alert when he saw the sword that shot out like shooting stars. He had met his fair share of swordsmen, but the person before him was definitely the best out of all of the sword users he had ever encountered before. He used Grandgale to evade several dozen zhang away while summoning Hundredwarble to carry out a mental attack, disturbing the other party's next action.

Hundredwarble's phantom charged at the person, who laughed out loud and said, "We should live every day as if it were our last; tomorrow's worries can wait until tomorrow!" He rushed straight through Hundredwarble's phantom, which exploded into bits of light.

Zu An's expression became overcast. This person was a master rank cultivator at the very least, and his soul was far more concentrated than Zu An's own. That was why Hundredwarble's mental attack didn't work at all. Most importantly, the other person's sword technique was just too brilliant. It always seized the best gaps between his attacks.

With his current cultivation, his use of Grandgale was pretty much limitless. However, there was a few seconds of cooldown between each use. An ordinary person wouldn't notice, and together with how fast the instantaneous movement was, even if they did notice, they wouldn't be able to seize that fleeting opportunity.

But this person was completely different. Even though his body was still lagging behind, his sword was faster than his body. It instantly arrived in front of Zu An.

Is he controlling a flying sword? Zu An didn't have time to think to himself. He took out the Tai'e Sword and traded more than ten blows with the flying sword. No matter how complex and intricate the flying sword's attacks were, he blocked every single strike.

"Hm?" It was the other party's turn to be shocked. Even though he hadn't gone all out, it was the first time all of his sword attacks had been blocked.

Zu An got a good look at the other person too. He was a middle-aged man with a long beard, with a few strands of curled hair on his forehead. He had a somewhat sleepy-eyed expression. On his back was a giant green gourd. Zu An could smell the strong smell of alcohol from his body even from far away.

This place was bitterly cold, yet the man still only wore a single layer. His clothes had dark blotches that could have been leftover alcohol or oil. His pants were wide and loose, and a pair of worn-out sandals was on his feet.

The person's appearance was as sloppy as sloppy could be. If it were a normal person who looked like that, other people's first reaction would be to assume he was a dirty and smelly beggar. However, this person was different. Zu An could still see signs that the man had a handsome and heroic past when he was younger. The feeling the man gave off was one of endless loneliness and bleakness.

While Zu An was examining the man, the other party was also sizing him up. Zu An had had an opening cut in his clothes by sword ki because he was caught unprepared. Even though he wasn't injured, it still exposed the skin underneath. The sloppy-looking middle-aged man suddenly noticed the flame-shaped pendant around Zu An's neck. His eyes couldn't help but narrow.

Just then, a loud voice called out from the distance, "There's an assassin!"

Their battle had caused such a huge disturbance that the City Lord Manor's guards would have to be blind to not notice anything. Countless guards stormed over. There were a few who were extremely fast, clearly the elites from the city lord manor. Even the auras of other cultivators from farther out were approaching quickly.

The sloppy middle-aged man gave Zu An a deep look. Then, he kicked off the ground and disappeared into the distance.

Zu An frowned slightly. From the looks of things, he clearly couldn't meet with Big Manman now. With his status, he didn't want to get into any conflict with the City Lord and the guards either. He decided to leave in another direction.

Chapter 1003: Sword Immortal

Zu An took several turns and detours, using his mysterious movement technique to throw off his pursuers. Then, he returned to Pei Manor. He hadn't been able to see his Big Manman last time after being interrupted by that mysterious swordsman, but he wanted to try again.

But unfortunately, after what had just happened, the City Lord had already strengthened the security. There were guards everywhere. No matter how high his cultivation was, it was impossible to sneak in under broad daylight without being invisible.

“Who was that sword master?” Zu An cursed that mysterious swordsman to death. At the same time, he began to wonder who the man really was.

He had thought that it was someone from the Pei clan at first. But once the manor’s guards were alerted, the mysterious swordsman chose to run and avoid the guards. This made him reject that suspicion.

But if the man wasn’t from the Pei clan, if his cultivation was so high, why would he take up residence near Pei Mianman? Judging from what Zu An had heard, the man seemed to be protecting Big Manman? But he had never heard Big Manman mention someone like that!

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Just then, some noise came from a side door. Zhao Zhi was there, wrapped in an overcoat that could hide his face. Then, he got into a carriage that had been prepared there. Han Fengqiu looked around vigilantly. Then, he pulled a hood over his eyes and drove the carriage away.

Zu An was alarmed. He followed them several li out to a residence. From the looks of it, the building was likely the home of a wealthy merchant in the city. Even though the residence wasn’t that special, the security was strict. It was definitely one of King Qi Manor’s secret bases.

Zu An didn’t want to alert them. After looking around to remember the place, he quietly left.

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After Zu An returned to the temporary official residence, he changed into his Golden Token Eleven uniform and headed to Xiao Jianren’s room.

Xiao Jianren sighed in relief when he saw Zu An, saying, “Sir Eleven, it’s been a long time since I received any information from you. We were extremely worried!”

After all, they had traveled through that vast desert, and yet they hadn’t seen Golden Token Eleven. They had even wondered if he arrived in Cloudcenter City. Now they finally felt as if they had a pillar to rely on again.

“I arrived ahead of time to look around a bit. I’ve already found out that King Qi’s heir secretly came to Cloudcenter Commandery; they have a hideout here. Send some people to monitor this location. Contact me as soon as you notice something strange,” Zu An said. He warned Xiao Jianren, “Han Fengqiu is here as well, and they’re on high alert. Don’t alarm them and scare them away.”

“I understand. Shadowing is the Embroidered Envoy’s specialty.” Xiao Jianren had a serious expression as he patted his chest and made a guarantee. Then, he gave Zu An a look of admiration, saying, “Sir truly is deep and immeasurable; you actually found out such important information so quickly.”

Zu An’s face heated up. All of that was merely a coincidence. However, when he saw the other party’s look of admiration, he obviously wouldn’t explain it either. He added, “There is one other matter. Are there any well-known sword-using experts in Cloudcenter Commandery at the master rank?”

When he saw how the other party didn't treat the investigation of King Qi's heir as a big deal at all, Xiao Jianren thought to himself that the boss really was the boss. Such an attitude wasn't something people like him could have.

He quickly proposed a few candidates when he received the question, but then said, "But even though they're all swordmasters, none of them seem to have reached the master rank... Sir, could it be that the one your respected self is talking about came from elsewhere?"

Zu An thought of something. He quickly gave Xiao Jianren a description of the man's appearance. At the same time, he recalled, "He seemed to have chanted a line of poetry, something like 'we should live every day as if it were our last; tomorrow's worries can wait until tomorrow'. I wonder if that's the name of his sword technique or if it's just his favorite expression."

Xiao Jianren's eyes lit up and he replied, "Now that sir has mentioned that, I've thought of someone who seems to match your description."

"Who is it?" Zu An was extremely curious, since it was related to Big Manman.

"The libationer's third disciple, Sword Immortal Xiao Yao," Xiao Jianren replied.

"He's the libationer's third disciple?" Zu An had never expected that person to be related to the libationer! He had heard quite a bit from Jiang Luofu, Xie Daoyun, and the others during their chats.

The libationer had twelve disciples, and each one of them was a specialist in a certain domain. For example, the senior disciple excelled at drawing talismans, Shen Xuzi at alchemy, Hei Baizi at chess...

There were still some disciples he hadn't yet met outside of the capital. Among the remaining disciples, some had special statuses that forced them to remain outside. For example, the tenth disciple, who was excellent at military strategy, remained at the border.

There were some who were even more mysterious, the outside world not even knowing their surnames or backgrounds. There was very little information about those people. For example, the second disciple was a doctor, the sixth an artist, the ninth a singer. However, the exact information about those people, and even whether they were male or female, was completely unknown.

Apart from them, the third disciple was also a special existence. Everyone knew his name, Sword Immortal Xiao Yao, but no one knew where he was.

At the very least, he had never returned to the academy or the capital in the past twenty years. Even if there were any major events in the Royal Academy, they still wouldn't look for him. It was as if the libationer had never even had such a disciple before.

Xiao Jianren said with a sigh, "Sword Immortal Xiao Yao really was a stunning talent in the past. He reached the peak of the ninth rank at a young age, so everyone thought he would be the one to break through into the grandmaster rank the earliest. Even the libationer himself said that he was the one with the most talent among all of his disciples, that becoming a grandmaster was but a matter of time.

"Xiao Yao was also high-spirited, roaming the world with his longsword. He defeated all of the heroes of the world. At the time, it hadn't been long since the war between humans and fiend races had ended, so

there were still many remaining evils from the fiend races. He roamed the world while dealing with them.

"Later on, no one knew what happened, but he suddenly became dispirited. He even abandoned his cultivation for quite some time. Even the libationer publicly reprimanded him. He got into a huge argument with the libationer, then left the academy's rear mountain, never returning since.

"Later on, traces of him were seen throughout the world. He was no longer his confident and handsome sword immortal self; rather, he drowned himself in drink. There were even rumors that he was bullied and beaten up by some smaller sects' people, and yet never retaliated.

"From then on, no one seemed to have seen him again. Some thought he had died, others thought he had become crippled. But everyone believed a rising star had already fallen," Xiao Jianren concluded.

Zu An frowned. "Then why do you think the one I was talking about is Xiao Yao? After all, he was only at the ninth rank. Not only did he drop in cultivation, people all think he's already given up on himself."

Xiao Jianren's voice suddenly became louder as he exclaimed, "Because I don't believe that he really abandoned his cultivation!"

Zu An was stunned. It wasn't every day he saw Xiao Jianren so excited. What was going on?

Xiao Jianren realized that had lost his composure. He took a deep breath and explained, "Before I was chosen to become an Embroidered Envoy, I was attacked by mountain bandits. Back then, I wasn't as skilled as I am now. Just as I was about to lose my life, a white-clad swordsman passed by and easily dealt with those bandits." His somewhat turbid, nearsighted eyes began to flicker with brilliance as he continued, "I've never forgotten the elegance of that sword even to this day."

Zu An blinked. He finally realized what was going on and replied, "So you're his fan?"

Even though Xiao Jianren didn't know what the word 'fan' meant, he could guess the meaning. He said in embarrassment, "I was also an orphan and I didn't know my surname. But after I met him, out of admiration for him, I gave myself the surname Xiao."

Zu An didn't even know what to say at that point. He hadn't expected this usually steady and cool-headed fellow to actually be such a diehard stan!

Xiao Jianren continued, "Later on, when I joined the Embroidery House, there were more and more things to deal with, so we never met again. One day, when I learned that something happened to Xiao Yao, I refused to believe that he fell. I even searched all sorts of different channels for information about him. But he really did seem to have vanished from this world.

"Then, a few years ago, I suddenly read in some archives that someone mentioned a mysterious drunkard swordsman. Even though the one portrayed was very different from the past Xiao Yao, for some reason, I felt it was him."

Xiao Jianren suddenly looked excited. "Judging from sir's description, I've become more confident in my prediction. May I ask where sir met him? I really want to meet with him again..."

Zu An felt a bit awkward when he saw just how big of a fan Xiao Jianren was. After chatting a bit more, he withdrew and went back to his room. He thought, Is that person really the libationer's third disciple Xiao Yao? But what does Big Manman have to do with him?

At nightfall, Sang Hong participated in the evening banquet with Zu An, Gao Ying, Pei You, and the others. It wasn't proper for an Embroidered Envoy like Xiao Jianren to attend, so he stayed behind to watch the residence.

Sang Hong asked Zu An if he had received any new information. His expression changed a bit when Zu An told him that King Qi's heir had arrived as well. He said, "King Qi really harbors malice. He was actually willing to send Zhao Zhi here. He is definitely planning something big."

Zu An thought to himself, Aren't we here to pluck one of King Qi's wings? It would be weirder if he didn't care about this at all.

Sang Hong said with an overcast voice, "Ah Zu, this trip to Cloudcenter Commandery will be full of dangers. We might perish if we take even a single wrong step."

Zu An said indifferently, "We just need to do what we have to do according to the situation."

Sang Hong was stunned at first, but then laughed. "Haha, it seems that the older I get, the more cowardly I become. You are right. We came with such a grand mission, so they should be the ones who are scared."

He began to admire Zu An more and more. He thought to himself that having Zu An as his son-in-law wouldn't be a bad choice at all. He had to try and foster more chances for Zu An to develop feelings for Qien'er once they went back.

Chapter 1004: Initial Display of Strength

The group arrived at the Civil Affairs Manor soon afterward. Cloudcenter Commandery's officials were all present, and even Jian Taiding had been waiting there ahead of time.

Normally speaking, both his master rank cultivation and family background were superior to Sang Hong. And yet he had come out to welcome them outside the city, and had even waited for them there, truly showing a lot of respect to the imperial envoy. He clearly wanted Sang Hong to scratch his back too afterward, and to promote him to the position of Cloudcenter Duke as early as possible.

Cloudcenter Magistrate Zuo Su and Jian Taiding greeted Sang Hong's group and invited them inside. They introduced all the different officials along the way. They had been in too much of a hurry when they were outside of the city, so only a few individuals could introduce themselves.

"This is Vice Magistrate Sir Xu Yu."

"I have been looking forward to meeting you."

...

Zu An carefully observed the other person. Xu Yu was a middle-aged man with a square face. He looked like a much more proper official than the big-bellied Zuo Su.

Apart from assisting the Magistrate, the Vice Magistrate also had the responsibility of supervising the Magistrate Manor and the local officials. Since his status was extremely high, he didn't sit in the same carriage as the Magistrate, but rather in his own carriage.

"This is Governing Supervisor Sir Yu Xuanqing."

"So it was actually the Imperial Secretariat's Left Confidential Assistant's clan brother! It is an honor!"

The Governing Supervisor was the number three figure of a commandery, in charge of the selection of officials and other matters. Even though he was a local official, there was no need for Sang Hong to treat someone like him with such importance.

The reason why Sang Hong remained so courteous was because the elder was someone from the Yu clan. The Yu clan had two main branches. One served as officials in the imperial court; their clan leader was the Imperial Secretariat's Left Confidential Assistant Yu Xuanchong.

The other branch remained in Cloudcenter Commandery and was in charge of the ki stone family business. The old man was actually Yu Xuanchong's clan brother. But compared to Yu Xuanchong, Yu Xuanqing was far inferior in both cultivation and ability.

Cloudcenter Commandery's clan leader had passed away, so the clan was currently under the control of the first wife, Yu Yanluo. However, she was still a woman, and she was beautiful too. As such, she couldn't really make an appearance too often, so many of the clan's matters had to be left to the clan uncles. Yu Xuanqing was one of them.

"This is Cloudcenter Commandery's Military Affairs Manor's War Minister Yu Xuansu."

"It is an honor to meet you at last."

...

Yu Xuansu was also one of Yu Yanluo's clan uncles. Zu An began to ponder to himself when he saw the two old men. The Yu clan's influence here really is great... With all of these higher level positions of Cloudcenter Commandery being occupied by them, this entire place is pretty much under their control.

Zu An looked around. He had originally been looking forward to seeing Yu Yanluo, but he didn't see the beautiful figure he remembered.

Sang Hong seemed to be thinking the same thing, as he found an excuse to ask, "Hm? Why do I not see Madam Yu here?"

He obviously wasn't doing so because he desired her beauty, but rather because Yu Yanluo was the one in control of Cloudcenter's Yu clan. Furthermore, they were investigating the disappearance of her husband, so he wanted to take the chance to ask her about some things.

Jian Taiding, the man with the mustache, said with a smile, "My sister-in-law has recently been affected by the cold weather, so she is not in the proper state to receive guests. I hope Sir Sang can pardon this."

Sang Hong said with a smile, "Her health is naturally the most important." He then quickly changed the topic. Then, Jian Taiding dragged Sang Hong along to introduce him to some more officials.

The others began to send their greetings to the other members of the imperial envoy. They were most enthusiastic when greeting Gao Ying and Pei You. After all, one had the Liu clan behind him, and the other the Pei clan. They were both top-level clans in the capital. The local officials obviously wanted to get closer to those influential clans' disciples.

As for Zu An, they all ignored him after giving him some polite greetings. In their eyes, an official like him who had clawed his way up from a poor and humble background wasn't worth all that much.

There was one huge weakness in people who had risen up that way, which was that their status completely depended on the emperor's favor. If they lost the emperor's favor, they would then completely collapse.

But the great influential clans were different. They had countless members in the court serving as officials, so their relationships were twisted and complicated. Even if the emperor didn't like them, it was difficult for him to do anything to them.

"They're quite honest," Zu An remarked. He obviously wouldn't take offense because of that. Instead, he took the chance to size up the others, especially Pei Shao. That fellow seemed to be playing matchmaker between King Qi's heir and his daughter.

He noticed that a young man with a long face and small, round eyes was next to Pei Shao. Someone like that obviously couldn't be introduced to Sang Hong. However, judging from the way some lower ranked officials flattered Pei Shao, he learned that the young man seemed to be Pei Shao's son, Pei Xing.

Big Manman's little brother? Zu An frowned. Were they really blood-related? Big Manman is so beautiful, so why is her little brother so disappointing?

The group quickly arrived in the main hall. Because of the cold weather, there was a blazing bonfire at the very center. There were all kinds of meat hanging above. Under the fire's illumination, the golden oil on the meat looked especially enticing. An aroma of spices and roasted meat filled the place.

"Sir Sang, please have the seat of honor!" Jian Taiding exclaimed, and the group quickly sat down. Sang Hong was the Imperial Envoy, so he naturally had to have the seat of honor.

Sang Hong looked around. He saw that the people there had arranged for Pei You and Gao Ying to sit next to him, while Zu An was seated farther down. As someone who had held an official appointment for a long time, he obviously knew that the seating arrangement hadn't been chosen randomly. Rather, it was the result of great clans struggling against each other for hundreds of years; it was the final tacit agreement they reached.

Even though Gao Ying and Pei You's official ranks were beneath Zu An's, their clan influence far exceeded the solitary Zu An. Under the support of their clan's resources, Gao Ying and Pei You would have high positions soon. That was why their higher seats were reasonable and appropriate.

But reasonable was one thing; Sang Hong wasn't happy about that. The first reason was because he himself had been all alone, creating his current status out of a humble background. He had suffered his fair share of mistreatment because of that. Furthermore, he was now even closer to Zu An than a mere ally, so he didn't wish for Zu An to feel wronged. As such, he said calmly, "Ah Zu, come and sit next to me."

Zu An naturally agreed. He sat down confidently at Sang Hong's side. However, those from Cloudcenter Commandery felt something drop in their stomachs. They seemed to have underestimated Zu An's worth.

Zuo Su was a bit worried. He had only arranged for two seats by Sang Hong's side, one for Gao Ying and one for Pei You. Now that Zu An had taken one of the seats, what could they do about the other person? He knew that such young masters cared a lot about these matters of prestige. They definitely wouldn't be willing to give it up. What would they do if the young masters began to fight among one another? Regardless of how they arranged things, they were definitely going to offend one side!

However, he soon relaxed again. The position had been taken by Zu An, so even if those young masters felt hatred, they would direct their resentment at the nobody Zu An. If they were more irascible in nature, they might just start a conflict with Zu An. For those great clans, the prestige of their clans was more important than anything else. That fact wouldn't change even if it was an imperial envoy.

Many officials there had similar thoughts. They were all waiting to see if there would be a dispute. After all, they were well aware that the envoy was here to investigate them anyway, so they were all hoping there would be internal conflict within the imperial envoy.

But what was surprising was that neither Gao Ying or Pei You had any intention of fighting with Zu An over the position. They naturally moved to another table, as if Zu An taking that position weren't anything unusual at all. Jian Taiding's eyes narrowed when he saw that. He had to re-evaluate this Zu An.

After the Imperial Envoy sat back down, everyone else also sat down one by one. Just then, however, there was some commotion in the distance. A tough-looking man with a curly beard pointed at an empty position, asking, "Who was this position arranged for?"

Sang Hong was naturally at the very front, in the seat of honor. Then, the two rows next to him were respectively led by Jian Taiding and Zuo Su in accordance with their statuses. There weren't too many seats arranged in those two rows, with every single spot prepared for a higher-level figure of Cloudcenter Commandery. Past those two rows were a few more tables outside, clearly for those officials who were of lower rank. That was why being able to sit in one of the two rows was also a reflection of status and honor.

According to the prior introductions, the large man who looked like a foreigner was a commanding officer from the Military Affairs Manor. Even though he couldn't compare to the Chief Historian or the War Minister, he was a high-level figure of the manor. He was barely qualified to sit in those two rows.

He was staring at Vice Magistrate Xu Yu angrily as he pointed at the empty space. Clearly, he was upset to have heard that he was assigned to sit in the back. That was why he caused a scene.

Sang Hong and Zu An exchanged a look. The Military Affairs Manor and Civil Affairs Manor in Cloudcenter Commandery seemed to be at greater conflict with each other than they had imagined.

Xu Yu said indifferently, "I have an old friend who is paying a visit here today. This seat was prepared for him."

"May I ask what his position and rank are?" the large bearded man responded in a low, muffled voice.

Xu Yu frowned, but in the end he still said, "He has no official post."

The bearded man roared with laughter. "Since he has no official post, what right does he have to sit here? This seat is mine!" Then, he sat straight down and picked up the cup of wine to drink.

Xu Yu glowered. He gave Jian Taiding a look and said, "Sir Jian, this is a seat belonging to our Civil Affairs Manor. Do we need the approval of your Military Affairs Manor's people regarding who we prepare it for?"

Jian Taiding said with a smile, "Sir Xu's words are not quite right. We are all court officials, so is there a need to distinguish between us? Cloudcenter Commandery's people are tough, and soldiers view glory and reputation as their life. Commander Dian has always been a straightforward man whom I cannot convince otherwise. If you really have been offended in any way, I hope sir can be understanding out of respect for his war contributions."

Zu An asked Sang Hong through ki transmission out of curiosity, "Respected uncle, even if they have any grudge between them, is there a need for them to put up this kind of display here? What are they trying to start by showing this in front of the Imperial Envoy?"

Sang Hong replied, "They are doing this on purpose as a display of strength for me. Yu Xu is an official sent from the central court, so just like me, he represents the court. Jian Taiding is clearly showing his strength as a warning by not showing any leniency. He showed me a friendly side earlier, but now, he is baring his fangs. He is implying that if we tactfully cooperate, he will treat us well, but if we do not, we might experience the same awkward situation as Xu Yu right now."

"It looks like this Xu Yu was doomed to be disrespected today." Zu An felt a bit of sympathy. Because of what had happened outside Brightmoon City's outskirts, he subconsciously disliked Jian Taiding.

Sang Hong laughed and said, "That may not necessarily be the case."

Chapter 1005: You Are Not Qualified for That

Sensing Zu An's confusion, Sang Hong explained, "Look at Xu Yu; have you seen him really get mad yet?"

Zu An looked over. Sure enough, even though Xu Yu was questioning Jian Taiding, his expression remained extremely calm. The expression he looked at that military commander with wasn't one of anger, but rather mockery.

Xu Yu spoke up again just then. "I was only considering the prestige of your Military Affairs Manor. I fear this seat is not one Commander Dian can sit in. Once you are chased out, it will only be even more embarrassing for you."

Jian Taiding smiled and just treated those words as a bluff. Meanwhile, Commander Dian laughed, his voice ringing in everyone's ears. "Aren't I sitting here all fine and dandy? If anyone wants to sit in this seat later, just send him over. We'll see who can sit here in the end then." Alcohol flowed down his beard as he spoke, further adding to his bold and unrestrained aura.

Sang Hong said with a suppressed voice, "According to his laughter just now, this person seems to have seven ranks of cultivation. No wonder he can act so wild."

Zu An gave the place a look. Those with higher cultivations than him were all already seated above him. The rest were weaker than him. No wonder Commander Dian seemed so confident.

The other officials had entirely different expressions when they saw the scene. Some of them looked worried; they were clearly those who were closer to Xu Yu. There were some who were having a great time seeing Xu Yu in a predicament; they were definitely in the other camp. Overall, most of the people present were waiting with a smile, wishing to see Xu Yu become a laughingstock.

Commandery Magistrate Zuo Su looked at Sang Hong, hinting for him to say something.

Sang Hong frowned. Even though he had arrived representing the court and was in theory supposed to help out Xu Yu, who had also been sent from the court, he had just arrived. If he immediately showed bias toward one side, that would definitely be unfavorable for what he had to do later. But if he refused, he might end up offending the Civil Affairs Manor.

Fortunately, a disturbance occurred nearby just then that helped him out of this predicament.

“Who is making a racket?” Zuo Su looked into the distance unhappily. He saw a group of guards back up step by step in the direction of the gathering.

“Reporting to sir, this person insists on coming in,” the guards said with sullen expressions.

Zuo Su was furious. Are you all good for nothing but eating? I’ve already looked bad in front of the Imperial Envoy, yet you can’t even stop some random trespasser from coming in? Aren’t we going to become a huge joke after this?

Sure enough, Jian Taiping fiddled with the cup in his hands while looking in the guards’ direction with an ambiguous expression. Next to him, War Minister Yu Xuansu said with a laugh, “We proposed to hold the banquet in the Military Affairs Manor, but Sir Zuo refused. We were a bit confused back then, but now it all makes sense. How could we have had the chance to see so many interesting things happen if it had been held at our Military Affairs Manor?”

Zuo Su harrumphed. He was about to order his men to attack that person when a lazy voice called out, “It was your Vice Magistrate who invited me over. Why don’t you believe me?”

The guards berated the other person. “Why would Sir Vice Magistrate invite someone like you?!”

“Hurry and leave already! Offending the Imperial Envoy is a huge offense!”

...

Just then, Xu Yu spoke up again with his eyes closed. “He is indeed a friend whom I invited. Let him in.” He had status on par with the Magistrate. Since he had spoken, those guards naturally couldn’t stop the other person anymore. They quickly stepped aside and made way.

Those gathered finally saw the appearance of the one who had arrived. He was dressed in tattered clothes, and even though it was the middle of winter, he wore straw sandals. He wasn’t scared of his exposed feet freezing over at all. He didn’t seem to care about his appearance at all, his eyes half-open, as if he were still drowsy. He had a huge wine gourd hanging from his body. The strong smell of alcohol filled the air even from far away.

All of the officials present frowned. Why did Vice Magistrate Xu have such a friend? However, no one said anything. Anyone who could get to that position wasn't stupid. How could any normal person be a friend of the Vice Magistrate? Furthermore, judging from how he only wore straw sandals in the middle of winter, and yet there wasn't a trace of frostbite, they knew the man was no ordinary person. Even Jian Taiding sized up the person with a frown. He felt he couldn't really see through the other party.

Zu An was incredibly shocked. He already recognized the other person as the one who had used a sword against him back in Pei Manor. According to Xiao Jianren's suspicions, the man could very well be the libationer's third disciple, the former Sword Immortal Xiao Yao!

The drunkard seemed to have sensed something. He looked toward Zu An, an expression of confusion flickering through his eyes.

Zu An thought to himself, Thank goodness I changed my appearance back then. Otherwise, it really would be awkward if this man recognized him here! After all, Pei Mianman's dad was right there. If it were exposed that Zu An had secretly visited his daughter's residence, that really would be tough to explain.

"Brother Xiao, this way." Xu Yu stood up and beckoned toward that drunkard. Zu An was startled. The other person was surnamed Xiao, as expected!

The drunkard shifted his gaze and walked over to Xu Yu's side. Xu Yu said apologetically, "I prepared a seat for you, but it ended up being taken by this person."

"Oh..." the drunkard replied. He turned around and walked toward the back, as if he were going to look for another seat.

The tough-looking Commander Dian roared with laughter and asked, "Vice Magistrate Xu, so this was that friend you cared so much about? Isn't he nothing more than a good-for-nothing drunkard?"

The drunkard slowly turned around when he heard those words, asking, "Is he your friend?" He didn't even look at Commander Dian and instead looked at Xu Yu.

After some hesitation, Xu Yu said, "He is merely a colleague in court. We do not have much of a relationship."

The drunkard nodded. Then, he walked up to Commander Dian and looked down on him from above, saying, "F*ck off." There wasn't even a hint of anger in his voice, almost as if he wasn't even mad, but rather saying something that couldn't be more normal.

Commander Dian was stunned. Forget about him, all of the other officials present were stupefied as well. Even though they all had their own fair share of dirt on their hands from dealing with their political enemies, they still had to do it in a roundabout way. Rarely did they ever clash with someone ruthlessly like that.

Commander Dian finally reacted. He erupted with rage, exclaiming, "You bastard! What did you say to me?"

He reached toward the other party's collar as he spoke. At the same time, he slammed a large palm toward the other party's face. He had seven ranks of cultivation, and he was skilled in wrestling arts. As such, his grab moved at lightning speed.

Many people felt that the drunkard was in trouble. Being slapped in the face wasn't a big deal, but being embarrassed was much worse.

Only Zu An inwardly observed a moment of silence for Commander Dian.

Suddenly, Commander Dian staggered. He hadn't grabbed anything, as if the other party were made of air. But wasn't that drunkard right there the whole time?

Only a few people saw that the drunkard had actually taken half a step back, then took half a step forward, perfectly avoiding the motion. Since his movements were too fast, it looked as if he hadn't moved at all.

Jiang Taiding's eyes narrowed. He immediately said, "Commander Dian, you should back down." He could already tell that Commander Dian was not a match for the mysterious drunkard.

But Commander Dian was hot-headed in nature. How could he let himself be embarrassed like this in front of everyone? He treated it as his own carelessness. He angrily rolled up his sleeves and glared at the other party, exclaiming, "Draw your sword! Why don't we go a round? Whomever wins will sit here."

The drunkard gave him a drowsy-eyed look, then said, "You're not qualified for that."

The onlookers all gasped. This person is extremely arrogant!

Commander Dian was even more furious. He roared as he charged at the drunkard, but this time, he didn't hold back at all. Ki swirled through his entire body as he charged at the drunkard like a furious bear.

"Stop!" Zuo Su quickly tried to stop him. Considering the force Commander Dian was rushing out with, those with even slightly lower cultivations would suffer serious injuries even from just being brushed. How could he allow someone to die during the banquet?

But the furious Commander Dian hadn't even listened to Jian Taiding's words, so why would he listen to Zuo Su?

The drunkard didn't even raise an eyelid toward the ferocious assault, but the sword in his hand suddenly moved a few inches from its scabbard. Even though he made his move after his opponent, the sword hilt slammed into Commander Dian's body.

Suddenly, Commander Dian flew backward and only stopped when his body slammed into the rock garden outside. With a rumble, the rock garden was crushed to pieces by the tremendous impact. Commander Dian struggled several times, trying to get back up to his feet, but he couldn't.

The drunkard's sword was already sheathed. It had only moved a few inches within the scabbard the entire time.

"A seventh rank expert was defeated just like that?" The onlookers were shocked by the scene. Only Zu An remained unfazed, because he had personally experienced just how brilliant the other person's sword technique was.

The drunkard sat down as if nothing had happened. He didn't even drink the alcohol on the table, and instead gulped the alcohol in his own gourd.

The Military Affairs Manor's people shouted in shock and anger, "How daring! You dare scheme against the life of a court official!"

Xu Yu said with a smile, "Everyone here was a witness. The two of them already agreed that the winner would have this seat. Our Zhou Dynasty is founded on martial might; we have always supported this kind of competition."

The other side retorted, "But Commander Dian is a court official, so he should not have been so ruthless! He has clearly exceeded the level of a proper contest!"

Xu Yu said indifferently, "Commander Dian only appears to be in a sorry state. He has not been injured. What has this Brother Xiao done wrong?"

Those from the Military Affairs Manor were stupefied. They quickly turned around. Commander Dian had already gotten to his feet. It seemed the reason he hadn't been able to get back on his feet was because his internal energies had been messed up, not because he had been injured. However, he didn't have the dignity to remain present. He cupped his hands toward the others in embarrassment before quickly covering his face and leaving.

Sang Hong finally spoke up and said, "Haha, I have just witnessed a stunning battle. I have fully appreciated Cloudcenter Commandery's martial spirit. Our Zhou Dynasty is founded on martial might, and our court needs heroic warriors like these. Let us all drink to the glory of the Zhou Dynasty!"

Now that Sang Hong had said those things, both the Civil Affairs Manor and Military Affairs Manor had to show him respect. Both sides backed down and raised their cups in agreement.

The people from the Military Affairs Manor intended to complain that the drunkard didn't raise his cup in a toast, as they could use that as a pretext to criticize disrespect. However, surprisingly, the drunkard who seemed indifferent to everything actually also raised his cup.

When he saw that, Zu An became even more certain. Only someone who had come from the academy, despite being in such a dilapidated state, would still retain honor for their country.

With a cup of alcohol inside them, the originally tense atmosphere gradually became joyous and harmonious. The maids and servants began to distribute barbecued meat to the tables.

Even though Sang Hong was curious about the drunkard's background, he was worried that the current mood obtained through great difficulty would be ruined again. As such, he didn't say anything and instead chatted with several people about bureaucratic matters.

The officials praised Sang Hong for his past achievements. Zu An even had an entirely new level of respect for Sang Hong when he heard about all of those things. Even though he had known that the other man was formidable, he hadn't expected him to be so proficient even in matters like economics.

Sang Hong naturally returned the favor and praised the local officials for the things they were proud of. The mood became more and more enthusiastic. As they chatted with each other, however, the conversation moved to the reason why the Imperial Envoy had ended up arriving a few days later than expected.

"It's all the Devil Sect's fault." Sang Hong gave them a rough summary of what had happened.

They all began to discuss how vile the Devil Sect was. Then, they talked about how terrifying the Devil Sect's Sect Master Yun Jianyue was. Just then, Sang Hong patted Zu An's shoulder with a smile and said, "Now that you mention it, Ah Zu has faced Yun Jianyue before."

The originally clamoring hall immediately became silent when Sang Hong said those words. Even the drunkard who seemed to have fallen asleep gave Zu An a look, a flicker of light passing through his eyes.

Chapter 1006: Why Should I Care?

Their surprise and silence was completely justified. What kind of person was Yun Jianyue? She was the Devil Sect's Sect Master, an expert at the peak of the grandmaster rank! There were untold numbers of experts who had been defeated by her hand over the years. She was already one hundred percent a bloody devil in the hearts of the Zhou Dynasty's officials!

Zu An had actually fought against that bloody devil, and was still okay? He didn't seem to be all that injured either! What kind of notion was that?

Forget about the others, even Zu An was shocked. Does Sang Hong know about my Embroidered Envoy identity?

Just then, Sang Hong sent him a voice transmission in secret. "Put on a bit of an act to make yourself look a bit stronger. Since they are giving us an initial show of strength, we cannot just sit here and do nothing."

Even though he was the Imperial Envoy, he only had eight ranks of cultivation. Furthermore, Golden Token Eleven hadn't shown up. Cloudcenter Commandery had many experts at the eighth rank, and Jian Taiding was even at the master rank. That gave him a kind of mysterious pressure.

If their side ended up looking too weak, many things would become more problematic later on. That was why he adopted that plan.

As for whether it was true or not, Zu An worked in the Imperial Palace, so outsiders had no idea about the real situation. Furthermore, as he was part of the imperial envoy, these people couldn't really test him. That was why it was a lie that wouldn't be exposed. How could he give up such a good chance?

Jian Taiding exclaimed in shock, "Sir Zu has faced Yun Jianyue before?" Even though there was no way to test that claim, there was still no problem with asking questions.

Zu An coughed lightly and said, "It couldn't be considered facing each other; I only received one of her attacks."

Sang Hong gave Zu An a big thumbs up inwardly. He had originally planned to warn Zu An not to go too far with his boasting, but he hadn't expected the kid to be so sharp, acting almost as if it were true. Even he began to wonder if Zu An had fought against Yun Jianyue.

All of the officials present were shocked when they heard that. This person was so young, so there was no way he could have fought against Yun Jianyue. But if it had just been a single move, there was a chance.

Zuo Su was the Magistrate, so he was on the imperial court's side. He naturally had to praise the Imperial Envoy. When he heard that, he remarked, "How formidable is that demoness Yun Jianyue? Being able to receive a single move from her is extremely difficult. Sir Zu truly is young and promising, deserving of admiration!"

With him taking the lead, the other officials in Cloudcenter Commandery naturally voiced their agreement. Even though the Military Affairs Manor had some doubts, the other party was the Imperial Envoy after all. They couldn't just challenge him like they had Vice Magistrate Xu. They could only join in the praise.

Sang Hong stroked his beard, feeling extremely satisfied with his brilliant idea.

Gao Ying and Pei You also spoke up.

"That's not all! For the sake of protecting the crown prince in the secret dungeon, he single-handedly slaughtered an evolved Jade Moon Serpent!"

"Some powerful assassins came to kill the crown prince, but all of them were defeated by Sir Zu."

...

The two of them really buttered up Zu An like crazy. They were already used to such exchanges of praise, and they really did feel admiration for Zu An. Everything they said was the truth.

However, when they finished their boasting, there was an awkward silence. Those present had strange expressions. They hadn't really believed that Zu An could face Yun Jianyue, but they didn't want to embarrass the Imperial Envoy and had just agreed.

But now, the boasting was getting more and more ridiculous. They were even saying that Zu An had single-handedly killed some Jade Moon Serpent?

The Jade Moon Serpent was a seventh ranked beast at the weakest. If it were an evolved one, wouldn't it be at least the eighth rank?

Everyone knew that beasts were much stronger than cultivators of the same rank. There were so many experts there who didn't dare to claim that they could single-handedly kill an eighth ranked Jade Moon Serpent, and yet a brat like him could?

As for the crown prince's attackers, they just ignored that claim. After all, Gao Ying and Pei You only had six ranks of cultivation. Seventh ranked cultivators were probably already experts in their eyes, right?

Sang Hong gave the two of them an annoyed look. Do you not understand that too much is just as bad as not enough?!

The atmosphere he had aimed for just then was just right, yet those two had ended up adding a bunch of nonsense, turning his previous move into a complete joke. The onlookers could just start making fun of him for trying to show off.

Gao Ying and Pei You felt incredibly wronged. They were speaking the truth, so why did no one believe them?

“Brother Zu, why don’t you say something?” The two of them looked toward Zu An with pleading expressions. Zu An chuckled and didn’t try to explain anything.

Just then, however, a lazy voice spoke up. “You were able to take a hit from Yun Jianyue? I refuse to believe it.”

Even though that voice wasn’t loud, it still stood out in such a situation. Those present quickly turned around. They saw that the drunkard had his finger hooked around his gourd, looking at Zu An with an ambiguous expression.

Those from the Military Affairs Manor hadn’t really liked him before because of that situation with Commander Dian. But now, they suddenly found him much more likable. They were all looking forward to seeing how the Imperial Envoy’s group was going to deal with him now.

Sang Hong’s expression finally changed. He had forgotten to consider that variable in his plans. The worst part was that he had just seen the seventh rank Commander Dian’s miserable defeat. This mysterious man was deep and immeasurable, perhaps already at the master rank. Even though Ah Zu has won against City Lord Liao, against a master rank, I fear...

Vice Magistrate Xu Yu also tugged on the drunkard’s sleeves nervously, saying, “Brother Xiao...” With his position, he naturally didn’t want to get into conflict with the Imperial Envoy. The drunkard was also his friend, so wouldn’t Sang Hong think he had instigated this?

However, the drunkard didn’t pay him any attention and instead looked at Zu An in amusement, saying, “I have faced Yun Jianyue in my earlier years, and even I was defeated by her. I understand her cultivation well. I really cannot believe that you could remain unscathed under her attack.”

Those present gasped when they heard that. Even though they had seen the drunkard defeat Commander Dian, they hadn’t thought too much of it. After all, there were many present who could defeat Commander Dian in the room alone. Furthermore, they were all in high positions and had a lot of resources at their disposal. It wasn’t something an independent cultivator could compare to.

But now that the other person had said he had faced Yun Jianyue before, even though he hadn’t spoken about it in detail, they could infer that he had actually experienced a huge battle. Even though he said he had lost, to be someone who could escape from Yun Jianyue in one piece, how formidable would one have to be?

It was different from when Sang Hong had tried to butter up Zu An. Back then, everyone had been full of doubts. Now that the drunkard said the same things, the onlookers subconsciously trusted him.

Sang Hong felt troubled. How could he have expected that there would be someone there who had actually faced Yun Jianyue before? The situation was now outside of his control.

Zu An was quite shocked. He hadn’t expected the weak and delicate Yun Jianyue he knew to be so ferocious in the outside world! Why were there victims of hers everywhere? However, he fiddled with the wine cup in his hands and remarked indifferently, “What do I care if you believe me or not?”

The drunkard chuckled. "I fear that's not up to you to decide." As soon as he said that, he slammed the table. A stream of alcohol shot out from the wine cup. With a flick of his arm, the alcohol fired at Zu An like an arrow.

"Be careful!" someone exclaimed.

There were several experts present. All of their expressions changed. They could tell that the stream was no longer alcohol, but rather profound sword intent. It was basically no different from a real sword.

Sang Hong wanted to stop the drunkard, but he was already too late. The 'sword' was just too fast.

Xu Yu's mouth was wide open. He knew that things had become troublesome now.

Jian Taiping had an ambiguous smile on his face. The sword was too powerful; there was no way that youngster could withstand it. He wondered if the drunkard would show any mercy. If he didn't and ended up seriously wounding Zu An, or even killing him, that would really be something.

Even if he did hold back, Zu An would be put in quite a sorry state. How could the imperial envoy still have any prestige left to investigate anything afterward? They would just obediently pass on the dukedom and return to the capital.

The officials present all had their own thoughts. However, their eyes quickly widened.

Zu An raised his wine cup in front of him to block the stream. Then, with a flick of his wrist, the sword intent-imbued alcohol entered his cup. He said, "Thank you, sir, for the toast." Then, he drained the cup in one gulp.

The entire place became momentarily silent. Against a sword that powerful, forget about a fragile wine cup, even a boulder would be directly penetrated! Yet this kid had actually received it that easily?

Their expressions immediately changed when they looked at Zu An. Before, they had only been showing him courtesy out of respect for Sang Hong, but now, they knew that they had greatly underestimated this person. No wonder that old fox Sang Hong cares so much about him! This person is extraordinary after all!

The drunkard revealed a look of shock. "Your respected self managed to take this sword from me, so I believe receiving a move from Yun Jianyue shouldn't have been too great of an issue either. I crossed the line earlier and will drink three cups here as an apology."

After saying that, he raised his alcohol gourd and began to gulp the contents down. But how was it just three cups? It was almost an excuse for him to drink more.

Zu An was quite shocked at how the other party had responded. He was also curious why the drunkard would be near Pei Mianman's residence, so he asked to test the waters, "The sword intent I just sensed reminds me of someone. In the past, the libationer's third disciple was Sword Immortal Xiao Yao, while your surname is Xiao as well. May I ask what kind of relationship you have with that sword immortal?"

Chapter 1007: The Sword Rides the Wind, Purging Evils Throughout the World

The onlookers immediately began to whisper among themselves when they heard those words. Many of them wondered who Xiao Yao was. After all, that was already someone from the last generation. Many people had already forgotten about his existence after so many years passed.

But there were still many people who did remember. They looked toward that drunkard in shock while explaining just how stunning the Sword Immortal was in the past.

Sang Hong looked at Zu An in shock. Even I don't know who he is; why was Ah Zu able to immediately see through him?

Sigh, how great would it be if Ah Zu were my son?

It's impossible for me to have another son. He still has a chance to be my grandson's father, though.

Gao Ying and Pei You were still too young and not too familiar with the name Xiao Yao. They were still completely immersed in the earlier scene where Zu An had easily received the drunkard's sword with his wine cup. Big bro really is big bro; when will I become as outstanding as Brother Zu?

But the drunkard's expression was also a bit strange. He hadn't expected someone to actually recognize him! As if he suddenly began to remember many things, his entire figure entered a strange, almost stupefied state. Only after a while did he say, "The past Sword Immortal Xiao Yao has already died. What's left is merely a useless drunkard."

But when they heard that, how could those present not know he had tacitly confirmed the question? A commotion immediately broke out. This was the libationer's third disciple! Even if his previous achievements weren't mentioned, just his identity alone was enough for all of them to treat him seriously!

The officials all quickly began to express goodwill. Unfortunately, Xiao Yao just continued to drink without paying them any attention. Their expressions immediately became unpleasant. What are you putting this act on for? No wonder you wasted away back then.

The atmosphere had become a bit awkward. Xu Yu quickly moved to smooth things over. "Brother Xiao's temperament isn't suited to social interactions, so I must ask for everyone's forgiveness..."

With that, the mood eased up a bit again. They soon found Xiao Yao uninteresting, and the conversation returned to Zu An.

Compared to their previous courteous respect, they were now all speaking sincerely. For him to have his cultivation at such a young age really was a reflection of extraordinary talent! If nothing unexpected happened, he would definitely be a huge star in the empire in the future! No family background? What did that matter? He could establish a glorious clan all on his own!

Their attitudes changed even more when they learned that he was already a viscount; their expressions became even more eager. There were even some who asked if he was married yet, intending to introduce their daughters to him. That immediately made Sang Hong panic. He became fiercely protective, chasing all of them off.

"I heard that Sir Zu is not only extremely proficient in cultivation, but your skills in poetry are also exceptional. Some even say that you have something of a poet immortal's style. You wrote a few

masterpieces back in the capital, and there are many places in Cloudcenter Province that sing your songs. How about you write a poem here too, to give us some experience?" Someone took a different route, trying to flatter Zu An from a different angle.

There were people who had looked into the imperial envoy's information too, and they knew that Zu An excelled in poetry. However, back then, no one had treated him as anyone important. Poetry wasn't anything they would care about too much either. But now that Zu An was a hot topic, everything was now completely different! All of them suddenly seemed to have become poetry enthusiasts.

Zu An smiled without saying anything. He had already seen what these people were trying to do. He was about to reject them when Sang Hong said with a chuckle, "Ah Zu, since everyone is full of sincerity, you should just make one."

Meanwhile, he said in secret, "Ah Zu, if you use this chance to make a name for yourself, it will be beneficial to our investigation. We are newcomers, so there will be many people from Cloudcenter Commandery watching us. The greater your reputation, the more confidence everyone will have in the Imperial Envoy. More local officials will unknowingly side with us. This is what it means to have momentum and influence."

Zu An felt a bit helpless. However, he trusted Sang Hong's judgment in such official matters. He was wondering which poem was suitable when he glanced over at Xiao Yao, who was drinking out of his huge gourd. His eyes lit up and he said, "I just happen to have suddenly found some inspiration."

The officials sat up straight when they heard that. They were curious as to just what kind of poem Zu An was going to create.

Gao Ying quickly called over a servant girl to grab some pen and paper. Pei You thought to himself, Are we doing this again? He immediately told a servant to grab some materials. He had always been the ink grinder or something in the past, which didn't make him look all that good. Even if his handwriting was ugly, he had to be the one to write it this time.

Sang Hong stroked his beard. His eyes flickered. He already began to think to himself about what kind of topic he should give. As a court official, his desire to leave his name in history was stronger than most.

Unfortunately, before Sang Hong could even prepare himself, Zu An began speaking.

"The sword rides the wind, purging evils throughout the world.

"With wine to drink I remain free and unfettered; without alcohol I still reign supreme.

"One sip will empty a river; another and the sun and moon are devoured.

"A thousand cups and still standing tall; only I alone, Drunken Sword Immortal."

The onlookers turned to look at Xiao Yao when Zu An spoke those words. Even Xiao Yao himself couldn't help but lower his wine gourd, stupefied; his entire figure was frozen in place. He was clearly extremely moved.

"Wonderful!" They all clapped their hands in praise. This poem's contents were just too fitting of Xiao Yao!

The key was that his name had even been mentioned, and 'Drunken Sword Immortal' was much more suited to his current self than his past 'Sword Immortal' title. It was as if it had been made for him! [1]

They all looked at Xiao Yao, feeling a bit jealous. They thought to themselves that poets really were incredible! This was clearly a good-for-nothing drunkard, and yet it made it sound as if he had reached a whole new realm of enlightenment from drinking or something.

Sang Hong stared at Zu An, thinking that he had been way too inflexible earlier in coming up with a topic. He had to get this kid to write him a poem one day! He could even write a poem for an outsider like Xiao Yao, while Sang Hong had even given him his daughter. It was reasonable to ask for a poem in return, right?

The onlookers thought that Xiao Yao would be grateful, but he instead seemed to have entered a kind of confused trance. He mumbled to himself, "The sword rides the wind, purging evils throughout the world... Purging evils throughout the world? But what is man, and what is evil..." Eventually, his voice even seemed to become a bit hoarse. Zu An keenly sensed that there were some sparkling droplets in his eyes.

"He's actually crying?" Zu An was stupefied. Wasn't this reaction a bit too much?

Xiao Yao staggered outside. When he passed by Pei Shao, he suddenly stopped and looked at him with red eyes. Pei Shao was a bit surprised, asking, "Does Sir Third have any guidance for me?" As an official, he cared more about Xiao Yao's identity as the libationer's disciple.

Xiao Yao only stared at him silently; a moment later, he walked out while staggering as if drunk. He didn't say a single thing the entire time.

Xu Yu didn't try to hold him back when he saw that. The other party only casually waved his hands before ultimately disappearing from view.

"What is this?!" Pei Shao's son Pei Xing exclaimed resentfully.

Pei Shao stopped his son's complaints, saying, "He is not someone you can offend. You should stay away when you see him in the future."

Pei Xing replied with an 'oh', but he clearly didn't pay it too much mind. He wouldn't even have dealings with people like that, so why would he end up offending Xiao Yao?

That little episode didn't affect the mood. After all, the main characters were Sang Hong, and now Zu An as well. Everyone drank together happily and the atmosphere quickly became lively again.

But Zu An couldn't feel anything sincere when faced with so many hypocritical greetings. He continued to wonder why someone like Xiao Yao would visit such a banquet. He really couldn't figure it out. As such, he found a chance to ask Xu Yu about it.

Xu Yu replied, "We just happened to meet each other during a military mission. I've really troubled Sir Zu; only now do I know Brother Xiao's real identity. I didn't expect him to be the glorious Sword Immortal."

Seeing as Xu Yu's expression wasn't fake, Zu An couldn't really keep questioning him either.

...

When the banquet ended, the Acting Commander-in-Chief Jian Taiding had some men escort Sang Hong's party back to their temporary residence.

Sang Hong called over Zu An, Gao Ying, Pei You, and the others, saying, "I am suspecting that Jian Taiding sent these people not to protect us, but perhaps to monitor or threaten us. You should all pay Yu Manor a visit tomorrow morning. I suspect that Madam Yu has already been put under house arrest."

"That shouldn't be, right?" Gao Ying and Pei You couldn't help but exclaim. "She is a duchess after all, and also the Yu clan's clan leader! Jian Taiding can keep her locked up for a day or two, but he can't keep her under house arrest forever, can he? Otherwise, news would've already leaked out a long time ago."

"We will know once you all go to the Yu clan tomorrow morning," Sang Hong said with an overcast expression. "Our forces in Cloudcenter Commandery are a bit too weak. We do not know much about many things here. That is why, just as we flaunted Ah Zu's reputation today, we need to at least show our strength and make some neutral factions lean toward our side..."

After they discussed things with each other for a while, they all returned to their rooms to rest. Zu An wondered if he should visit the Pei clan while it was dark. But when he pushed open the door, he suddenly froze, because he saw someone sitting on his own windowsill.

The melancholy expression, the beard stubble, the look of hesitation, the green wine gourd, and the eye-catching tattered sandals; all of those things sold out the other party's identity.

"Xiao Yao!" Zu An exclaimed, becoming vigilant. He couldn't understand why the man would appear in his room in the middle of the night.

Chapter 1008: Letting a Wolf Guard the Sheep

Xiao Yao opened his drowsy eyes and gave Zu An a look, saying, "You don't seem scared."

Zu An smiled and said, "We share no grudges, and we even drank together. Why would I need to be scared?"

"I don't think that's the real reason." Xiao Yao jumped down from the window and slowly walked toward him, saying, "It's because we've fought before that you have enough confidence."

"The sword you displayed in the banquet was indeed brilliant. I was instead the one who managed to get by through a fluke," Zu An said humbly. The other party had imbued his sword intent into wine. Wine was mostly made of water, so using the water affinity he had received from Blue Mallard, he had been able to receive that attack much more easily than most.

Xiao Yao shook his head. "I'm not talking about our exchange at the banquet, but rather during the day."

Zu An was alarmed, replying, "I don't know what you're saying."

Xiao Yao looked at him with an ambiguous smile, saying, "You'll know once we give it a try." He thrust outward with his sword as soon as he finished speaking. It was so fast that Zu An couldn't even see him draw the sword from the scabbard.

Zu An instantly withdrew by a zhang, evading the lightning fast sword. He was just about to retaliate, but Xiao Yao had already withdrawn his sword, saying, "Your evasion is the same as it was during the day."

Several auras rushed over just then; the one in the lead was Sang Hong, who asked, "Ah Zu, did something happen?" Others quickly rushed over as well. The violent ki fluctuations had clearly startled them.

"I'm fine; I was just training by myself." Zu An even opened the door to let them see inside, to help dispel their confusion.

Sang Hong examined the room out of the corners of his eyes. When he saw that there was indeed nothing wrong, he nodded and said, "Then you have to be careful. If there's anything wrong, just shout out. The guards nearby will immediately rush over."

"Thank you for your concern, respected uncle." Zu An closed the door again after seeing them out.

Xiao Yao walked back out from behind the bed. He asked out of curiosity, "Why didn't you tell them to work together with you to capture me?"

"I can sense that you bear no malice, so why would I capture you?" Zu An pulled over a chair and sat down. He gestured for Xiao Yao to do the same.

Xiao Yao didn't put on airs and sat down casually, saying, "Your age isn't great, but you're surprisingly open-minded."

Zu An declined to comment and instead replied, "Your respected self didn't seek me out in the middle of the night just to have an ordinary chat, right?"

"I'm quite curious. You're still so young, so why were you able to recognize me? I already disappeared from the martial world so many years ago, and I almost forgot my name myself," Xiao Yao said with a sigh.

Zu An replied, "It's actually because I visited the academy a few times, and my relationship with those teachers is pretty good. I know a bit more than others."

When he heard Zu An mention Shen Xuzi, Hei Baizi, and the others, a smile appeared on Xiao Yao's face. He said, "It's been so many years, but they're still the same. Sigh, but they've already become the best in their respective fields; only a senior brother like me alone has wasted away..."

Sensing his bleakness, Zu An said, "Your respected self doesn't need to undervalue yourself. Everyone says that you've already fallen, but in my opinion, your sword dao is a bit more formidable than it was in your past peak. That can only mean the world is mistaken, and the Sword Immortal is still the same Sword Immortal."

Xiao Yao shook his head in self-mockery, saying, "I'm not. It's already too late for many things."

Zu An said seriously, "Even though I don't know what happened, I know that your deeds have inspired many people. For example, I have a friend who views you as his idol..." He told Xiao Yao the story of Xiao Jianren, but of course he hid many details to prevent Xiao Yao from guessing that he was Golden Token Eleven.

Xiao Yao was a bit surprised to hear that there was someone who cared that much about him. He was actually a bit shaken up, clearly recalling his former glory years.

Zu An thought to himself that if he used this chance to ambush the other party, if he didn't deal a fatal blow, it would still be a serious injury! Xiao Yao was really shaken up. Zu An wondered just what he had experienced for him to be this way.

"The fact that I could inspire a young man like that means this life of mine wasn't lived for nothing. I ought to drink to that." Xiao Yao laughed and undid the gourd, drinking a few more gulps. Then, he asked Zu An if he wanted any.

Zu An shook his head. This man really was an alcoholic; he always managed to find all sorts of excuses to drink more.

After closing the wine gourd again, Xiao Yao suddenly put away his smile. His originally drowsy look was replaced with a penetrating gaze as he asked, "Why were you around the Pei clan's inner courtyard?"

"I'm friends with Manman." Zu An replied. Then he asked, "So why were you there?"

"I'm friends with her mother." A gentle expression appeared in Xiao Yao's eyes when he mentioned Pei Mianman's mother.

Zu An had a strange expression. Isn't calling her your friend here a bit suspicious?

"Damn brat, what the hell are you thinking?" As if sensing what Zu An was thinking, Xiao Yao gave him an annoyed look.

Zu An asked probingly, "You aren't Manman's real dad, are you?" If this was his freaking father-in-law, that would really be crazy.

Xiao Yao's face turned entirely red. "Stop speaking nonsense! Manman's mother is as clear as ice and as clean as jade. Don't insult her purity."

Zu An could guess what was going on from his reaction. Xiao Yao's status in his mind plummeted. He had thought that this man might have been lovers with Big Manman's mother. But now, not only were they not lovers, he seemed to just be a simp...

Xiao Yao gradually calmed down. He looked at Zu An's neck, saying, "I saw a flame-shaped pendant around your neck during the day. Where did you get that from?"

Zu An suddenly realized something. No wonder this person's killing intent had become much weaker. He took out that unique pendant and said with a warm smile, "Big Manman gave it to me."

Xiao Yao was momentarily absentminded. His expression was extremely complicated as he looked at Zu An, muttering, "She actually gave this pendant to you."

Zu An was surprised, asking, "What's wrong?"

Xiao Yao shook his head, appearing to be recalling something. A while later, he said, "This pendant used to be her mother's, and then she gave it to Manman. This item is what they treasured the most, something they would only give to their most treasured lover."

Zu An quietly put away the pendant, thinking, Don't try to steal this from me just because Big Manman's mom didn't give you hers.

Xiao Yao couldn't help but laugh, saying, "Since you and Manman have such a relationship, I can feel at ease putting her under your protection. I have some matters to take care of and need to make a trip, so I can't protect her for some time. That's why I was quite worried."

Zu An said, "Senior was protecting her, as expected." It was as he had suspected.

Xiao Yao nodded, explaining, "Manman's mother passed away at an early age, after which her father took the Yu clan's woman as his wife; she gave birth to a little brother, that Pei Xing you met today. Since her mother didn't have any status, Manman's status in the clan has always been rather difficult."

Zu An felt a bit pained when he heard that. He hadn't expected Manman to have had such a life growing up. She'd had a beautiful and enthusiastic personality when he first met her. She had clearly buried all of that deep within her, using her smile as a camouflage.

"The Yu clan's father and son used their status as main wife and first son, as well as the mother's clan background, to make things hard on Manman. Pei Shao, that fellow, is also incredibly prejudiced, so Manman always had a hard time. She rarely spent any time at home and always wandered the world, but she was fine on her own," Xiao Yao said.

"But this time, after returning to the Pei clan, she was kept under house arrest and not allowed to leave as she wished. I wanted to bring her with me, but she wasn't willing to leave with me no matter what I said." He had a pained expression as he spoke.

"Why isn't she willing to go with you?" Zu An asked out of curiosity. Big Manman wasn't the type to let others bully her without doing anything!

Xiao Yao laughed in self-mockery, saying, "It might be because of her mother that she hates me."

Zu An's expression immediately became strange. You're still going to say that you and her mother were just normal friends?

Xiao Yao clearly didn't want to discuss the topic anymore. He continued, "Later on, through my investigations, I finally found out that Pei Shao wishes to marry her off to King Qi's heir as a concubine."

Even though he had already heard Pei You tell him about that, Zu An still erupted in rage when he heard that. "Someone like Zhao Zhi actually thinks he's worthy?!"

Xiao Yao nodded in deep sympathy when he saw Zu An's reaction, saying, "Indeed, Manman is a beautiful genius; it would be a waste even if she were the main wife, yet they actually want her to be a concubine? Pei Shao, that pig, has lost his mind!"

Zu An looked toward the Pei clan. He thought to himself, There's absolutely no way I'll give Big Manman to anyone else.

"I can't make Manman leave, so I've always remained here to protect her, to prevent others from bullying her. Unfortunately, recently, a matter occurred that's forcing me to leave for a while. I now feel at ease leaving her protection to you," Xiao Yao said gratefully.

“Don’t worry; I’ll take good care of her!” Zu An replied seriously.

Xiao Yao nodded in satisfaction. He took out a toothpick-sized wooden sword and gave it to Zu An, saying, “Your cultivation should be enough to deal with most situations, but keep this with you just in case. This has my sword intent sealed in it. If you encounter any opponents you can’t defeat, use this against them. It’s equivalent to a full-powered attack from me. There aren’t many in all of Cloudcenter Commandery who can withstand such an attack.” As he spoke, his voice was full of pride.

Then, he didn’t wait for Zu An to try to keep him. His figure quickly vanished through the window. He called out, “The sword rides the wind, purging evils throughout the world... You’ve given me a poem, and I’ve given you a present. This should be enough to make us even, hahaha!”

Chapter 1009: Abusing What Was Entrusted

After chatting with Xiao Yao about Pei Mianman just then, Zu An could no longer hold back his thoughts about her. Xiao Yao had just left, so there was no one there to protect her. He didn’t hesitate anymore, changing clothes and quickly disappearing into the night.

...

When Zu An arrived at Pei Manor, he immediately checked out the surroundings. Even though the security was strict, it was already much more lax compared to earlier that day.

Zu An figured that it was probably because after they had failed to find anything, and considering how they had to rest for the night, there was no way for them to maintain the same level of security all the time.

He borrowed the cover of darkness to quietly infiltrate the building. He was much more familiar with the path since he had already been there once during the day. With his cultivation and the jade badge’s radar-like function, he quickly arrived at Pei Mianman’s small courtyard.

This time, Xiao Yao wasn’t here to guard the place, so he was able to enter without alerting anyone. The first floor was where the maids lived, so Zu An didn’t want to alarm them. He jumped straight into the second floor.

He was feeling truly moved because he could finally meet with Big Manman again. He wondered what to say to her after all this time, but suddenly, everything in front of him went black.

He was alarmed, quickly turning to look behind himself. Even though it was nighttime, there were still lit lanterns all over Pei Manor, so there should still have been some light. But just then, everything was pitch black. It was nothing like how it had been on his way there! Zu An felt alarmed. It was as if he had been swallowed up by an enormous black beast.

Suddenly, a strong gale swept over him, and he quickly dodged to the side. The other party didn’t even give him a chance to breathe, immediately delivering another attack. No matter how Zu An attacked, the other party’s attacks continued to tangle around him.

Since he couldn’t see anything, Zu An’s strength was greatly reduced. He was curious. Don’t tell me the other party isn’t affected at all? Judging from their earlier exchange, his opponent’s movements were quick, and their judgment of his position was extremely accurate.

Wait! He suddenly thought of something. Don't tell me...

"Manman?"

"Ah Zu?"

Just then, two voices spoke out in unison.

"It really is you?" Zu An was shocked and overjoyed.

The darkness immediately disappeared, and warm candlelight appeared. They were in an extremely elegant lady's chambers.

However, Zu An couldn't be bothered to look around him. He stared at the girl in front of him. He was focused on her beautiful face and fine skin, looking into her eyes that seemed as if they could speak; she looked back with teary eyes. Who else could it be but Big Manman?

"Ah Zu!" Pei Mianman could no longer hold herself back and jumped into Zu An's arms when she saw him remove his mask. Her clothes really were forced to bear an unfair pressure that could make one worry about whether the buttons might just explode and shoot out.

The two sweethearts who had been separated for so long embraced each other tightly, as if they each wanted to take the other right into their bodies.

As he smelled her familiar scent and felt her soft body, Zu An couldn't help but say with a chuckle, "Go easy on me; you're hugging me so tightly it's a bit hard to breathe."

"You're so annoying~" Pei Mianman hit his chest playfully, then excitedly pulled him over to sit next to her. "I heard my maid tell me that the imperial envoy had someone surnamed Zu who was really outstanding in tonight's banquet. I was wondering if it was you, but it really was! I'm not dreaming, am I?"

"Of course not. I'm alive and well right in front of you. If you don't believe me, you can feel my heartbeat." Zu An placed her hand on his chest and looked at her with a gentle expression before saying, "Manman, you've lost a lot of weight."

"Hmph, it's your fault for leaving me all alone for so long." Pei Mianman was grumbling on the surface, but she still caringly poured him a cup of tea, saying, "Drink some tea to help with the alcohol. You stink of wine right now."

Zu An received the tea cup and asked with a smile, "Did you find out it was me through the smell of alcohol?"

"Of course. I was wondering just what pervert was so daring he would come to take advantage of me while drunk! I was going to teach that idiot a lesson, but that dummy turned out to be you." Pei Mianman leaned on the table while speaking. As if she wanted to save her strength, she placed her chest right on the table. Her eyes were gleaming as she looked at him.

"What was going on with that darkness? Was that Fu Hao's owl sculpture?" Zu An asked curiously.

“Yup. I got it from the dungeon we entered last time. It can create a domain of darkness. My opponent can’t see a thing, but I can still see perfectly fine.” Pei Mianman reached out her fair white palm. A pocket-sized bronze sculpture slowly spun in it. She had already completely refined it for herself.

“This thing is indeed formidable. I was almost done in by it.” Zu An couldn’t help but remember their experience in Yinxu’s dungeon back then.

Pei Mianman was reminiscing about the same thing. Her expression became gentler. Suddenly, though, she exclaimed, “Ah Zu, your cultivation has become higher than ever! You clearly couldn’t see me earlier, so why were you able to avoid all of my attacks?”

“I actually came here earlier during the day.” Zu An patted her thigh while speaking.

Pei Mianman had a knowing smile and moved closer to him, leaning against his body. “So that was you during the day! Did that drunkard hurt you?” she asked, realizing what had happened. She began to check his condition with her hands.

“Don’t worry, I’m fine.” Zu An chuckled. “Do you know Xiao Yao?”

Pei Mianman harrumphed, saying, “He’s nothing more than an annoying drunkard.”

“But he treats you pretty well. He’s always been protecting you,” Zu An explained.

“Who needs his protection? In the end, he’s just doing it out of a guilty conscience.” Pei Mianman’s voice was a bit cold.

“Guilty conscience?” Zu An was stunned. He felt he wasn’t getting the same message from her end.

Pei Mianman’s eyes turned red as she said, “My mom wouldn’t have died if it weren’t for him.”

“He was the one who killed mother-in-law?” Zu An frowned. A bit of killing intent appeared in his eyes. He had even thought that Xiao Yao was some good person.

Pei Mianman sighed and said, “My mother wasn’t brought to death by him directly, but she was hurt by him. Her cultivation was ruined, which was why she wasn’t able to protect herself when something serious happened.”

“No wonder you hate him.” Zu An understood now. The reason why Xiao Yao was the way he was, his expression that flickered between insanity and guilt, might have been precisely because of that. He could understand why Pei Mianman hadn’t been willing to accept the offer to take her away now.

Zu An carefully wiped at her tears and asked out of concern, “How did mother-in-law pass away?”

Pei Mianman shook her head and said, “I was still too little back then; I don’t remember it all too clearly anymore. Whenever I asked my father, he would always get upset. I asked that drunkard too, but he didn’t tell me anything either.”

Judging from how she was shaking slightly, Zu An knew she was in a bad mood. He held her hand tightly to provide her some warmth. He asked, “Didn’t you receive a letter that had something to do with your mother, which was why you rushed back? Did the Pei clan trick you?”

"That's not it. My mother's grave was robbed by someone, and they didn't find her remains." Pei Mianman bit her lips. "I thought it was because of that stupid drunkard, but he said it wasn't. I've been looking into the matter this whole time."

"Something like that happened?" Zu An was furious. "Don't worry; I'm now part of the imperial envoy. I can help you get to the bottom of this."

"Thank you, Ah Zu." Pei Mianman leaned gently into his arms. She said, "I've been so tired. With you at my side, I feel so much better."

"I'm here, so everything will be better." Zu An gently caressed her soft hair. He then asked, "I heard your father wants to marry you off to King Qi's heir?"

"Yeah. The Pei clan actually had that intention a long time ago, but I ran off to Brightmoon City to avoid it. After a series of accidents, I ended up meeting you. I guess it was fate." Pei Mianman had a smile on her face when she recalled how the two of them had met.

"Zhao Zhi, that brat, dares to come after my wife? I'm going to break his third leg the next time I see him!" Zu An exclaimed. He wanted to talk smack about Pei Shao, but that was her father after all, so he didn't bring him up in the end.

"Who's your wife? Isn't your wife Chuyan?" Pei Mianman harrumphed and wrinkled her nose.

"Chuyan and I have already divorced each other." Zu An coughed. Sorry, Chuyan; I've wronged you...

"We already properly performed our ritual kneeling to heaven and earth in Yinxu; we were husband and wife for several lifetimes."

"You still have the nerve to talk about Yinxu? You didn't even let me go when I was still so young..." Pei Mianman looked at him with her beautiful eyes, her stunning features looking even more charming under the candlelight's illumination. Her red lips had a captivating gloss.

Zu An couldn't hold back and kissed her. Pei Mianman moaned, her hands naturally wrapping around her lover's neck. Unlike the cold and aloof Chuyan, she had always been a passionate person. The two of them had even spent several generations as husband and wife in Yinxu, so they were already beyond intimate with each other.

The two passionate lovers had been separated for so long. Now that they had been reunited again, they naturally came together. The air and temperature also became scorching hot...

...

Meanwhile, back in the city, inside King Qi heir's secret hideout, Han Fengqiu asked Zhao Zhi, "How does the young heir feel about Miss Pei?"

"I was able to get a glimpse of her graceful figure. Even though I was only able to see her side profile, she's an incredible beauty. I guess she's worthy of being this young heir's wife." Zhao Zhi nodded in satisfaction. That beautiful figure continued to appear in his mind. "If it weren't for the fact that her background is a bit awkward, I wouldn't even mind having her as my main wife."

Chapter 1010: My Wife Really Is Adorable

Zhao Zhi was all smiles. Suddenly, he frowned and said, "But she didn't seem to want to meet me during the day. Don't tell me she isn't willing?"

Han Fengqiu replied, "Which woman in this world doesn't wish to become a concubine of King Qi Manor? Such an increase in status is something countless people hope for but will never be able to obtain, so why wouldn't she be willing? She might've just been too embarrassed, or maybe she's deliberately feigning a reserved nature to draw your respected self's attention."

"Indeed, this woman has successfully drawn this young master's attention." Zhao Zhi's entire head was filled with that gorgeous figure he had seen during the day. He thought to himself just how great being with that woman would be.

"I don't know why, but I just feel a bit anxious." Zhao Zhi suddenly voiced his thoughts. He looked in the Pei clan's direction with a distracted expression.

...

Meanwhile, in Pei Manor, a moan that would make anyone's bones melt rang out. "It hurts..."

"Huh?" Zu An raised his head in puzzlement.

"Dummy." Pei Mianman giggled when she saw him in a rare state of confusion. However, she looked away in embarrassment and continued, "Did you forget? In Yinxu, only... Only our souls were together."

Zu An was stunned. Then he realized, "Then doesn't that mean you're still..."

An ice-cold finger pressed against his mouth. Pei Mianman looked at him with a lovable, yet annoyed expression. "You're not allowed to say it!"

"I won't, I won't, haha." Zu An couldn't help but chuckle. There were no men who wouldn't be happy in such a situation.

"You're a bad man~" Pei Mianman was finally a bit annoyed. She bared her fangs and was about to bite him. The two of them quickly tangled around each other.

After they fought for a bit, Zu An embraced her soft body, saying, "Manman, I missed you so much."

"Me too." Pei Mianman's charming gaze was extremely gentle. She looked at him with tender feelings, as if she were silently inviting him in.

How could Zu An hold himself back? He immediately kissed her. In the secret dungeon, the two of them had been husband and wife for several generations. They had already become extremely intimate.

"Mmm... It hurts..."

...

A while later, a maid below suddenly woke up with a start. She heard creaking coming from above. She was confused, wondering whether her lady couldn't sleep. Why was she tossing and turning restlessly in bed?"

Since Pei Mianman usually spent her time cultivating, she didn't let the maid disturb her. That was why the maid could only feel nervous. She muttered, "I'll make my lady some soothing medicinal congee to drink and help her sleep better. Right, I should also tell the housekeeper that the bed needs to be changed."

Even though my lady doesn't receive much favor, she can't just sleep on an old bed that groans like this just because she can't sleep! the maid thought to herself in a daze. Then, she turned around and tried to go back to sleep. For some reason, she also began to feel a bit restless as she listened to the creaking.

...

The next morning, Zu An felt a stinging pain. He woke up because someone had bitten him. He grimaced, asking, "What are you doing?"

Pei Mianman's long hair scattered across his arm. She bared her small canines and exclaimed, "You baddie, you took my virginity three times!"

Zu An chuckled and took her into his arms, saying, "You baddie, you should be happy about that. Other girls will never have an experience like yours."

"You're probably the one who's the happiest!" Pei Mianman was really annoyed seeing him so happy. She moved over to bite him again, starting another round of wrestling.

...

A while later, Pei Mianman pushed the man next to her away. There was still a bit of lingering redness on her face as she said, "It's almost daytime, and the maid will come up soon. You should hurry back."

Zu An looked a bit gloomy, asking, "Why do we always have to be so secretive? Should I just propose marriage to your father?"

Pei Mianman replied with an ambiguous expression, "Then what about Chuyan?"

Zu An choked Pei Mianman laughed and said, "It's okay; I'm happy enough just to hear that you had that intention. My clan wants to marry me off to King Qi Manor as a concubine, so how could they allow me to marry anyone else?"

"Your clan's members really are impossibly stupid. King Qi is already almost finished, and yet they still keep throwing things straight into the fire pit." Zu An naturally knew that the emperor was already targeting King Qi.

Pei Mianman smiled and replied, "I don't like anyone else, so who cares if he's King Qi's heir or a random commoner? I won't marry them. I will only marry you alone."

Zu An was truly moved when he heard that. He immediately pulled her close to him. Pei Mianman was immediately shaken up and said, "I really can't keep going; let me slowly..."

...

As Zu An was about to leave, he suddenly remembered something and took out the 'toothpick' sword Xiao Yao had given him, saying, "Keep this with you. If you end up facing someone you can't defeat, just

use this against them. It will release an attack on par with the full-force strike of a master rank cultivator.”

Xiao Yao didn't know that Zu An still had other trump cards under his belt. Such a thing wasn't too useful for him. After all, should he encounter something too hard to deal with, he still had the emperor's decree at his disposal.

Meanwhile, even though Pei Mianman's cultivation wasn't low, and she even had Fu Hao's owl statue, it wouldn't be enough against a true expert. Furthermore, he couldn't always stay at her side, so such a thing would make Zu An feel a bit more at ease.

“Did you get that from the drunkard? I don't want it.” Pei Mianman immediately recognized the little sword's background. She harrumphed and refused.

“Don't make a fuss. It's something I'm giving you now.” Zu An tossed it into her clothes. “Cloudcenter Commandery is extremely dangerous, and the Pei clan even wants to marry you off. Having more things to protect yourself can only be a good thing. You're now mine, so you have to protect yourself well for me.”

“Hmph, who's yours?” Pei Mianman scoffed, a pink blush crossing her cheeks.

Zu An suddenly felt he was in the mood again... but he was chased out in the end.

...

When he returned to his residence, Zu An felt as if all of the stress he experienced from the mission had vanished. When he remembered his gentle and enthusiastic night with Pei Mianman, he immediately felt invigorated.

Gao Ying and Pei You were washing up. They couldn't help but ask when they saw how happy he looked, “Brother Zu, what's caused you to be in such a good mood today?”

Zu An coughed and said, “It's nothing. I'm just in a good mood.”

Pei You moved over and gave him a sniff. He remarked, “Hm? You smell pretty good. It smells a lot better than the girls from the pleasure quarters. Do all the girls in Cloudcenter Commandery have such noble tastes?”

Gao Ying had an expression of hidden bitterness on his face. He said, “Brother Zu, you didn't even invite us.”

Zu An was speechless. These two really have become addicted to playing around in those brothels!

He saw Sang Hong come out from his room too. Zu An coughed and said, “We are members of the imperial envoy; we represent the dignity of the court. How can we go to the pleasure quarters? We would end up becoming the laughingstock of Cloudcenter Commandery's officials.”

Sang Hong nodded in appreciation. Even though Ah Zu did behave a bit frivolously sometimes, he still knew when to act seriously. Qien'er wouldn't be wronged by following him. Sigh, we've been gone for so long already. I wonder if Qien'er was able to get pregnant or not...

Pei You and Gao Ying had strange expressions. They thought to themselves, Who are you talking all fancy like that to? They were just about to mock him when they noticed that Sang Hong was nearby. They immediately changed their tone.

“Brother Zu’s words are correct.”

“Brother Zu is a model for our generation.”

...

Zu An was a bit embarrassed when he saw the two grit their teeth. He immediately changed the topic, asking, “Haha, why did you all get up so early? Do you already have plans?”

“We were about to pay Madam Yu a visit. She’s a key component of the case this time.” Their expressions became somewhat moved. Yu Yanluo had been the number one beauty in the past. Even though they knew someone like that would never have any relationship with them, as men, who wouldn’t want to admire her beauty from up close?

Zu An replied, “Oh, then you guys should go; I won’t come along with you. I looked around last night, so I feel a bit tired right now. I’m going to get some rest.” He thought, Big Manman really is a little enchantress. I didn’t get to sleep much last night at all!

Gao Ying and Pei You were confused. You’re not even interested in seeing the number one beauty? Are you even a man or not? Still, it was better for them if Zu An didn’t go. Otherwise, he would always end up stealing the spotlight somehow.

“Ah Zu, rest well. There is no need for you to worry about Yu Yanluo’s matters,” Sang Hong said. Even though he was curious as to what Zu An had been investigating the previous night, judging from how tired Zu An looked, he couldn’t really ask about it at the moment. It was more important for Zu An to go back and rest first.

“Thank you, respected uncle.” Zu An’s face heated up, and he quickly returned to his room. When he entered the covers, he fell asleep just a few moments after hitting the bed. He really was too tired after the previous night.

...

Meanwhile, in Pei Manor, Pei Shao was politely receiving King Qi’s heir with his wife.

Zhao Zhi pointed at the exquisite gift case on the table, saying, “These are special cakes that I purchased from Cassia Moon Restaurant for Miss Pei. I hope they are to the young miss’ taste.”

“The young heir is too kind.” Madam Pei had a big smile on her face. She then urged a maid off to the side, “Why aren’t you inviting the young miss over yet?”

The maid left, then came back. She stuttered, “The young miss... The young miss said she was tired, so she was going to sleep some more. She said the master and madam should eat on their own.”

Madam Pei’s smile froze. She exclaimed, “That damn lass! Was sleeping all night not enough? The young heir came all the way here to see her; how can she be so indiscriminate?!”

Zhao Zhi frowned. Pei Mianman is going to be my concubine in the future; how can you talk about her like this?

Pei Shao seemed to have sensed Zhao Zhi's change in attitude. He quickly stopped his wife from berating Pei Mianman further, saying, "Ahem, madam, how about you call her over personally? I must ask the heir for your pardon. That child has been spoiled a bit by us, so she has become a bit headstrong."

"It's fine; let her sleep for a bit longer. We can just chat on our own." Zhao Zhi smiled. He wanted to leave Pei Mianman with a good impression. A woman as pretty as her ought to throw a bit of a tantrum from time to time.

Furthermore, she must be a bit shaken that she's going to be wed to this young master. Her predicament is understandable. I should show her my gentlemanly side. She'll soon have a favorable opinion of me.

Pei Mianman's incredible appearance and voluptuous figure appeared in his mind again. No wonder she has such an amazing figure; it was all from good rest.

My wife really is adorable.