

## Immortal 1011

### Chapter 1011: Doubts Everywhere

Afterward, Zu An slept all the way until noon. He felt incredible when he got up again.

The servants of the temporary official residence had prepared fruits and snacks. When he saw the amount of meat, Zu An thought, As expected of the northwest! Even the refreshments are very different in style. Since he wasn't all that picky about food, he ate some of it.

A while later, a sudden disturbance occurred outside. It turned out Sang Hong's group had returned.

Zu An saw that their expressions weren't good at all. He asked out of curiosity, "Did things not go well?"

Sang Hong nodded in agreement. Pei You was the first to say, "We went to Yu Manor and waited there for a long time, just to be told that Madam Yu was feeling unwell and wasn't meeting any guests. I'm so freaking pissed right now!"

They had been looking forward to seeing the number one beauty's appearance, and they had even wondered about how they were going to leave someone like that with the best impression possible. And yet, after all of that, they had ended up getting the cold shoulder. They were pent up with resentment.

"Do you think she's been kept under house arrest by Jian Taiding?" Zu An asked. That was also what everyone had suspected before.

Sang Hong shook his head, saying, "We thought that Yu Yanluo might have moved to the Dukedom Manor, but later on, I learned she had remained in Yu Manor the entire time. She is the one with the most say in Cloudcenter Commandery's Yu clan, so who could even keep her under house arrest?"

Gao Ying also said with a bitter smile, "In the end, it's because she doesn't want to meet with us. Her status is special and she's also female. We really can't do anything about it."

"We can't investigate the case of the duke's disappearance if we can't even meet with Yu Yanluo. There are many things only a duchess like her knows best," Pei You said resentfully.

Sang Hong's brows were also tightly locked. He said, "I just cannot understand why she would refuse to meet with us. Unless... She does not want us to find out who the mastermind is?"

Zu An was alarmed. He remembered Qiu Honglei's warning back in Yi Commandery. She had said that Yu Yanluo was definitely not the harmless white flower people all imagined her to be. He thought for a bit, then said with a serious expression, "I'll give it a try and pay her a visit."

Pei You put his arm around Zu An and said, "It's useless. Even Sir Sang was given the cold shoulder."

"Indeed. There were untold numbers of princes and dukes who wished to meet her in the past due to her fame, and yet they weren't able to meet with her at all. There were even many young masters who believed themselves to be talented enough and solemnly vowed to see her, and yet in the end, they were also given the cold shoulder." Gao Ying retold the stories he had heard before in the capital.

Even though Zu An had known Yu Yanluo was popular, he had never expected it to be to that extent. The biggest reason was that people's impressions of her were that she was arrogant and cold, yet he had never felt that way before. He said, "I feel like she'll meet with me. I'm pretty close to her."

Those present fell silent. Gao Ying, Pei You and the others looked at him with strange expressions. Sang Hong wanted to say something several times, but stopped.

In the end, it was Gao Ying who said with a long sigh, "Brother Zu, we know you have a high affinity with women, but Yu Yanluo isn't like the other girls. There's no need to waste your time going again." Pei You also parroted his message.

Even Sang Hong said seriously, "Since we cannot meet with Yu Yanluo, we can only start our investigation from the Jian clan and other such people."

Even though they all spoke tactfully, what they meant was clear. They all felt that Zu An was bullshitting. Who is Yu Yanluo? When she was popular, you were still sucking on your mom's breast! Why would she be close to you? However, out of respect for Zu An's dignity, no one exposed him.

Zu An replied, "Uh... I'll give it a try anyway. It's not like we'd lose out on that much anyway."

The group assumed he was putting on an act to save face, so they couldn't convince him otherwise. They thought to themselves, He'll regret it once he goes through what we went through. At that point, our only job is to make sure we absolutely don't laugh at him because of our friendship.

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Just like that, they parted ways. Sang Hong's group went to the Jian clan to gather intel, while Zu An headed to meet with Yu Yanluo alone.

The Yu clan wasn't hard to find. The most luxurious and majestic buildings in Cloudcenter Commandery weren't in the Civil Affairs Manor, the City Lord Manor, or even the Cloudcenter Duke Manor, but rather in the Yu clan's territory, as they had gathered several centuries of wealth. It was rumored that out of the entire Cloudcenter Commandery, half was the Yu clan's property; even though the claim was a bit exaggerated, it still told of the Yu clan's power in Cloudcenter Commandery.

As Zu An arrived in front of a grand residence, he became a bit absentminded. He felt as if he had arrived in front of a small-scale Imperial Palace. No wonder the emperor had so many reservations against the Yu clan! This really was a bit too ridiculous.

Back then, the Chu clan had engaged in the salt and iron industries in Brightmoon City, making them extremely wealthy as well. But compared to the Yu clan, they weren't even on the same order of magnitude.

When he arrived at the gate, he told the guard at the entrance, "Please help me contact your madam. Tell her that her old friend from Wolf Valley outside Brightmoon City's outskirts has come to pay her a visit."

The guard gave him a few looks, then waved his hands casually. He said, "Go, get out of here. Our madam isn't feeling well and has politely refused to meet with all guests."

After being a guard for so long, he had already lost count of how many absurd reasons people had given him to get closer to the madam. This kid is so young. How can the madam possibly be his friend?

All of the Yu clan's guards bore a natural sense of responsibility in protecting their madam. They didn't want to let any bad people get close to her. That was especially the case after something had ended up happening to Cloudcenter Duke. That feeling became even stronger.

Zu An stared blankly for a moment. This feels like déjà vu... He had been given a hard time by the gatekeeper at Brightmoon City's Jade clan back then. But his attitude was entirely different from before. He didn't feel a trace of anger as he said, "I'm not speaking lies. I still have a present your madam gave me. You can bring this inside to contact her..."

He suddenly froze midway through his sentence. He remembered that back then, in the capital, Yu Yanluo had already taken back the pendant she gave him.

When he saw Zu An's expression, the guard said coldly, "Stop wasting your time already. Our madam won't meet with anyone. She didn't even meet with the Imperial Envoy when they came earlier. Don't tell me you're more important than the Imperial Envoy?" Zu An frowned.

Suddenly, someone exclaimed in shock, "Cheng... Brother Cheng?" A bodyguard clad entirely in white had been returning to the manor. He had glanced over when he saw the disturbance, but then he cried out in alarm.

Zu An turned around. When he saw that person, he felt that the other party was a bit familiar, but he couldn't recall who it was.

"Did Brother Cheng forget me? I'm Yu Bin! You saved me back then in Brightmoon City's outskirts!" the bodyguard exclaimed with a smile.

"So that was you!" Zu An finally remembered who it was. He had been completely focused on earning Rage points back then, and that name had only shown up before in the backend. No wonder he hadn't remembered. As for why the other party had called him Brother Cheng, that was because Zu An had been trying to hide his identity. That was why he'd said his name was Cheng Shouping.

"Yu Bin, you know this person?" The guard was stunned.

Yu Bin said with a smile, "Of course. He even saved the madam before."

The guard immediately apologized to Zu An. "I'm truly sorry! I've misunderstood the young master... I actually refused someone who saved the madam's life before. I really deserve death."

He suddenly raised his blade up to his neck, but fortunately, Zu An moved quickly and disarmed him, exclaiming, "What are you doing?! It wasn't anything major at all!"

"I've let down the madam; I've let down the young master..." The gatekeeper was really shaken up.

Yu Bin quickly advised him, "Even Brother Cheng isn't blaming you, so of course the madam won't blame you. Why do you need to be like this..."

The two of them finally managed to stop the guard from taking his life. Meanwhile, Yu Bin learned the reason for Zu An's visit and said, "Brother Cheng, I'll take you inside. However, the madam's condition

and mood have been quite poor recently, and she really hasn't met with any guests. I can't say for certain whether she'll be willing to meet with you or not."

"Thank you, Brother Yu." Zu An followed him into Yu Manor. He sized up the decorations and security along the way while asking, "Why would that person choose to almost take his own life?"

He was alarmed when he recalled the previous scene. That person had definitely not been acting. If Zu An had been even a moment slower, he really would have died.

"The people in the manor truly admire the madam. You were someone who even saved the madam's life, and yet he made you feel humiliation. That was why he couldn't get over that fact." Yu Bin sounded as if he were just speaking about a common occurrence.

Zu An frowned. Aren't the Yu clan's people a bit too crazy about Yu Yanluo? He could tell that these people didn't have lust or desire for an exceptional beauty in their eyes, but rather only utmost respect. He once again recalled what Qiu Honglei had told him before. His opinion of Yu Yanluo was actually starting to waver. There was definitely a lot more to her than he knew.

Yu Bin had Zu An rest in the lobby for a while. Then, he quickly left to report. Soon afterward, he ran back and said with an excited expression, "Brother Cheng, the madam has invited you inside. This really is surprising! It's already been a long time since the madam has met any outsiders."

"Brother Yu, actually, my name isn't Cheng Shouping..." Zu An took the chance to tell him his real identity. "Back then, I was worried that someone would try to get revenge on me, so I used a fake name. I hope Brother Yu can forgive me."

Yu Bin was a bit startled, but he didn't really mind it either, saying, "Brother Zu is quite meticulous; it really is admirable. The fact that you're speaking up about this now speaks even more about your noble character. This way, please!" He brought Zu An to a room, then silently withdrew.

Zu An entered through the main entrance; suddenly, his entire body was enveloped in comforting warmth. It was bitterly cold outside, and yet this place felt like the middle of summer! He subconsciously loosened his collar. "Isn't the heater turned a bit too high here?" he muttered.

However, the scene before him quickly left him stunned.

## **Chapter 1012: Completely Defenseless**

Precious incense was being burned inside. The fragrance was a bit stimulating, and yet not to the point that it would make one go crazy.

A mature and graceful beauty was lying on a soft chair, dressed in leisurely indoor clothes. Perhaps because it was a bit inelegant, she also had a white fox fur coat draped over her shoulders. However, her personal wear could still be seen underneath. A fluffy and soft quilt rested over her waist, outlining her incredible waist and bottom. Her body gave off an indescribably soft and supple feeling, as if even the toughest of men would sink straight in.

She rested her chin on one hand, while her other hand held a delicate heater by her belly. A bit of her fair wrist was exposed, her skin somehow even more tender and fair than that of a young lady's. Her

hair that had previously always been coiled up elegantly above her head was now scattered across her body, adding a much more leisurely feeling to her current appearance.

Zu An felt as if the room had suddenly become much hotter. But what he was feeling even more at the moment was puzzlement. It was because Yu Yanluo's appearance was way too casual! It was almost as if she had just gotten out of bed and met with her guest in her sleepwear. His eyes moved to the embroidered covers around her waist and he immediately rejected that thought. She hadn't even gotten out of bed!

Even though he had saved her life before, their relationship wasn't this good, right? Why would she even let him see such a personal scene? This was something one should only show one's spouse, right? Some couples that were more reserved might not even see such a side of each other, right? Doesn't this mean she's seducing me right now?

But when he raised his head and looked into her deep, beautiful, and starry eyes, the pure expression in them that didn't carry a shred of ulterior motive, he knew it was he who was thinking the wrong things.

"I'm truly sorry; I was still sleeping before." Yu Yanluo's red lips parted slightly. Her voice was pleasant like a yellow oriole's cry, yet also carried the grace of an upper-class woman. "I've been extremely tired recently and really don't wish to get up. I was worried that you might've waited for a long time, so I just called you in. I hope you don't mind."

"The madam speaks too seriously. The fact that you were willing to make an exception to meet with me already makes me extremely happy. Why would I mind something like that?" Zu An now knew why Sang Hong and the others couldn't meet with her. Her current state really wasn't suitable for meeting with them; she hadn't been finding excuses to avoid them.

Yu Yanluo smiled. There were faintly discernible dimples by the corners of her lips. She said, "I can refuse to meet with others, but you saved my life. How can I refuse you?"

Zu An even became momentarily distracted when he saw the smile on her face. He thought to himself, No wonder she's regarded as the world's number one beauty and makes so many men go crazy. He replied, "You saved me once in the capital too, so we're even."

"How can life-saving gratuities be repaid just like that..." Yu Yanluo gave him a look, and a hint of shock appearing in her eyes. "It's been a while since we last met. Your growth speed seems to be quite shocking! You've already grown from that little boy into a real man."

Zu An's forehead darkened. He exclaimed, "When have I ever been a little boy?"

"Didn't someone previously say you wanted to become my man?" Yu Yanluo teased. "Back then, you weren't scared of anything, but you're now more mature and restrained."

Zu An's face heated up. This was complete social suicide... As he understood Yu Yanluo more and more, he began to realize just how ridiculously overconfident he had been in the past.

Fortunately, Yu Yanluo didn't brood over the subject and instead said out of concern. "If you feel a bit hot, you can just take off your jacket. My room is fairly warm."

Only then did Zu An realize that not only were there heaters everywhere in the room, there was heat coming from the floor too. It seemed to be drawing geothermal heat to the room. He once again sighed at the Yu clan's wealth.

"Right, I noticed that madam seemed to be especially scared of the cold, as if you were afflicted with some cold poison. Even though I'm no physician, I have some knowledge on these matters. Should I help the madam take a look?" Zu An asked out of curiosity.

After all, Chu Chuyan had suffered from the Snowflake Sword's side effects. Her lower abdomen area had always seemed as if it contained a block of ice. Later on, he had used his special blazing hot stick technique to warm her up completely, completely curing that condition.

Of course, with his current relationship with Yu Yanluo, there was no way he could use the same method to cure her. However, he had already reached the fourth layer of the Primordial Origin Sutra. Unless it was some life and death injury, he could just heal her through that technique.

"You even know something like that? You're really leaving me more and more surprised." Yu Yanluo chuckled and continued, "But thank you for your good intentions. I don't have too many issues; it's just a matter of my constitution. I've always been a bit scared of the cold, and it's always like this during winter.

"In the past, I could avoid the cold by going south, but things have become a bit different this year. I had no choice but to remain here."

Zu An had a strange expression. Can you still call this being a bit scared of the cold? But there was nothing else he could say if it was about her constitution.

Yu Yanluo didn't wish to continue chatting about the previous topic and casually asked Zu An, "Right, I heard you were a member of the imperial envoy this time?"

"That's right," Zu An replied. "The main reason I came here was to appoint a new Cloudcenter Duke. At the same time, we were going to investigate the case of the Cloudcenter Duke's disappearance."

"Then this trip is most likely mainly to investigate the disappearance of the duke." Yu Yanluo sighed.

"I won't hide it from the madam. Both of these matters are indeed very important." Zu An carefully examined the other party's exceptional face. He didn't sense too much grief in her expression when he mentioned the Cloudcenter Duke's disappearance. Since they were already on the topic, he took the chance to ask, "By the way, there are some things about Cloudcenter Duke that I wish to consult the madam about."

"I don't know too much about his affairs either," Yu Yanluo replied.

Zu An was confused. He asked, "Isn't he your husband?"

Yu Yanluo shook her head and said, "We normally don't live together, so I don't know a lot about many of his affairs."

Zu An frowned and said, "How long ago did you two start to live apart from each other? Don't tell me it was from the very start?"

Yu Yanluo's expression turned strange. A while later, she said, "That question's too personal, so I don't wish to answer it."

Zu An was speechless. There's definitely something strange with this couple!

As if realizing her reply was a bit rigid, Yu Yanluo said after thinking for a bit, "You can just ask Gong Pan. He's Yanyou's captain of the bodyguards and extremely devoted. He knows many things about Cloudcenter Duke better than me. I'll have him come to you in a bit."

Zu An was shocked. He asked, "Someone like that is also in this manor?"

Yu Yanluo nodded, replying, "He decided to follow me after something happened to Yanyou."

Zu An's expression turned strange. Why does this feel like the assets have already been divided or something? As Cloudcenter Duke's guard leader, had Gong Pan decided to follow the madam after his master passed, or had he been bribed by the madam from the start?

Seeing that the other party wasn't all that interested in the various questions he asked about Cloudcenter Duke, Zu An changed the topic. He asked, "Has the madam found out who the evildoer was behind your ambush in Brightmoon City?"

"Ah, that matter..." Yu Yanluo seemed to be thinking about the past. A while later, she said with a chuckle, "We found out who it was and already dealt with it."

When he noticed that she had answered without elaborating on the details, as if she didn't plan to tell him anything more, Zu An didn't push the issue. Seeing how the other party wasn't in the best of spirits and appeared to be pushing herself to speak to him, he then got up and said, "The madam's condition isn't the best, so I won't disturb your rest anymore."

Yu Yanluo was a bit shocked. Then, she smiled and said, "You're the first man to ever take the initiative to ask to leave. I won't act overly courteous then; I indeed feel a bit tired and will continue to rest. Once you leave, someone will bring you to see Gong Pan." She removed the fox fur coat and lay back down again, closing her eyes. Her sleeping position was sweet and unrestrained, as if she had already entered dreamland again.

Zu An was stunned. I didn't see her telling anyone anything about this... How will the people outside know I'm looking for Gong Pan?

Also, is she really daring enough that she won't even put up the slightest resistance in front of me? She's going to fall asleep right in front of me like this?

Does she not know just how fatal her beauty is for men?!

Is she not scared that I'll just pounce on her?

He had known she wasn't a cultivator from when he first met her. Wasn't she completely lowering her defenses in front of a cultivator? As long as the cultivator wasn't too weak, if he wanted to do something, none of the guards outside would be able to hear her screams or shouts at all.

"Only a real gentleman like me would walk away." After shaking his head, he threw away such random thoughts and left. He closed the door behind him.

When he left, Yu Yanluo's lips curled up slightly, as if she were currently experiencing a beautiful dream.

### **Chapter 1013: A Riddle of Disappearance**

Soon after Zu An left the room, someone standing in the distance turned around and walked toward him, saying, "I greet Sir Zu. I am Gong Pan. The madam has said that you have something to ask me."

"Sir Gong is too polite. There were just some things I wanted to ask about." Zu An carefully examined the middle-aged man in front of him. He had a strong and sturdy build, and his gaze was steady. Zu An could tell that his cultivation was definitely not low. He had thick brows and big eyes, and the first impression he gave Zu An was that of an experienced and knowledgeable person. There was also a knotted scar by his neck, making him look tough.

Gong Pan subconsciously rubbed his scar when he noticed that Zu An was looking at it. He explained, "I got this back when I fought against a fiend race expert. If this wound had been even half an inch lower, I wouldn't be in this world right now."

"Sorry." Zu An felt a bit apologetic. After all, staring at that wound really wasn't too polite.

"It's fine." Gong Pan had an open-minded smile on his face. "Those who meet me for the first time often look there. This isn't a disgrace for me, but rather a glorious memory. This wound proves that I fought against the fiend races head-on."

"The fact that General Gong was able to survive after having a wound like this means that there are great blessings awaiting you after the misfortune." Zu An sighed inwardly as well. Such a wound really was too treacherous.

"I don't care if there are blessings or not; I only hope my duke is well." Gong Pan sounded dispirited as he continued, "It was because the duke pulled me an inch to the side that I avoided that fatal blow. Unfortunately, even though I survived, I have no idea how the duke is doing right now."

Zu An took the chance to ask, "What exactly happened to the duke?"

He had already looked through the corresponding files the local officials provided, and he had even submitted a report to the court. Unfortunately, there were too many details missing, and there were too many contradictions. It was much better to ask those directly involved.

Gong Pan was a bit hesitant. A while later, he said, "Since the madam asked for my assistance, that means Sir Zu is someone worthy of trust. Please follow me."

Afterward, he led Zu An to a spacious courtyard. Only after making sure that no one else was listening in did he say, "The entire matter of the duke's disappearance is extremely bizarre. Back then, the duke suddenly decided to go into seclusion for a long time. When it was time for him to come out, there was no sign of him. At first, no one treated it as a big deal. After all, cultivators wouldn't always leave seclusion on time.

"But after ten days, there was still nothing. Only then did we try to inquire when the duke was coming out. Yet we still didn't get any response. Then, we noticed that the doors weren't locked, and that the inside was already completely deserted.



“At first, we all thought the duke left earlier to go somewhere else. That kind of thing has happened before. But after a few months passed, there was still no sign of the duke’s return. We then realized something was strange.

“We sent out a lot of people to search in places the duke might have been in, but we unfortunately didn’t find him. Even though there have been people who claimed to have seen the duke appear in the commandery from time to time, when we looked into them, we found that they were all just making up nonsense to try and cheat us for a reward.

“Another half year passed just like that. The duke never appeared. Only then did we realize that something bad might have already happened to him.” As Gong Pan spoke, he clenched his fists so tightly that his knuckles cracked. He was clearly stirred up by the subject.

Zu An asked seriously, “Who was the last one to have met the duke and when?”

Gong Pan thought for a bit, then replied, “There were many people there the last time he was seen. At the time, the duke invited the second master for a drink, and there were many maids and servants tending to them. I was also there. We all saw him.”

“Were you all there the entire time? And did you personally see him go into seclusion after he finished drinking?” Zu An felt that things were a bit strange. Who went into seclusion after drinking?

“That wasn’t the case,” Gong Pan replied. “We were all at their side in the beginning, but later on, the duke wanted to talk about some matters with the second master in secret, so he had us withdraw. Even though we weren’t there, we could still see two silhouettes chatting behind the window. They continued to chat, and we could even hear laughter from time to time.

Zu An frowned. The fact that Gong Pan hadn’t really seen them directly meant there was a lot of room for manipulation. There were many similar cases in the detective novels he had read.

“Could it be that something already happened to the duke then? That the figures you saw and the voices you heard might have actually been imitated by someone else?” Zu An asked.

“That’s impossible!” Gong Pan directly refuted him. “We’re all the duke’s most trusted people; no one knows his build and voice better than us. If someone tried to impersonate him, we would definitely have been able to distinguish between them.”

Zu An frowned. He just felt that sort of judgment was too arbitrary. Someone’s build could look very different through the mirror, and for things like voice... There were a ton of eccentrics in this world. Surely there was someone good at vocal mimicry out there. The ‘Face of a Thousand Identities’ alone spoke of how to perfectly imitate the voice of one’s target.

But after thinking about it, he realized such manuals were probably not too common either. After all, he was an Embroidered Envoy, but he had never heard of anyone being capable of something like that.

Gong Pan continued, “Even if we take a thousand steps back, even if that person was an impostor, how could he have possibly accomplished something like this? After all, the duke’s cultivation is already at the peak of the master rank; he’s one of the best cultivators in the world. Who could silently assassinate him in such a short amount of time, and under our very eyes no less?”

“What if the second master assisted that person?” Zu An stared straight into the other party’s eyes.

Gong Pan’s expression changed, but he still replied, “That’s impossible. Even though second master’s cultivation is high, he’s still lacking compared to the duke. The duke could even fight him without using one of his hands as a handicap and still win, let alone with all of us waiting outside.”

Zu An remained silent for a moment. He could suspect someone of mimicking the man’s voice, but cultivation wasn’t something so easily replicated.

If Jian Yanyou hadn’t been on guard at all, there might have been a chance of his younger brother taking him down by surprise. But with his cultivation, there was no way he would be taken out without causing a huge scene. The guards outside would have stormed in as soon as he called out.

Could it be that I guessed wrong? Zu An remained silent for a bit. Then, he suddenly asked, “What kind of a relationship does the madam have with the duke?”

“The madam?” Gong Pan’s expression suddenly changed. He asked, “You’re not suspecting the madam, are you?”

Zu An waved his hands and said, “I’m your madam’s friend, so how could I suspect her? I’m just asking out of curiosity. I heard her mention that she doesn’t live together with the duke.”

Gong Pan hesitated, but then said, “Indeed, the duke and madam live separately. However, that’s because the madam has to manage the Yu clan’s affairs, while the duke needs to take responsibility for Cloudcenter Commandery’s safety and fend off the fiend races’ invasions. The two of them rarely met and were more often apart, which was why they lived apart. But their relationship is good. There’s always been mutual respect between them.”

“So they treat each other with mutual respect.” Zu An raised his eyebrows. Those words could be interpreted from two different angles. The first was that the spouses were indeed compatible and harmonious; the second was that there was no real love, but rather, each person merely fulfilled their own obligations...

“This might be a bit bold of me to ask.” Zu An looked at Gong Pan and asked curiously, “So why did you come to the Yu clan? Normally speaking, you should be someone from the Duke Manor.”

Gong Pan looked somewhat downcast as he explained, “After the duke went missing, everyone was still unified in the beginning. But as time went on, and we couldn’t find where he went no matter how hard we tried, so many things began to change.

“But that was to be expected too. Many people have families to support. Some people had their future prospects to worry about, and naturally sought out new patrons to rely on.”

Zu An asked to test the waters, “Is the patron you’re talking about the second master?”

Gong Pan nodded and explained, “Indeed. He’s the duke’s younger brother, and he was the second most authoritative figure in the Military Affairs Manor as well. He has many trusted aides under him. After something happened to the duke, it only made sense for him to take over. Many people didn’t necessarily want to follow him, but as they worked with him, as time went on, they already unknowingly became his men.

"But I didn't have such aspirations and waited for the duke to return all this time. I'd be a bit of an irksome presence if I stayed there, which was why I came over to the madam's side. After all, she's the duke's wife. There were some others who shared my thoughts and came over to the madam's side as well."

Zu An nodded. That was something he could understand. Others might rely on Jian Taiding, but Gong Pan was the guard captain of the previous duke and his trusted aide. He wouldn't be put in an important position even if he went over to the second master, so staying with Yu Yanluo was a sensible choice. At the very least, he would retain a reputation of loyalty.

"Judging from your tone, it seems you don't bear any enmity against Second Master Jian, no?" Zu An asked curiously.

Gong Pan looked toward the north and said with a calm expression, "Unless the duke's disappearance really had something to do with the second master, why would I hate him? It's only natural for him to have taken in the duke's former subordinates. Even if I were in his position, I would most likely do the same.

"Furthermore, the Duke Manor is vital to the safety of Cloudcenter Commandery; we still have to fend off the fiend races who invade the borders. We need a powerful leader to stabilize the situation after the duke's disappearance. A capable and ambitious leader will always be much better than a mediocre one."

"General Gong is an upright and righteous person, as expected. Your bearing is admirable." Zu An felt sincere admiration for the other man. Afterward, he asked some more about some matters related to the dukedom. The other party replied to all of his questions one after another.

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When he was about to leave, Zu An suddenly turned around as if he had just remembered something. He asked, "By the way, would it be possible to give me a list of all of the duke's personal guards?"

#### **Chapter 1014: In a Hurry to Marry Away**

Even though there were usually a lot of guards assigned to such important individuals, the most trusted personal aides were usually set in stone. It was usually just a small group of people who worked together.

Those people were carefully selected. Cultivation was actually secondary; the most important thing was for them to have a clear background and for them to be devoted and reliable. But of course, those who were chosen in the end wouldn't have low cultivation levels.

After interrogating that nefarious cultivator in the capital's outskirts, Zu An had learned that there was a guard who had run all the way from Cloudcenter Commandery to the capital to ask for help, but he was intercepted and killed along the way. Even though he had gotten some information about that guard, unfortunately, that evil cultivator had only refined the other party's fractured soul, and so they didn't know that guard's complete identity.

But if his suspicions weren't wrong, that guard had to be one of Cloudcenter Commandery's personal guards. Regular guards wouldn't have access to a secret on that level, nor would they have enough loyalty to devote their life to asking for help.

"The guards' names?" Gong Pan was stunned. He was clearly curious as to Zu An's objective, but he still nodded and said, "I'll write them down for you."

He fetched some paper and a pen. Then he explained as he wrote, "After something happened to the duke, these people began to disperse as well. After all, no one else would be comfortable employing them, so they all began to build up their own small groups..."

Zu An nodded in understanding. It was just like some of the corporations of his previous world. The rise of the next leader would often result in the disbanding of the previous leader's cheerleaders. Everything would be completely replaced...

Zu An received the name list. He asked out of curiosity while looking it over, "Where are these people now?"

"A small number of them followed me here to serve the madam, while another group returned home dejectedly to live in seclusion. Some stayed in the Military Affairs Manor, but were then marginalized and assigned to other places," Gong Pan explained.

Zu An patted his shoulder in consolation. The formerly glorious Duke Manor was now in such a state... It was quite the tragedy.

Gong Pan suddenly took a knee respectfully, saying, "Sir Zu, please help us find out the truth regarding the duke's disappearance and bring justice to everyone."

"Please get back up!" Zu An quickly supported him to his feet. "This is my duty, so I'll definitely do everything I can!"

Whether it was because it was his mission, because of his friendship with Yu Yanluo, or to ease some of his own doubts, he had to find out the truth of the matter.

...

Lost in thought about the case, Zu An returned to the temporary residence without realizing it. He discovered that Sang Hong and the others had already returned earlier.

When he saw Zu An walking silently, Sang Hong said in consolation, "Ah Zu, you don't need to feel too bad about this. We already investigated the Duke Manor. According to what the people there said, Madam Yu hasn't received any guests for quite some time already. She isn't acting against us, so it's completely normal that she wasn't willing to meet with you."

Pei You had rarely seen Zu An so dispirited. He actually felt a bit more confidence as a result. He forced a smile and wrapped his arm around Zu An, saying to comfort him, "Brother Zu, we all know that you possess exceptional charisma, but that woman Yu Yanluo just doesn't let anyone near her..."

Zu An shook his head and replied, "Indeed, she didn't let anyone else in, but I got in."

"It's natural that you weren't able to get in; none of us were able to get in either." Pei You subconsciously continued to console Zu An. He then suddenly realized that something wasn't right. His voice jumped up an octave as he exclaimed, "You got in?! You... What... How... Where did you go?"

Zu An was stunned. He replied, "To Yu Yanluo, of course. Where else would I be going?"

"No way, right? Madam Yu hasn't met anyone for several months already, and she even refused to meet with the Substitute Commander-in-Chief Jian Taiding. How could she possibly agree to meet with you?" Even Gao Ying was now suspicious. Was Zu An just saying things on purpose so he wouldn't look bad in front of all of them? After all, none of them could prove that he hadn't gone inside, as no one could get in at the moment anyway.

Zu An shrugged and replied, "Didn't I tell you guys she's my friend? We're really close."

Sang Hong was a bit suspicious at first, because he had heard that even the emperor had been given the cold shoulder by Yu Yanluo. How could Zu An meet with someone like this just because he wanted to? However, he then remembered that Zu An wasn't the type to speak without thinking. He quickly asked, "Ah Zu, you really met with Madam Yu? Did you gain any valuable information?"

"Her condition was indeed quite poor, and she needs a lot of rest. That's why she hasn't been meeting with outsiders." Zu An didn't tell them that she feared the cold. Yu Yanluo had trusted him and showed him that side of her, so he couldn't just tell people that secret. What if someone with ill intent wanted to use that to harm her?

"Also, she doesn't seem to live with Cloudcenter Duke. They usually live apart," he added. He even wondered if there was something wrong with the relationship between the husband and wife. However, he didn't voice those suspicions.

"You even learned something as private as that?" The listeners were shocked. They had investigated the duke manor all day. Even though Yu Yanluo hadn't been there, they had all assumed that she had only returned to the Yu clan after Cloudcenter Duke's disappearance. They hadn't expected the two of them to have lived separately for so long.

"Furthermore, a portion of Cloudcenter Duke's people follow Madam Yu now, while some of them were roped in by Jian Taiding..." Zu An explained the information he had gotten from Gong Pan.

Now, no one doubted that he really had met with Yu Yanluo. Gao Ying wanted to say something, but he stopped. Pei You was much more straightforward. He grabbed Zu An and said, "Brother Zu! No, Master! Take me as your disciple, please!"

Sang Hong thought to himself, Didn't the intelligence say this brat from the Pei clan was reserved and introverted? Why is it that whenever Zu An is here, he always seems so... silly?

However, Ah Zu's affinity with women really left him shocked. He hadn't treated it as a big deal previously, but even a woman like Yu Yanluo was close to him? He couldn't help but worry for his daughter when he thought of that. Even though Qien'er was talented and good-looking, whether it was the Chu clan's first miss or someone like Yu Yanluo, she couldn't compete against them! Looks like we need Dan'er's help; only then will we have an unrivaled advantage!

When he saw so many people ask Zu An for girl advice, Sang Hong finally snapped out of his daze and said with a light cough, "We should talk about important matters first. We visited Jian Yanyou's butler in the Duke Manor. The information he gave us matched up with what Ah Zu just said, but it was nowhere near as detailed."

He became a bit dispirited when he thought of that. There was no lack of capable people among their group, yet all of the information they had collected together couldn't even compare to what Zu An alone had gotten. It really was embarrassing... Looks like I need to learn a bit from Ah Zu in this regard in the future.

"Sir Sang speaks too seriously. All of you did great work too. Some things can't be investigated from a single direction to begin with, or else you'll easily reach a biased conclusion," Zu An replied. The group's smiles became more sincere when they heard his answer.

Sang Hong stroked his beard in satisfaction. This kid is so much better than that incapable son of mine. I hope my grandson can inherit these good points from Ah Zu. If that happens, my painstaking efforts will all have been worth it. He asked, "Ah Zu, how do you think we should approach this case from now on?"

Zu An thought for a bit before saying, "I think we can divide ourselves into three groups. One group will investigate Cloudcenter Duke's place of seclusion, as well as various parts of the Duke Manor to see if any clues can be found.

"Another group will interrogate relevant individuals. That means not only the maids, servants, and guards of the Duke Manor, but also the people from the Military Affairs Manor and Civil Affairs Manor. Jian Taiding's political enemies might provide us with some important information.

"Lastly, we need to investigate the guard who resolved to bring vital information to the capital, but was intercepted and silenced along the way. Even though he's already died, people who leave this world inevitably leave behind all kinds of imprints. We'll start investigating the people and places he's been around to see if we can find anything."

Sang Hong nodded inwardly. Ah Zu's plan was well thought out. He had been able to neatly summarize the confusing matter. As such, Sang Hong replied, "I like this plan. Gao Ying and Pei You will be in charge of surveying the scene of the crime. I will interrogate the various people related. Ah Zu will be in charge of looking into the guard's information."

Gao Ying was meticulous in thought, and Pei You was quick-witted. The two of them were perfect for exploring the location of the duke's disappearance. The second group had to associate with Cloudcenter Commandery's officials, so if anyone other than him took charge of that task, their words wouldn't possess enough weight. He had to be the one to take charge of that matter. As for the guard who had been silenced, that was something Zu An understood best to begin with.

He wanted to send some people to keep an eye on King Qi's heir too, but Zu An told him that he had already sent Xiao Jianren over. He was once again impressed and satisfied with this son-in-law, appreciating Zu An more and more.

...

In the following days, each group began their investigation and did their respective duty.

Meanwhile, In Pei Manor, a beautiful young lady was sitting in front of a table, applying makeup. The maid behind her was helping her comb her hair. The maid gave the young lady's chest a jealous look and said, "The miss seems to have been really happy recently. Your complexion has improved a lot too!"

"Is that so?" Pei Mianman supported her chin and looked at the beautiful reflection in the mirror. She couldn't help but chuckle.

"The miss has always been smiling and laughing like this for no reason. You seem really satisfied with King Qi's heir." The maid thought to herself, The young miss' hair really is soft. Combing through her hair didn't take much work at all. It wasn't anything like her own dry and tied-up hair.

"Him?" Pei Mianman harrumphed. But she didn't want to explain further, either.

The maid didn't sense the disdain in her voice and continued, "That King Qi's heir seems to be quite fond of the miss. He keeps visiting the manor with all sorts of desserts, makeup products, and jewelry. The miss has given him the cold shoulder for so long already, but isn't it about time? He is the young heir of a King Manor, after all. It'll be bad if he becomes offended."

In her opinion, the young miss only refused to meet with King Qi's heir to captivate the other party's heart more. But there was a limit to that kind of thing, right? It was already about time to rein it in.

"I won't meet with him!" Pei Mianman felt a bit annoyed. She thought to herself that after taking advantage of her, that guy hadn't come for several days. Men are all pigs after all! They don't know how to treasure you anymore after they get what they want.

"Won't you end up really offending King Qi's heir? Furthermore, the master and madam will be quite troubled too," the maid advised her.

"What does that have to do with me?" Pei Mianman's expression turned cold when she heard the words 'master and madam'. She exclaimed, "What, did you receive some benefits from that heir? Is that why you're trying to persuade me right now?"

"I didn't, I didn't!" The maid immediately waved her hands fearfully. "The young miss has treated me so well; Hong Zao wouldn't dare to go against you!"

Pei Mianman wasn't the daughter of the first wife, so she hadn't received much care in the manor during her earlier years. She'd only had a weak and sickly little maid to help her. Since the maid's condition wasn't the best, Pei Mianman would always share a portion of her leftover red dates for her. Later on, she decided to just call the maid Hong Zao.[1]

As Pei Mianman grew older and became more and more beautiful, Pei Shao began to treat her with more importance. They wanted to give her more maids, but she refused all of them. The two of them had relied on each other for survival for many years. Hong Zao was a grateful maid as well, and always cared for her master.

Pei Mianman said, "Hong Zao, I know your intentions are good and that you want to help me escape from this wretched place. King Qi's heir is indeed an excellent candidate for most girls, but I don't like him."

Hong Zao asked worriedly, "Is the young miss still thinking about your lover from Brightmoon City? But both King Qi Manor and the Pei clan seem to be pushing for this wedding to happen. I fear..." As the miss' personal maid, even though her master never said anything, the changes in her master didn't escape her eyes.

"Don't worry about it. I have my own ways." Pei Mianman had a big smile on her face when she remembered that rascal Zu An.

Hong Zao couldn't say anything else either when she saw her master like that, so she began to talk about the manor's affairs. "King Qi's heir came over again today. They seemed to be talking about the imperial envoy's matters with the master and madam. When I was passing by, they seemed to plan to invite the young miss to leave on a trip for something. The master was a bit hesitant. That young heir really is going a bit too far! The miss hasn't even married him, and yet he already wants to use you for something..."

Pei Mianman had already stood up before Hong Zao even finished speaking. She exclaimed, "What?! Bring me to the lobby immediately!"

#### **Chapter 1015: Familiarity Breeds Fondness**

"Young miss, young miss! I haven't even finished combing your hair yet!" Hong Zao ran after her master, but how could she possibly catch up to Pei Mianman?

"It's fine!" Pei Mianman casually flicked her wrist, and her beautiful hair turned into a pretty bun.

Hong Zao blinked blankly. The young miss was the young miss after all. If you were pretty, every hairstyle would suit you. But why is the young miss in such a rush to leave? Don't tell me she changed her opinion of King Qi's heir?

...

Meanwhile, in the guest lobby, Pei Shao and his wife were receiving Zhao Zhi.

"Thank you, young heir, for the care. That little girl is short-sighted and inexperienced; I fear she would be unable to handle something like that." Pei Shao tactfully refused.

Are you kidding me? King Qi's heir wants Pei Mianman to investigate the imperial envoy's progress on the case? I do want to get closer to King Qi, but I don't want to offend the court!

What kind of a group is the imperial envoy? They have the authority to decapitate first and report later!

Cloudcenter Duke's disappearance was full of suspicious factors; there was definitely something terrifying going on behind the scenes. Even the slightest involvement might result in horrifying consequences.

Pei Shao really didn't want to get involved in something so messy. In his opinion, the best result was to successfully marry his daughter off to King Qi's heir as a concubine. He didn't want his daughter to do anything in public anymore.

With her personality, it had been fine for that daughter to keep running around before. But now, they were already discussing marriage with King Qi Manor, so it wasn't proper to have her going around



anymore. Otherwise, it would look very bad later. Someone might just use that matter to criticize her for dishonoring the royal family, and say she wasn't suitable to be the young heir's concubine.

"Respected uncle is too modest." Zhao Zhi acted quite humbly, showing Pei Shao the greeting of a junior; Pei Shao appreciated that a lot. Zhao Zhi continued, "Miss Pei's aptitude is high, and her cultivation also places her among the best of her peers. She is also quick-witted and resourceful. I have heard about her activities in Brightmoon City as well. She really is a woman who is not inferior to a man at all."

"Not at all, not at all..." Pei Shao stroked his beard proudly when he heard those praises about his own daughter. He enjoyed hearing them.

Zhao Zhi continued, "This is all because I failed to bring enough manpower to Cloudcenter Commandery, and I am not too familiar with the lifestyle around here. I want to investigate the Imperial Envoy somehow, but I do not know how to do so. But Miss Pei is different. The Imperial Envoy this time, Sang Hong, previously served as the governor of Brightmoon City, and his assistant Zu An is also from Brightmoon City. Miss Pei and the others have something of a relationship with them, so it would be much easier for her to take care of many things."

Madam Pei spoke up in favor of the suggestion as well and said, "Master, the heir has already expressed his sincerity. We should just help him out here, no?"

She began to like King Qi's heir more and more. Whether it was his appearance or family background, she was extremely satisfied with both. It was just a pity that she had no daughters herself, or else she would have already offered up her own daughter a long time ago.

Even though that damn brat Pei Mianman didn't get along with her, the Zhou Dynasty valued filial piety greatly. As long as they could marry her off to King Qi Manor, a first wife like her would also rise in status greatly. Furthermore, she wouldn't have to see that damn brat in the manor anymore. Just the thought alone made her extremely happy.

She was probably the one who wanted the marriage to happen the most in the entire Pei Manor. Zhao Zhi had even brought her so many gifts in that time, so how could she not speak up for him?

"Uh..." Pei Shao was hesitant.

However, a pleasant voice exclaimed from outside, "Fine, I'll do this!"

Those inside turned around and saw Pei Mianman slowly walk in from outside.

Zhao Zhi felt as if the oxygen in his lungs had been blown right out. The side profile he saw before had already left him stunned. Now that he could see her from the front, it was even more overwhelming.

He had thought that the Chu Chuyan he had seen in the past was already the most beautiful woman of the generation. But now, he discovered that Pei Mianman wasn't inferior to her in any way! In certain aspects, she was even better.

Forget about him, even Han Fengqiu, who was next to him, gave Pei Mianman a few more looks. His eyes moved up and down, and he wondered whether her massive rack's buttons would burst.

Madam Pei harrumphed. This girl is just like her mother, with her fox-like oval face and ridiculous chest.

"Greetings, Miss Pei. I am Zhao Zhi. I have long heard of the young miss' reputation." Zhao Zhi got up, his usually arrogant and casual nature nowhere to be seen. He bowed in a refined and courteous manner, and gave her an introduction he thought was proper and confident.

Pei Mianman completely ignored it and instead said, "I can agree to help you investigate the progress of the Imperial Envoy, but you have to agree to a request of mine too."

"As long as it is something the young miss asks of me, forget about one thing; I am willing to do it even if it is a thousand or ten thousand things." Zhao Zhi treated Pei Mianman with the best attitude. He was too used to concubines who were completely submissive; instead, this was the kind of woman who drew his interest. When he had first seen her, he had thought that she would be a woman full of charm. Her current attitude instead showed her aloof and reserved side, which only made him feel even more satisfied.

Pei Mianman frowned. This guy really is too cheesy. My Ah Zu is much more honest and reliable.

"Don't agree so quickly, or else everyone here will be embarrassed," Pei Mianman said indifferently. "I can help the young master investigate the Imperial Envoy, but I hope the young master can give up on any thoughts of marriage with the Pei clan."

The Pei clan's master and his wife turned pale with fright. Pei Shao immediately spoke out to stop her. "Manman!"

"What kind of nonsense are you saying? Has this girl gone mad?" Madam Pei shot her a hateful glare.

Zhao Zhi frowned. He couldn't help but feel some rage too. He was a glorious heir of King Qi, so marrying someone from the Pei clan was already supposed to be a compromise for him. Furthermore, he had already restrained himself greatly and showed extreme devotion. Yet in the end, the other party was so quick to reject everything he did?

He replied coldly, "Oh? Why is Miss Pei not willing to marry this young heir?"

After a moment of hesitation, Pei Mianman replied, "Because I do not like the young heir." She had to speak with some tact, or else she might end up infuriating the other party and bringing the Pei clan a disaster. Of course, she couldn't bring Ah Zu trouble either. That was why she didn't mention him at all.

Zhao Zhi was stunned at first, then roared with laughter. "So it was that kind of reason!"

Madam Pei exclaimed furiously, "Absolute nonsense! King Qi's heir is so outstanding; who do you think you are to try and be picky?"

Pei Shao also said with a frown, "Marriages have always been carried out with the mother and father acting as matchmaker. When has it ever been up to you to decide?"

Pei Mianman's expression turned cold. However, Zhao Zhi instead spoke up to stop the two of them, saying, "This is fine. Miss Pei seems to have a unique personality, and I like that."

"No one is asking you to like them." Pei Mianman rolled her eyes. She thought to herself, Is there something wrong with your head? I've already flat out rejected you; do you not understand human speech?

“Girl, you have successfully drawn my attention.” Zhao Zhi gave her a deep look. He really found her more and more pleasing the more he looked at her. This woman was just too stunning. Even when she was mad, she was still so beautiful.

If I could bring back Chu Chuyan as well, having both of those beauties on either side, just how amazing would that be?

But that woman, Chu Chuyan, has no self-respect. She actually got married to someone else! Hmph, she’s already unworthy of becoming my wife. But with her looks, I wouldn’t mind taking her in as a pet to play around with...

“This is fine; I agree.” Zhao Zhi gave Pei Mianman what he thought was an enchanting look.

Pei Mianman was stunned. She hadn’t expected him to agree so easily. It was instead the Pei clan’s master and madam who became worried. They began, “Young heir, how can you...”

Zhao Zhi stopped the two of them from continuing, saying, “This is fine. Since Miss Pei does not like me, there is no use in forcing it. It will be a good thing for us to be friends as well. Furthermore, completing what I came to do first is most important. My own personal affairs can be considered at a later date.”

Didn’t this woman say she didn’t like me? That’s not a problem at all. That’s only because she’s never met me before. If she stays around me a little longer, with how handsome and charming I am, isn’t subduing a girl who’s just experienced her first awakening of love an easy task?

Feelings? Those are things that need to be developed. After all, there’s a saying that familiarity breeds fondness. After ten days, or half a month, she might be completely head-over-heels in love with me.

With the generosity I just showed, she must be incredibly shocked, right? There’s actually a young heir who is this considerate in this world?! She’ll definitely have a good impression of me now. And being curious about a man is often the beginning of a girl’s entrapment.

As for the promise, once we get along, all of that will be easy to take care of.

Pei Mianman had a strange expression on her face. She thought to herself, Why is this guy smiling like a freaking idiot?

I’ve heard everyone say that the crown prince is an idiot. It looks like this heir of King Qi isn’t much better.

Is there something wrong with the entire royal family’s bloodline? Do they all give birth to these kinds of ‘prodigies’?

## **Chapter 1016: From Now On, You Have Me**

When he saw Pei Mianman look at him with her head slightly tilted, Zhao Zi interpreted it as her developing interest in him. He laughed confidently and said, “Right, there is something I wish to remind Miss Pei about. There is someone in the imperial envoy named Zu An. That person is a pervert and absolutely shameless. Miss Pei needs to be careful and not let this man take advantage of you.”

Pei Mianman’s expression turned cold. That guy Ah Zu is indeed a pervert, and also a bit shameless, but only I can say that. That’s not for someone like you to say.

Pei Shao said, "Young heir, do not worry. Manman has always been a trustworthy person. She is reliable in taking care of matters."

At the same time, he was curious, as he had met Zu An last time at the banquet. Zu An's cultivation was high, and he had high achievements in the arts; he didn't seem to be anything like how King Qi's heir was describing him at all. Why was the young heir saying those things?

Zhao Zhi laughed and said, "Right, right, I am the one who has had too many misgivings. Miss Pei will definitely be able to take care of this task well."

Pei Mianman said coldly, "I'll leave to complete the mission. Please remember your promise." She turned around to leave afterward. She didn't want to see that face anymore; she worried she might not be able to hold herself back anymore if she stayed for even another moment.

When he saw her swaying figure, Zhao Zhi felt as if his heart would jump out of his chest. He asked, "Should this young heir walk Miss Pei out?"

"There's no need!" Pei Mianman didn't even turn around.

Zhao Zhi didn't think too much about it and said with a smile, "Then I wish Miss Pei success."

Pei Mianman didn't even react to him. Her figure quickly disappeared into the distance.

Zhao Zhi narrowed his eyes. This woman has just the right amount of spice! This young heir likes you! Only this kind of woman is worth subduing!

Han Fengqiu instead frowned slightly. This woman doesn't seem to like the young heir that much. But the young heir doesn't seem to have realized that yet. Should I find a chance to remind him?

But when he saw how excited Zhao Zhi was, he still abandoned that thought. The young master might become unhappy if he poured cold water all over him. Instead, he thought, It might just be the temper tantrum of a young lady. Her attitude will change later.

...

Since Pei Mianman had already left, Zhao Zhi felt that staying any longer was senseless. After chatting with Pei Shao for a while longer, he got up and bid the couple farewell.

"Young heir, take care!" the couple replied.

After they escorted Zhao Zhi out, Madam Pei couldn't help but say resentfully, "Master, what's wrong with you? Not only did you not stop him, you even helped that damn brat. Now, our wonderful plan of marriage is all spoiled!" Even if you don't want to become a father-in-law of King Qi Manor, I want to become his mother-in-law!

"Who said it would be completely spoiled?" Pei Shao stroked his beard and said with a mysterious smile. "The key part of this marriage depends on whether the young heir likes her or not. If the young heir doesn't like her, no amount of planning will do anything. If the young heir likes her, even if the marriage has been canceled on the surface, it won't really matter."

Madam Pei's eyes lit up. "If you put it like that, the young heir indeed seems pretty fond of that girl. Hmph, she's just like her mom, a vixen who naturally seduces men."

Pei Shao's face darkened. He harrumphed and stormed off in a huff. Madam Pei sneered as she stared at his back. There was a hint of pride in her smile.

...

Meanwhile, Zu An was leading a horse as he strolled through Cloudcenter City's streets.

The northwest had experienced a lot of wind and snowfall. At that point, all of Cloudcenter City was covered in a layer of silver. But even though it was cold, the streets were still extremely lively. Shouts echoed through the place, many words sounding as if they were in an unfamiliar dialect. Zu An couldn't understand anything.

Cloudcenter Commandery was located on a major road in the northwest. Merchants from all around the country passed through it, and there were many fiend race merchants there as well. Even though the fiend races and humans had previously experienced a great war, business was still business, unstoppable like a wildfire.

The fiend races had many factions. Those who had good relations with the human race naturally had their ways of obtaining trade permits that allowed them to cross over the borders. That was why there was a much more generous variety of goods available in Cloudcenter City's streets than there was in other places.

Zu An was, of course, not there just for a stroll. He was investigating the whereabouts of the missing duke's personal guard.

There were thirty-six members of Cloudcenter Duke's personal guard in total. A small group of them had followed Gong Pan to Yu Yanluo. Those individuals had already been carefully investigated and cleared of suspicion.

Another small portion of those guards had been assigned to different locations. They had been 'promoted' in name, but everyone knew they would never recover their former glory. However, those people's circumstances didn't seem to be that terrible; they definitely didn't have it the worst.

The worst off were the remaining fifteen guards. Among them, nine of them had been crippled for various reasons and had no choice but to be discharged from military service. The remaining six hadn't even been able to retain their lives.

Zu An had just visited those nine who were still alive. He had personally checked in on every one of these individuals. Even though some of their wounds were a little fishy, he didn't think too much of it. After all, even though they were crippled and wounded, they were still themselves at least. None of them were the one Zu An was searching for.

Looks like the one I'm looking for is among the six deceased. While Zu An was thinking to himself, he suddenly heard a charming voice next to him.

"This young master seems to have gotten a bit lost. How about you request a local to show you around?"

Zu An turned around, and his eyes immediately lit up. Pei Mianman was standing nearby, smiling at him. Her beautiful eyes really were intoxicating and enchanting. She was completely covered in a fiery red overcoat. She looked just like a blossoming flower amid all the snow.

"How did you find me?" Zu An asked, surprised and happy. When he saw her nose was a bit red from the cold, he quickly reached over to touch her cold face, using his hand's warmth to ease the cold.

"Hmph, a certain someone got a taste of what they wanted and never came back, so I had no choice but to come to you. How can a woman not find her man? I'm not like some people," Pei Mianman replied. It was so cold that white mist appeared whenever she spoke. Even so, it still wasn't enough to cover up the grudge she carried.

Zu An apologized quickly, "I'm really sorry. I've been investigating the case of Cloudcenter Duke all this time. I've been so busy that I didn't even have the time to be distracted about other things."

"Hmph, the proverbs were right after all. Once a man obtains the girl, he won't think about her at all anymore." Pei Mianman had just been feigning a small tantrum at first, but she really did start to feel stronger emotions the more she talked about it. She began to pout.

"Who said I didn't think about you?" Zu An took out a brilliant red tanghulu<sup>[1]</sup> skewer from behind him. "I was wondering what to give you as a gift while walking through the streets. When I saw this tanghulu, I bought it for you."

"How did you know I really like tanghulu?" Pei Mianman's eyes lit up. She completely forgot about her annoyance. She grabbed the tanghulu and carefully gave it a lick.

"Because I heard about how you were really happy when your mother bought you some tanghulu when you were little." Zu An stroked her head in a doting manner. Who would think such a stunning woman would have such a childish side to her?

"You actually remembered." Pei Mianman's eyes conveyed her smile. There wasn't even half a trace of her previous unhappiness left.

If Zhao Zhi were there to see them, he might just vomit blood from anger. Every single day, he had come to Pei Manor with Cloudcenter City's most expensive pastries and food, but Pei Mianman hadn't even given any of it a single look before feeding it to her maid. She hadn't even smiled for him a single time. Yet now, another man had bought her a random tanghulu for just a few coins and she was this happy?

"Is it good?" Zu An looked at her curiously.

"It tastes good! But it's a bit too big, mm..." Pei Mianman had only given it a few licks at first, but she could no longer hold back on the sweetness and put the tanghulu straight into her mouth, leaving her cheeks swelling a bit.

"Go slowly, or else you might choke on it." Zu An helped her wipe the corner of her lips considerately.

When she finally finished the tanghulu, Pei Mianman had a satisfied look on her face. She said, "I haven't eaten any tanghulu ever since my mom passed away, because they always taste bitter whenever I try to eat one. Thank you for bringing this happy feeling back to me."

Zu An held her hand, feeling heartbroken. He said, "All that is in the past. From now on, you have me." Even though Pei Mianman had never talked about her past, he could imagine just how difficult it was for someone like her, who had lost her mother at a young age.

Pei Mianman voiced her acknowledgement as she gently leaned against him. The two of them walked through the snow-covered world just like that. She really wished that the road would never end.

Unfortunately, their moment of peace was quickly interrupted by a burst of hooves. A strong, tough-looking man approached on horseback. When he saw Zu An, he immediately greeted him respectfully and said, "Sir Zu, I have already investigated the things you asked me to look into."

Only then did he see Pei Mianman at Zu An's side. He froze up completely, thinking, How can there be someone this beautiful in this world?

There was even such a lovely fragrance coming from her. It really was enough to make anyone go weak from a single look. The man thought, No wonder Sir Gao and Sir Pei always say they want Zu An to become their master... Sir Zu really is a model for all men!

Zu An received the paper from his hands and said with a smile, "I've troubled you. Please continue investigating the remaining people."

The robust man cupped his hands. He couldn't help but sneak another look at Pei Mianman before leaving, however. His gaze just happened to meet her beautiful eyes. Guiltily, he looked away to avoid eye contact, his face red.

Pei Mianman had already been used to such things ever since she was little, so she didn't feel any resentment over it and didn't take it to heart. She turned to Zu An and asked, "Ah Zu, what happened?"

When she saw the contents of the paper in his hands, however, her brow gradually furrowed.

### **Chapter 1017: The Dead Won't Lie**

Zu An put away the paper strip and said, "Cloudcenter Duke had six personal guards who died in their line of duty. I had my subordinates look into their respective situations.

"Three of their deaths weren't suspicious at all, and their remains have already been investigated. However, the other three's deaths are fishy."

"How so?" Pei Mianman asked curiously.

Zu An explained, "For example, one was attacked by the fiend races and was beheaded. In the end, his colleagues were only able to bring back a headless corpse.

"Another guard was investigating a drug smuggling case. In the end, the storeroom he was investigating caught fire. His entire body was burned to a crisp.

"The third had all of his blood essence sucked away, leaving behind only a shriveled corpse."

Pei Mianman was intelligent. She quickly reacted, saying, "The common point between these individuals is that it's difficult to discern their identities."

"Indeed." Zu An nodded, continuing, "What I suspect is that others actually replaced the real bodies with fakes. These corpses might not be the ones I'm looking for."

"But how do you investigate something like that?" Pei Mianman was a bit worried. "After all, it's already hard to even discern those people's identities."

"Anyone in this world will inevitably leave behind all kinds of traces. Even the most careful murderer will unknowingly leave behind holes they didn't pay attention to," Zu An said. He paused for a moment, then said, "Furthermore, the living might lie, but the dead won't."

Pei Mianman's expression changed slightly. She began, "Don't tell me you..."

Zu An nodded with a smile and said, "My love, since we have some leisure time, will you join me on a graveyard date?"

"Hmph, what sane person goes on a date in the cemetery?" Pei Mianman shot back. After all, she was a girl. She had an instinctive rejection toward those kinds of things.

Zu An knew it was a bit awkward for her, so he said, "It's fine; you should go back first. I'll look for you after I'm done."

Pei Mianman experienced a bit of an internal struggle, but she still didn't want to leave her lover. As such, she insisted, "No, I still want to go with you."

Wasn't the Pei Manor the same as a graveyard anyway? If she could be with her lover, wasn't that home wherever she went?

Zu An was a bit reluctant to leave her. He held her hand and said with a smile, "That's good too. When husband and wife are of one mind, we can do anything."

"Who wants to be your wife?" Pei Mianman pouted playfully. However, she still let him hold her hand in the end.

Zu An got on his horse, saying, "The graveyard is outside of the city. It's still a distance away from here. It'll be more convenient to go by horse." He patted the spot in front of him, gesturing for her to get on.

Pei Mianman blushed. If they were in a private place, she would happily sit there. But right now, they were in the city, where people came and went. Sitting there pressed up against him really would be a bit too bold for her.

She wasn't so well known that everyone knew who she was, but with her appearance and her identity as the Pei clan's young miss, many people still recognized her. If someone saw her and the news went back to her parents, things would become a bit troublesome. As such, she kicked off the ground and instead sat behind Zu An.

"Hold on tight," Zu An reminded her.

Pei Mianman pursed her lips. If they were in private, forget about holding onto him, she would be willing to do a thousand other things. But holding onto the waist of her man in broad daylight in the streets was still awkward for her as a reserved young lady.



But who would've thought that Zu An would pull on the reins and cause the horse to sprint forward? He exclaimed, "Giddyup!"

Pei Mianman lost her center of gravity and almost fell off of the horse. Fortunately, her cultivation was high enough for her to react quickly. She wrapped her arms around Zu An's waist to steady herself.

Zu An's expression became somewhat strange when he felt something press against his back. Big Manman wasn't Big Manman for nothing!

"You did that on purpose, right?" Pei Mianman beat his back with her fist, but she couldn't bear to really use any strength.

Zu An laughed. He swung the reins and they quickly left the city. Riding his steed with a beauty by his side really was an incredibly blissful thing.

"Ah, slow... Slow down, I can't take it anymore..." Pei Mianman was almost thrown off several times. She could only hug the man in front of her tightly.

"Swiftness and decisiveness are the keys to success! I've already begun to investigate these guards, so the powers that are in hiding might already be on guard. It'll be troublesome if they end up destroying all of the evidence," Zu An explained.

"Oh..." Pei Mianman pressed tightly against Zu An's body. Even though there were clothes separating them, she could still feel the comfortably warm heat coming from his wide and sturdy back. She suddenly felt an incredible sense of peace and bliss fill her. This was something she had only imagined as a fantasy with her sweetheart before. She had never expected it to really come true today.

"Ah Zu, do you know why I looked for you today?" Pei Mianman asked, her face pressed tightly against his back. Having someone to block the wind and snow for her really was a great feeling.

"Wasn't it because you missed me?" Zu An replied with a smile.

"Hmph, that's only part of it." Pei Mianman wasn't too shy this time and said, "It's also because King Qi's heir wants me to investigate your Imperial Envoy's progress."

"Oh?" Zu An's brow rose. Pei Mianman gave him a rough summary of Zhao Zhi's visits. Zu An said with a sigh, "There really is something wrong with the heads of men in this world. Why do they always like to send their own fiancées to other men?"

Zu An recalled the situation with Sang Qian. But then again, he had ended up taking advantage of Sang Qian's younger sister, so he was a bit embarrassed to argue about it. Still, he actually didn't mind that kind of behavior at all. In fact, the more people he met who were like that in the future, the better. Please don't pity a delicate flower like me; just come at me! Beautiful women, please come and trample all over me!

"Hmph, who's his fiancée? I've never agreed to such a thing." Pei Mianman bit down on Zu An, expressing a bit of resentment.

"Of course you're my woman. That toad Zhao Zhi even wants to get together with someone like you? He thinks he's being smart, but he's not only going to give away his bride; he's also going to lose his army on top of it!" Zu An exclaimed while laughing.

Pei Mianman felt that Zu An's words sounded strange. But when she heard him loudly proclaim that she was his woman, she hugged him even tighter and didn't say anything else.

Zu An felt as if his entire body were leaning against a ball of cotton the entire time. He thought to himself, No wonder those bikers from my previous world all made their women sit behind them. I actually automatically asked her to sit in the front! I'm still too naive...

Just like that, the two of them were immersed in their own thoughts, neither one of them wishing to interrupt such a beautiful feeling.

...

They unwittingly arrived at the city outskirts' cemetery. Even though the world was big, there were still designated burial areas. One couldn't just bury someone wherever one wanted to, because the land might not be theirs. There wasn't even enough land for growing crops. A single disaster and one might not be able to pay back one's loans. Then, one's land would be seized by another landlord.

The authorities would often assign a piece of wasteland to people who had no other places for a burial. However, the ones buried there often didn't have many family members left. After a few generations, there would be no one there to pay their respects anymore. Thus, the place would turn into an abandoned graveyard over time.

Cloudcenter Duke's trusted guards were clearly treated much better than that, however. Cloudcenter Duke had set aside a piece of land for the burial of those who had passed away in the line of duty within his own land. Even though he had gone missing, the system still continued.

There were several pine and cypress trees nearby, with an assortment of flowers and plants sprinkled throughout. Of course, there weren't many flowers in the current cold season.

The cemetery had gravekeepers who were normally in charge of pruning the flowers and plants, as well as preventing beasts from destroying the graveyard. But at the moment, it was snowing, so all of them were hiding inside and warming themselves by the fire. None of them would come out to check the graves in such a situation.

Zu An and Pei Mianman entered the graveyard without any issues. They quickly located the locations of the guards' graves by following the information Zu An had received from his subordinate.

"Are we really going to dig up graves?" Pei Mianman turned around stiffly. The ride had been too bumpy, and the two of them had been pressed up against each other the entire time. Her body was still feeling numb. She didn't want Zu An to see such a poor side of her.

Zu An voiced his confirmation, saying, "You can just stay over there. I can do this alone."

Pei Mianman opened her mouth and wanted to say she was going to help. But when she thought about what he was going to do, she still gave up on that idea in the end.

"Courageous heroes, this humble one doesn't wish to disturb your rest, but I want to bring justice to all of you. After all, there really was someone who harmed you, and I don't think all of you wanted to die such tragic deaths either..." Zu An took out several sticks of incense he had prepared beforehand, lighting them and bowing to all the graves. Then, he began to do what he had to do.

This was a world of cultivators; each cultivator was practically an excavating machine in human form on their own. Digging up a grave wasn't as difficult as it seemed, and a coffin quickly emerged.

"This person's name is Cheng Ba. He was ambushed by the fiend races and beheaded," Zu An explained as he opened the coffin. A wave of stench spread outward.

"Be careful of the corpse toxins." Pei Mianman pointed with her hand, and a strand of black flame flew over and burned away all of the toxic air.

"You're as meticulous as always," Zu An said with a chuckle. Then, he began to examine the corpse inside.

Only the body was present. The head had been replaced by a wooden carving. Even though it had already been several months since the person died, Cloudcenter Commandery's temperature was cold, so the body hadn't completely turned into a skeleton yet.

"There isn't even a head left; what can you even investigate at this point?" Pei Mianman covered her mouth and nose with her handkerchief. She also handed Zu An one. If it weren't because of her lover, she would never stay in such a place.

#### **Chapter 1018: The Trail Has Been Cut Short?**

"There are more ways to verify someone's identity than just looking at their head." Zu An took out a wooden stick and fiddled with the corpse. "This person has at least thirty wounds on his body. Even if he hadn't been beheaded, he would have died from the blood loss.

"He fought a bitter battle before he died, and these wounds are curved and strange. They look entirely different from the wounds inflicted by the weapons of the Zhou Dynasty's cultivators. They look similar to the curved blades of the fiend races."

"Do you think that maybe someone might have secretly used those kinds of curved blades to make you think he was killed by the fiend races?" Pei Mianman voiced her doubt.

"There is indeed that possibility. But look over here." Zu An pointed at the space between the remains' left index finger and thumb. "Even though we can't see the calluses anymore, his joints are clearly a bit larger than his right hand. He definitely wielded his blade with his left hand.

"This matches with the intelligence my subordinates have provided. Cheng Ba was indeed left-handed."

"With all of these intense battle scars and details like his left-handedness being accurate, the chance of all this just being an imitation is too low. Therefore, this probably isn't the one I'm looking for."

"You're right..." Pei Mianman nodded when she heard him say that. She suddenly realized what he was saying and asked, "Then who is the one you're looking for?"

"There was a guard loyal to Cloudcenter Duke who traveled a vast distance to bring a report to the capital. However, he was silenced along the way." Zu An looked at the tombs. His voice was full of respect as he said, "I came here to confirm his identity, not to find any new clues."

"That is indeed a loyal guard." Pei Mianman was also moved. She continued, "Right, I said I'd help King Qi's heir to get information. You already told me everything! Aren't you scared that I'll betray you and tell him everything?"

Zu An laughed and replied, "What kind of relationship do we have? Why would I not trust you?"

Even though Pei Mianman was incredibly happy to hear that, she still had a strict look on her face as she remarked, "What am I going to do with you? You're going to be deceived by a girl sooner or later."

"But what if I'm okay with you deceiving me?" Zu An looked straight at her as he spoke.

"You're so corny..." Pei Mianman could no longer hold back her smile. She said, "Hurry up and do what you have to do here already. I don't want to stay here for too long."

Zu An nodded. He closed the coffin lid and covered the tomb up again. He had come to investigate a case; disturbing these soldiers' rest was already crossing the line, so how could he just leave the coffin out in the open?

He quickly dug up the second tomb. Pei Mianman was initially eager to help him burn away the corpse toxins, but when she saw what was inside, her expression changed greatly. She sprinted away and began to retch.

The only thing left in the coffin was a pitch-black corpse. Many parts of it were cracked open, revealing the flesh underneath. Perhaps it was because too much time had passed, or due to some other reasons, but the color and shape of his flesh really were beyond words...

Zu An waved his hand to fan away the coffin's smell. Then he explained, "This person's name was Chen Zhou. He was investigating an illegal drug smuggling case. Later on, when he found a suspicious warehouse, it suddenly burst into flames and he was burned to death."

"It was probably the smugglers who wanted to cover all the evidence, and thus burned him to death." Pei Mianman's pretty brow furrowed.

"We have to examine the corpse to be sure." Zu An took out a glove he had prepared in advance as he spoke. He took out a dagger and slowly cut into the corpse's chest cavity.

"What are you doing?" Pei Mianman's eyes widened when she saw that. She really couldn't understand why he would do something like that.

Zu An carefully cut through the nauseating rotting flesh while explaining, "I need to see if he really was burned to death. If he really was burned to death, there should be ashes left in his respiratory tract. There should also be signs of burns. If he had been burned after being silenced, those traces wouldn't be there."

"Ah Zu, why do you know all of these things?" Pei Mianman was a bit shocked. What he said was easy to understand, but if he hadn't said it, she really couldn't have reached such a conclusion.

Zu An chuckled and replied, "You'd know if you watched a lot of dramas."

"What?" Pei Mianman was confused. She clearly didn't really understand what he was saying.

Zu An frowned and said, "He really was burned to death." Even though the corpse was rotting a bit, he could still see ashes in the person's windpipe.

"Then his death isn't suspicious?" Pei Mianman asked.

Zu An nodded. Then, he dug up the third grave. He opened up the coffin, revealing a dried corpse with a warped and sinister expression. But this time, Pei Mianman remained completely calm. After all, she had already seen similar things many times. She had seen such things a few times when they were in Yinxu.

"This person was named Yu Li. According to the records, he had all of his blood essence sucked out by an unknown monster." Zu An looked at the corpse's warped appearance. He could imagine just how much pain and suffering the man had gone through before he died.

"Don't tell me the monster was like Mosquito Daoist?" Mosquito Daoist had left Pei Mianman with a huge psychological shadow back then.

Zu An shook his head and said, "There aren't many members of the blood race. Furthermore, if one of them really did do something, it would cause a huge scandal. There's no way there would only be a single victim." He examined the corpse while speaking. His expression soon became strange and he said, "I know how he died."

Pei Mianman blinked and looked at him in shock. He had already deduced how this person had died just from fiddling with his corpse a bit?

"He was probably sucked dry by Thick-Browed Daoist..." Zu An explained what had happened between him and Thick-Browed Daoist in Yi Commandery. Since he had faced that person before, he immediately sensed traces of the other cultivator that were still left in the corpse. It was indeed Thick-Browed Daoist's demonic technique.

Pei Mianman sighed and said, "I've heard a bit about this infamous Thick-Browed Daoist. His cultivation was high and his cultivation method was strange. Even if one's cultivation were higher than his, one would still be fearful of his evil technique. But it was his misfortune to have encountered you instead." The two of them had spent a long time in Yinxu, so of course she knew that Zu An had learned the Heaven Devouring Sutra.

Zu An chuckled and said, "I actually hope more of these independent cultivators like Thick-Browed Daoist come for me." The precious materials he had gotten were one thing, but that Face of a Thousand Identities was just incredible! The more he studied it, the more engrossed he became.

"That Thick-Browed Daoist might become so angered by what you said that he'll just come back to life." Pei Mianman giggled. Then, a hint of worry appeared on her beautiful cheeks. "You already checked three people, and their causes of death aren't suspicious. Does that mean the trail has been cut short?"

"That's not it." Zu An chuckled. He restored the grave, then led Pei Mianman away from the graveyard.

"Don't touch me." When she saw his hand move toward her, Pei Mianman took a step back with a strange expression.

Zu An was a bit hurt, replying, "I was wearing a glove earlier, and I already washed my hands by the stream..."

"I don't care." When she recalled how Zu An had dissected those corpses, Pei Mianman's little face turned pale. Zu An was left speechless.

"Fine, fine, fine, I won't touch you. You hold onto me, then." Zu An got back onto the horse and gestured for her to sit behind him.

When she recalled the amazing experience of riding to the graveyard, Pei Mianman felt her chest tremble a bit. A blush appeared on her tender and beautiful face as she murmured, "You dummy..."

But even though that was what she said, she still sat behind him.

...

They quickly left the area. Pei Mianman's beautiful eyes seemed on the verge of tears. She quickly asked something to hide her embarrassment. "Where are we going?"

"To their homes," Zu An replied.

"Their?" Pei Mianman asked with a trembling voice. "The ones from just now?"

"Yeah," Zu An said. Pei Mianman was speechless.

Soon afterward, the two arrived at a small village on the outskirts. A handful of brick houses were scattered across the village.

Zu An walked to a courtyard halfway up the mountain. There was a six or seven-year-old little boy at the gate, riding a bamboo stick horse and waving a wooden sword in his hands. The boy was shouting carelessly, "Charge!" He was clearly playing war games.

Pei Mianman had a smile on her face as she remarked, "This child is really cute."

Zu An moved over to her and whispered, "Our child will definitely be even cuter."

"You're so annoying! Who wants to have a child with you?" Pei Mianman gave him a nudge. But inwardly, she was already starting to look forward to it.

"Wow! Your horse looks so strong!" The little child noticed them and saw the big horse they were riding on. He immediately felt his own bamboo horse wasn't anything special.

The pair got off the horse, and Zu An patted the boy's head, asking, "Little guy, is this Chen Zhou's home?"

"You guys know my dad?" The little guy's face shone brightly.

"We're your dad's friends," Zu An replied. When he saw the look of suspicion in the child's eyes, Zu An thought for a bit, then took out a shortsword from his Brilliant Glass Bead. "You seem to like playing war games, so this uncle will give you a present."

There were many weapons and other such things inside. But in order to prevent the child from hurting himself, Zu An gave him a shortsword that was merely ordinary. However, anything he would store in his Brilliant Glass Bead was definitely not low quality.

Sure enough, the little child loved it. He held the short sword close to his chest. After thinking for a moment, he handed over his wooden sword, saying, "My dad told me you can't carelessly receive kindness. You gave me this sword, so I'll give you one. That way, we're even!"

The child was quite naive. How could he have known that the shortsword's value was high enough to buy hundreds of those wooden toy swords?

"Little guy, who are you talking to?" There was a loud noise as a woman walked out while wiping her wet hands on her apron. Her expression changed a bit when she saw Zu An and Pei Mianman. She rushed forward and took the little child into her arms. She looked at the two vigilantly and asked, "Who are you two?"

Zu An quickly examined the other party. Working year-round had made her skin a bit dark, and her arms were rough. She was just like the peasant women he had seen on his way here. Her face was a bit prettier than average, but it wasn't enough for her to be considered a beauty.

"They said they were daddy's friends." The little child wasn't on guard at all. He even replied right away.

"Friends?" The madam looked at the two of them in suspicion. But suspicion was suspicion. She saw that the man was handsome, and the woman was ridiculously pretty. She suddenly felt a bit ashamed of her own inferiority with the two of them standing in front of her.

How could her husband possibly have friends of this level?!

#### **Chapter 1019: The Truth Comes to Light**

Zu An gave the child a look. He wanted to say something, but he hesitated. The woman patted her son and said, "My son, go and play in the back for a while."

"Okay!" The little child wanted to test out his new weapon anyway. He happily ran toward the back when he heard that.

"Be careful not to hurt yourself with that sword!" Zu An warned him. The other party was still young after all. It would be bad if he ended up accidentally hurting himself.

"It's fine; he's always secretly played with his father's sword ever since he was little. He was already beaten several times for that." The woman's expression immediately eased a bit when she heard the other party's sincere concern for her son. "Why have I never heard that my husband had friends like the two of you?"

"Greetings, elder sister. Big Bro Chen saved me once before on a mission, but because of different assignments, we went our separate ways. I wanted to meet with him again after returning to Cloudcenter Commandery and properly thank him for saving my life. But who would've thought that I would end up hearing such grievous news about him?" Zu An sighed with sorrow.

Pei Mianman looked at him in alarm. Isn't this guy a bit too good at acting? He's completely immersed in this role! She had actually been worried before, feeling that he might be deceived by a woman back then, but wasn't the woman the one being completely duped this time?

But then she heard him say that his name was An Man. Wasn't that created from combining their names? She immediately felt happy when she thought of that.

The woman's eyes turned red when she thought of her husband. She felt broken-hearted as she said, "It's all because of those smugglers..."

"Elder sister, please don't feel too sad." Zu An took out a hundred taels of fine silver from his Brilliant Glass Bead, put them into a wooden case, and handed it over. "This is a bit of my own regard; I hope elder sister will accept it."

"I can't, I can't, it's too much..." The woman was hard-pressed and quickly rejected the offer. She wiped her hands on her dress and didn't even know where to place them. A hundred taels of silver wasn't much for a rich and powerful man, but it was a huge sum of money for common people.

"How can a life-saving grace be valued by money?" Zu An said with an upright expression, "I only hate the fact that I was too late to save Big Bro Chen. The only thing I can do is help him take care of his family a bit."

Seeing that the woman still wouldn't take it, Pei Mianman said with a smile, "Elder sister, even if you aren't thinking for yourself, please consider this for your child. Wouldn't it be great if your child could have a better environment to grow up in?"

The woman only accepted the gift when she heard Pei Mianman mention her son. She thanked the two of them while saying to Pei Mianman, "This lady really is beautiful and outstanding. Is she your wife?"

Zu An nodded and held Pei Mianman's hand, saying, "Yes, she is."

Pei Mianman's eyes turned a bit red when she heard him introduce her like that. Because of her relationship with Chu Chuyan, she had always intentionally avoided naming their relationship. But back then, her mother had passed away without even properly becoming the main wife of the Pei clan, so how could she not care about such a thing? When she heard him say that, she felt that everything she had done was worth it.

"What a blessing; the two of you are definitely a perfect match," the woman said with a sigh. "Chen Zhou unfortunately didn't have such luck..." She silently wiped at her eyes after saying that.

Pei Mianman handed over a handkerchief. However, the woman didn't take it for fear that she would dirty the pretty snow-white handkerchief. She just casually wiped her tears on the corners of her dress.

"Elder sister, do you know which smuggler Big Bro Chen was investigating? I want to see if I can avenge him." Zu An took the chance to inquire about the matter.

The woman shook her head and said, "He never told me anything about his work. Also, his mission was especially secretive, so there was no way he would tell me. As for what he was investigating, only the government authorities would know, right...? Brother An, don't get involved in this matter anymore. Your Big Bro Chen has already lost his life. If you end up losing your life too, we won't be able to live in peace for the rest of our lives!"

"Elder sister, don't worry; I'll be careful and won't do anything reckless," Zu An reassured her. He then asked, "By the way, after something happened to Big Bro Chen, did the authorities give you any compensatory silver? If not, I can help you urge them a bit. I can't let my brother's dedication go unrewarded, after all."



"They did. Some government officials came by just a few days after something happened to that child's father. The leader was the previous captain; I think he was surnamed Gong or something..." The woman couldn't remember the name on the spot.

"Gong Pan?" Zu An asked.

"Exactly! That's him," the woman said. She continued, "Sir Gong is really a good official! After something happened to that child's father, I felt as if the skies had collapsed. Fortunately, I had Sir Gong to help me take care of the funeral arrangements, and only then could we manage to survive this most difficult time.

"The compensation was given by Sir Gong too. Only later did I learn that it was a bit higher than usual. Sir Gong probably added a bit out of his own pockets.

"I've always wanted to find a chance to return it to him, but I have to take care of my son and can't leave. Sir Gong is always busy as well, so I'm worried that I'll disturb him. Brother An, perhaps you could help me bring the silver to Sir Gong?"

Zu An immediately refused, saying, "Elder sister, you're treating us like outsiders here. That was Sir Gong's sincerity toward all of you. Wouldn't you be putting him in a difficult situation by returning it? You should just accept it."

The woman looked moved. She said, "All of you are great people. Even though that child's father wasn't so blessed, he had fellow soldiers like all of you, so he didn't live his life in vain."

Zu An chatted a bit more with her. But then, he suddenly said casually, "Right, I heard Brother Chen mention that his leg broke once before, but even though his injury healed, he'd still feel a dull ache when it got too windy or rainy. I bought some jade ointment for that, but it doesn't have any use now. I'll just leave it with you." He took out a bottle of ointment while speaking.

The woman looked stunned. She asked, "Chen Zhou's leg was injured before? Why have I never heard about it before?"

"It might be because he was scared of worrying you and didn't tell you." Zu An thought to himself, As expected.

The madam looked confused. She was clearly recalling her interactions with her husband.

Zu An had originally wanted to ask if Chen Zhou had left any last words or possessions, but asking that directly would be too abrupt. As such, he changed his mind and said, "Right, elder sister, since Big Bro Chen's case has never been solved, I want to see if there are any new clues we can use to bring the criminal to justice. This will help Big Bro Chen rest in peace too.

"I wonder when it was that elder sister last saw Big Bro Chen? Did he act strange in any way?"

The two of them had already chatted leisurely for some time, and the other party had even given her so much silver as a gift. When the woman heard that, she replied, "I don't think he did."

Zu An felt disappointed at first, but he suddenly heard the woman say, "There was something, but I don't know if it counts."

“Even the smallest matter might contain some clues,” Zu An quickly replied excitedly.

The married woman began to think to herself, “That day, the child’s father didn’t say anything to me, but he seemed to have a lot on his mind. He even carried our son for a long time. But, he rarely spent time with the child. It almost felt like a kind of premonition toward his own death.” She couldn’t hold back her tears again when she said that.

Zu An and Pei Mianman consoled her for a while. Then, her son rushed out with the short sword while shouting ‘charge’! Zu An took the chance to pull him aside and ask him what his father had told him that day.

“I don’t really remember...” The child scratched his head. A while later, he said, “Actually, I don’t think he really said anything. He just played war games with me for a bit.”

Zu An asked him about some more details, but they had really only played with each other. There hadn’t been any secret messages or anything.

Pei Mianman also asked, “Elder sister, can we take a look around Big Brother Chen’s room? He might have left behind some clues there.”

Pei Mianman was extremely beautiful. With her smiling eyes, she gave off a natural feeling of closeness. They had chatted with each other all this time, and she had always called the woman ‘elder sister’, so the woman was naturally extremely happy.

“Of course you can!” The woman pulled on her hands and said in praise, “Sister, you really are outstanding!”

Pei Mianman felt a bit embarrassed. She and Zu An quickly went to examine Chen Zhou’s room. Unfortunately, the two of them didn’t find anything of value even after searching for a long time. There were only some ordinary lifestyle goods inside.

“Right, the local authorities came before and brought away a lot of things that were related to his work, saying it was conventional practice and that the items needed to be brought back to be investigated,” the woman said from off to the side.

Zu An thought to himself, No wonder there aren’t many things here. He asked, “Elder sister, do you know the name of the one who took these things away?”

“It was Sir Gong, of course,” the woman replied.

“Hm?” Zu An raised his eyebrows. He had a pensive expression on his face.

The two chatted with the mother for a while longer, then got up to bid her farewell. On the way back, however, Pei Mianman finally couldn’t hold back and asked out of curiosity, “Aren’t you going to investigate the other two’s wives and children? Why did you only go to Chen Zhou’s family?”

“There’s no need to visit the other two families,” Zu An explained. “I already examined Cheng Ba. The chance that someone could fake a death so seamlessly is too low. The same is true for Yu Li as well. He had his cultivation sucked out by Thick-Browed Daoist, and I myself can verify that. Even though his appearance changed greatly after turning into a dried corpse, as someone who knows a similar

technique, there's no way I would make a mistake there. Therefore, there's nothing wrong with those two's identities.

"As for Chen Zhou, even though he was indeed burned to death, I can't confirm if it really was him because his face was destroyed. I noticed there was something wrong with that burned corpse's leg, though. Even though that wound had already healed, there was definitely an old wound there. But when I went over to ask that woman, she told me Chen Zhou had never broken his leg before.

"That means this corpse isn't Chen Zhou, and someone used a person who resembled him as a substitute. However, the perpetrator never expected the person they chose to have broken his leg before, which is why they left this opening."

"That's why Chen Zhou is the one who delivered that report to the capital?" Pei Mianman was a bit confused. She asked "But why would he come all the way to the capital to report about that? Wouldn't it be enough as long as he contacted Gong Pan or Madam Yu?"

"There are two possibilities. The first is that he couldn't contact the two of them back then. The second..." Zu An paused for a moment, his expression becoming complicated. "...is that he couldn't trust those two."

## **Chapter 1020: Concealed**

Pei Mianman couldn't help but say, "Cloudcenter Commandery is more than ten thousand li from the capital. The difficulty of contacting the capital far surpasses that of contacting Madam Yu and Gong Pan in Cloudcenter Commandery. So, the second possibility is more likely."

How could Zu An not know that? It became increasingly suspicious if one considered how Gong Pan could have followed anyone else, yet for some reason, he had insisted on following Yu Yanluo. Yu Yanluo's smiling face reappeared in his mind. As expected, the prettier the woman, the better they are at lying.

Back then, Chen Zhou had gone all the way to the capital to deliver the report. After he was silenced, he had clearly said that Jian Taiding was the one who had plotted against him, but he hadn't dared to drag in Yu Yanluo and Gong Pan. Could it be that those two had been in cahoots with Jian Taiding?

"Hmph, you're clearly thinking about a woman." Pei Mianman harrumphed. "What, was that Yu Yanluo so beautiful you can't bear to turn against her?"

Zu An snapped out of his daze. He took her into his arms and said, "No matter how beautiful she is, she's still someone else's wife. How can she compare to you in my heart?"

"You smooth talker~!" Even though she knew he was only saying that to make her feel good, Pei Mianman was still extremely happy. "The trail has broken off again, but we didn't find anything from Chen Zhou's home. I thought he might have at least left behind some kind of clue."

"It's not as if we didn't find out anything. At the very least, we confirmed Chen Zhou's identity and know that some people are suspicious. That gives us an entry point into what we have to do from now on too," Zu An said seriously. "Furthermore, from my chat with his wife, I learned that Chen Zhou was the quiet sort. Someone like that would definitely not do something rash. He definitely knew the trip to the

capital would be dangerous, so he would have done a few things to prepare for it. He would have left behind some clues through certain hidden ways.”

“But just now, elder sister said all of his possessions were already seized by Gong Pan,” Pei Mianman said with a frown.

Zu An shook his head and replied, “Since he was a meticulous person, he would definitely anticipate that someone would take his things if something happened to him. The possessions Gong Pan took were most likely useless.”

“But we searched his room too and didn’t find anything.” Pei Mianman thought back to the earlier situation. She just couldn’t associate those ordinary objects with any valuable information.

Chen Zhou hadn’t even said anything to his wife or their son before he left. The two of them had already analyzed everything they had discussed earlier, and none of the family’s interactions seemed to have any deeper meaning.

“This is strange.” Zu An felt a huge headache. He rubbed his temples and said, “For now, we can only return and investigate the things Gong Pan collected. Then, we’ll start investigating Chen Zhou’s interpersonal relationships from before he passed away.”

They had asked his wife before too, but she was a model housewife who only took care of household duties, and didn’t know anything about Chen Zhou’s work. Chen Zhou’s job had been special too, and he had rarely shared any information about work with his family.

“You have to be careful. Chen Zhou has already been killed. If you really find anything, the one behind the scenes won’t let you go,” Pei Mianman grabbed his arm and said with a worried expression on her face.

Zu An laughed and said, “Don’t worry. No matter how dangerous this place is, can it be more dangerous than Yinxu? No matter how formidable the one behind the scenes is, can he be stronger than the emperor? Furthermore, my cultivation has already soared by leaps and bounds...”

“Look at how cocky you’re acting.” Pei Mianman recalled many things from the past. She gradually felt more at ease and said, “Right, you didn’t even tell me about what happened after we separated.”

“It’s too cold over here. Should we find an inn to stay the night at?” Zu An looked around. Cloudcenter Commandery was an extremely lively city, and merchants liked to gather in the northwest. Thus, even though they were in the city outskirts, there were still quite a few inns.

Pei Mianman blushed. She obviously knew what he was suggesting. She was about to say something when she raised her head and noticed that night was falling. Her expression changed slightly and she exclaimed, “Oh no, it’s already about to become dark!”

“Yeah, the city gates are probably going to close soon.” Zu An suddenly felt that the scene was a bit familiar. Didn’t students from his previous world love to do this kind of thing? They would invite out a female friend on a date, then stay outside on purpose. The school dorms would close, so they would have a pretext to stay at an inn outside.

“No, I have to go back.” Pei Mianman panicked.

Zu An was stunned. He asked, "It's already too late, isn't it? Weren't you free to move around outside before?"

They were quite a bit of distance from the city gates. The gates would definitely already be closed by the time they rushed back.

Pei Mianman bit her lip. "Before was before! Right now, my home is here. If I stay out all night, stepmother's annoying gossiping will never end. I don't care, but I don't want to bring down my mother's reputation."

Zu An immediately understood. If rumors that they had raised a fickle daughter began to spread, his mother-in-law would be unjustly blamed even in the afterlife.

"Don't panic. I just have to bring you back," he said as he got onto the horse. He couldn't be bothered with making sure she stayed behind him and took her into his arms. Then, he rushed toward the city gates.

...

Eventually, they arrived at an inn outside the city gates. Zu An handed the horse over to the shop owner to take care of.

When he saw Pei Mianman's confused expression, he explained, "The city gates are definitely already closed. We have to climb the wall, so this horse definitely can't come with us. It's so cold that the horse might freeze to death if we just leave it outside."

Pei Mianman turned around and gave the horse a look. Even though it was decent looking, it was still far from being a truly precious steed. It was just a standard horse the local officials had provided the Imperial Envoy with. She sighed and said, "Even though people always say all sorts of bad things about you, only I know that you're actually a gentle and kind person."

Zu An replied with a laugh, "That elder sister already buttered me up with praise; is it your turn now? I'm not as amazing as you're imagining me to be."

"I don't care. In my heart, you're the best." Pei Mianman clung to his arm and leaned happily against his shoulder.

The eyes of the men in the tavern widened. When had they ever seen a woman as beautiful as that? Those two mounds in particular... Tsk tsk tsk, that man's arm is even about to sink in! Even though it was cold, they only felt their blood race when they saw the scene.

Cloudcenter Commandery was located in the north, and it was often invaded by the fiend races. The local folk were usually tough, and there were always sinister bandits lurking in the surroundings. Many people in the tavern began to think bad thoughts. Those who were brave even swallowed their saliva, then began to walk toward the pair.

Zu An frowned. However, just then Pei Mianman raised a finger and a black flame rushed out. The men's conical bamboo hats were instantly set aflame. They screamed, quickly throwing their hats to the ground. Even so, a large portion of their hair had been burned.

"Hahaha~" Pei Mianman laughed in her charming voice.

"It's not common to see you be so lenient," Zu An remarked, a bit surprised.

"Hmph, am I really that sort of merciless person in your heart?" Pei Mianman said in displeasure. "My mood is good today, so I don't want to see any blood." There was actually another reason she hadn't told him, however. After hearing Zu An say that their child would definitely be even cuter, she subconsciously wanted to avoid these kinds of situations.

The two of them gradually disappeared into the wind and snow. The men in the tavern were disappointed and frustrated, but after what had just happened, they obviously knew that the two were definitely not people they could mess with. But that woman's stunning appearance was something they might never forget for the rest of their lives. Just who was that man? Why the hell is he so lucky?!

Zu An couldn't help but smile when he saw the Rage points coming through the backend. The ingenious plan he had come up with before of having beautiful female friends around him to earn Rage points really was reliable!

Their mood wasn't ruined by the previous incident. They quickly arrived outside the city. It was already dark, and the city gates were indeed already locked. However, that wouldn't stop Zu An. He found a secluded area, then picked up Pei Mianman before stepping onto the city wall and flying over.

"Ah Zu, be careful! There are guards patrolling around the city gates after nightfall. It would be troublesome if the alarm were set off," Pei Mianman warned him. In a place like Cloudcenter Commandery, once the city defense was alarmed, forget about them, even a master rank would feel a huge headache.

"It's fine; I already made a cat distract the guards," Zu An replied. Even as he spoke, the pair had already successfully entered the city.

Sure enough, after the two of them landed, the soldiers by the city walls returned while cursing to themselves.

Pei Mianman had a strange expression on her face. She asked, "It's that jade badge's ability, right? Sigh, that thing really is amazing for doing adulterous things."

Zu An coughed lightly in embarrassment, replying, "Am I that kind of person? Your body is the only one I've stolen."

Sure enough, when Zu An fired back, Pei Mianman's attention shifted. She remarked, "Hmph, we're lovers. Why are you using a word like 'stolen'?"

The two of them teased each other for a bit as they quickly returned to her room in Pei Manor. Pei Mianman grabbed his hand with a blush, saying, "Don't leave. I'm going to show my face outside, but then I'll come back."

"Don't I still have to tell you about what happened after we separated? I never planned to leave anyway." Zu An looked at her with a smile.

Pei Mianman's expression immediately brightened. She got on her tiptoes and gave him a peck. Then, she broke out into a little run and left.

Zu An looked around her room, thinking, So this is where Big Manman grew up. He couldn't help but smile when he saw some toys she had played with before. A cute little girl appeared in his mind. He had seen what Pei Mianman looked like as a little girl.

Zu An was lost in thought when his expression suddenly changed. He dodged, then made a grab toward the side.