

## Immortal 1021

### Chapter 1021: I Am Still a Child

Zu An's grab smashed a screen to pieces; he found himself gripping a petite figure by the throat. He frowned. He hadn't expected it to be a little girl who was hiding here. He coldly asked, "Who are you?"

The girl's face was entirely red. She frantically patted his hand to indicate that he was gripping her too tightly. Zu An didn't sense any ki fluctuations from her body. She was probably just a normal person. However, he didn't lower his guard and only loosened his hand slightly, barking, "Speak!"

"I... I am Hong Zao," the little girl said while sobbing.

"Hong Zao?" Zu An frowned. What kind of stupid name was this?[1]

When she saw him frown, the little girl immediately panicked. She quickly explained, "I am... I am the young lady's maid."

Zu An stared blankly for a moment, then remembered that Pei Mianman had mentioned a little maid before. He harrumphed and asked, "Then why are you hiding here all secretly?"

The little maid whimpered, "I... I wasn't hiding... I was helping the young miss clean the room, but then I waited... I waited for the young miss to come back, but she never came back, so I ended up falling asleep. Then... Then..." She trailed off. She wasn't able to say anything even after a long time.

"You saw me and your young miss return, so you didn't dare to come out?" Zu An was sharp and quickly guessed what had happened.

The maid was probably scared when she saw Pei Mianman return with a stranger; furthermore, the two seemed extremely close, and so she didn't dare to talk about what she had seen. In the end, it was because Zu AN had been careless. He had been so immersed in flirting with Pei Mianman that he hadn't expected someone else to be in the room.

"I didn't see anything... I didn't hear anything... Don't kill me... Sniff..." Hong Zao began to sob.

Zu An's forehead darkened. You dumb maid, aren't you basically saying that you saw and heard everything?

Things really were quite tricky now. If she had been male, then he could just use Daji to change her memory. But she was a little girl, so there wasn't much he could do. He usually wouldn't really care, but it was related to Pei Mianman's reputation.

Even though this world was more open-minded than ancient China, there was still a limit. If a girl from a wealthy family like Pei Mianman was secretly contacting a man outside, and news of it got out, it would cause a huge scandal.

Furthermore, discussions of marriage with King Qi's heir were underway. In order to prevent the clan from being shamed, there would even be a chance that they would punish her with the highest level of severity.

While he was hesitating, a nervous voice said, "She's one of my own people. Ah Zu, let her go." Pei Mianman had just returned from downstairs, her footsteps echoing.

"But she was hiding over here just now. She saw and heard everything," Zu An said worriedly.

"Sob..." Hong Zao felt incredibly wronged. Are my lies that easy to see through?

Even though that was what Zu An said, he still released his grip. Hong Zao quickly hid behind Pei Mianman. She held her neck and coughed while sneaking fearful looks at Zu An. Pei Mianman held her, gently patting her back and speaking some words of comfort. Then, she said to Zu An, "Hong Zao and I depended on each other for survival. We grew up together. She wouldn't do anything to let me down. I trust her."

They were master and servant in name, but in reality, they were more like sisters.

Zu An chuckled and said, "That's good then. I was feeling a bit troubled."

"Look at how badly you scared her." Pei Mianman gave him a playful pout.

Zu An felt a bit embarrassed when he saw that the girl was so scared she didn't even dare to look at him. After thinking to himself for a moment, he took out a hairpin from his Brilliant Glass Bead, saying, "I'm sorry for scaring you earlier. I'll give you this as an apology gift."

He had gotten many head ornaments of that sort from the dragon's cave. They were all shiny and pretty, as the red dragon had really liked that kind of thing.

"This is too precious! I can't take such a thing..." Hong Zao's hands quickly moved back and forth, and she shook her head just as rapidly.

"Who gives a girl a hairpin as soon as they meet?" Pei Mianman gave Zu An a glare. However, she still consoled Hong Zao and said, "Since he gave it to you, you should just take it."

Only after hearing her master tell her that did Hong Zao receive the hairpin with trembling hands. She didn't dare to look Zu An in the eyes the entire time. But when she received the hairpin and saw its elegant and gorgeous design, she suddenly froze up. A hairpin this pretty is really mine? I'm just a servant!

Could it be that something this precious is my... betrothal gift?

It wasn't her fault for thinking that way. She was a servant girl who would follow her master. Whomever her master married, she would follow. Not only did she have to serve the young lady, when the young miss wasn't ready, she would have to serve the husband in her place. She would also be fighting for the husband's favor with her master among the other wives.

She finally couldn't help but raise her head and sneak Zu An a look when she thought of that. The man was most likely the husband of her young miss, and therefore her master. Her young lady's instincts forced her to at least take a look at his appearance.

His white clothes were purer than snow, his eyebrows were dark and sharp, his eyes were prettier than gemstones...

Hong Zao blushed as she stared at him. She thought to herself, This man is even a bit more handsome than King Qi's heir! There was an indescribable calmness and confidence coming from the man. It made him seem more mature than King Qi's heir. It gave her a greater sense of safety.

"Hong Zao, is there something wrong?" Pei Mianman noticed that the little maid was acting strange.

"Huh? No, it's nothing..." Hong Zao said, panicking. She lowered her head to look at her toes. However, she seemed to have gotten a bit chubbier recently and couldn't even see the tips of her toes.

Pei Mianman just assumed Hong Zao had been scared badly and didn't think too much about it. She said, "Help me prepare some hot water. Later, I'll need to... Ahem, I'll need to take a shower and change clothes."

"Understood!" Hong Zao left in a hurry. But as she was going downstairs, she secretly turned around to sneak a look. She saw that the man seemed to be smiling toward her. Her heart rate sped up and she quickly turned back around. Then, she almost slipped and fell down the stairs.

"Look at you, going after my personal maid as soon as you meet her," Pei Mianman said in annoyance. However, she didn't really get mad. After all, Hong Zao was her personal maid, so why would she be jealous? "Are female household accessories like that hairpin something you should randomly give out?"

"I couldn't think of anything else to give her at the time," Zu An explained. "I scared her quite badly just now, and I only did that so we would become closer. Otherwise, I might leave her with a bad impression."

"She and I are like sisters. Why would you need to give her a gift to rope her in?" Pei Mianman harrumphed.

"That's where you're wrong. Her relationship with you is good, but she doesn't know anything about me! What if I offend her and she ends up speaking ill of me at your side everyday? Public opinion can be powerful enough to melt metal, you know?" Zu An exclaimed.

He thought back to his previous world. There had been many bros who chased after girls, but because those girls' close friends didn't like them, constantly badmouthing them behind their backs, it would almost always fall through even if the guy and the girl liked each other. With so many predecessors as examples, he definitely didn't want to make the same mistake.

"You're worrying too much. I'll just give her a good spanking if she dares to speak ill of you," Pei Mianman raised her hand and said with a harrumph.

Zu An laughed and took her into his arms, saying, "It's my Manman who is the best."

Pei Mianman leaned gently into his embrace. The two were passionately in love, wishing they could be together constantly.

"Young miss..." Hong Zao began shyly. She looked at Zu An too and didn't know what to call him.

Pei Mianman said with a smile, "You can just call him 'young master' in the future."

"Yes, young... Young master!" Hong Zao stuttered. Master and madam don't know anything, right? The young miss really is brave! The two of them seem to have already pledged to be married... She said, "I prepared the hot water already. I'll help the young miss take a bath."

"There's no need. You just need to prepare the clothes, and then you can get some rest," Pei Mianman said with a blush.

"Huh? Oh..." Hong Zao looked at the two of them with a strange expression. Are these two going to take a bath together?

When she left, Zu An couldn't help but laugh. He asked, "Why does this maid of yours seem a bit slow?"

"She is naturally timid, and her personality is weak. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been sent to me." Pei Mianman's expression carried a hint of pity as she said, "You're not allowed to bully her anymore in the future."

"Am I the kind of person who would bully others?" Zu An protested.

Pei Mianman retorted, "Don't touch me and take a bath first." Zu An was stunned. Pei Mianman continued, "You were just digging up graves in the cemetery. You're not allowed to touch me before you wash yourself."

"But I already washed up in that river before!" Zu An exclaimed.

"You didn't wash your body," Pei Mianman retorted.

"..."

Seeing that Pei Mianman had gone down first, Zu An suddenly realized something. Wasn't taking a bath together great? What was he rejecting her for?

Soon afterward, the water's surface rippled, and a mist wafted through the air. It was like a spring wind brushing through willow leaves...

Hong Zao didn't go off to rest, but instead guarded the entrance. As the young miss' personal maid, she naturally had to consider things from all angles for the young miss. If someone came and ran into the two of them by chance, the young miss would be finished. Thus, she guarded the entrance with 120% vigilance, keeping her eyes and ears wide open.

However, snow was in the air, and it was nighttime. Why would anyone from the manor pass by? The surroundings were quiet, to the extent that she could even hear the sound of snow falling. But what she heard more of was laughter behind the screen, accompanied by rising and falling emotions. Her face flushed red.

"Young miss... Why is the young miss..." She subconsciously wanted to cover her ears, but she was worried that she wouldn't be able to hear anyone approaching if she did that. She could only grit her teeth and endure it.

"I am still a child..." Hong Zao muttered. Even though she was at the age of marriage, her way of thinking hadn't completely reached that level yet. She quietly took out the golden hairpin Zu An had given her,

and a blush spread across her pretty face. She felt as if her entire body had been bathed in a comfortable autumn wind.

After a long time had passed, though, she suddenly thought of something. She quickly ran to her room and took out a large case of food. King Qi's heir had always been sending the young miss food over the past few days. The young miss hadn't even given it a look before giving it all to her.

She had obviously eaten everything happily. When would she ever have a chance to eat so many expensive kinds of food otherwise? She even felt she had become a lot chubbier because of that. The front of her clothes was getting a bit tight.

But the young miss had already decided on this future young master. The young master had even given her such an expensive gift. He was handsome too, and his build was good...

Pah pah pah! What kind of nonsense am I thinking?

Since the young master has already been decided, I can't take the gifts of other men!

She couldn't help but gulp her saliva down when she saw the pastries inside. There was a look of reluctance in her eyes. However, in the end, she bit her lip and threw away all of the food inside.

When she returned to the room and looked at the screen, she curled her small lips, thinking, Are they still not done?

I really want to take a bath too...

## **Chapter 1022: I Will Have Nothing to Do with Gambling and Drugs**

The next morning, Pei Mianman was leaning against the crook of Zu An's arm. Her finger mischievously drew circles around his chest as she asked, "Ah Zu, do you want me to leak some fake information to King Qi's heir?" The part of her skin that was exposed outside of the covers was even whiter than the snow outside.

Zu An shook his head, saying, "Not yet. When the time is right, I'll tell you then." This was a rare double agent he could make use of, so of course he had to use the opportunity at the crucial moment.

After the two embraced each other for a bit and exchanged some romantic words, they exchanged a look. Then, another intense battlefield ensued.

Knock knock knock!

There was a burst of soft knocking, and the door opened with a groan. Hong Zao stuck her head in and said, "Young miss, the manor's people are starting to wake up." Her unspoken words were clear. It was time for the young master to leave.

"I got it, you can withdraw for now... Mmm!" Pei Mianman replied.

When Hong Zao heard that tender moan that seemed to be uttered from deep in Pei Mianman's throat, even as a girl herself, she was greatly flustered. She quickly closed the door to the room.

She patted her chest. Her heart was beating like crazy. She sat on the ladder outside while hugging her knees. She recalled the earlier years when the people of the manor hadn't treated the young miss that

well because of her identity, always gossiping behind her back and talking about how her face was only good for seducing men. Back then, Hong Zao was so mad she had even angrily fought with them.

But now, weren't those people completely correct? The young miss really is charming...

When she recalled that intense scene, her face turned red. Also, is the young master not tired? They already went at it for an entire night!

"What are you mumbling about over there?" A soft voice spoke next to Hong Zao's ear.

Hong Zao raised her head and saw that a man with starry eyes and long eyebrows was looking at her with a smile. His clothes were purer than snow, truly like a male lead straight out of a novel... Her face turned red and she didn't dare to look straight at him. She quickly lowered her head, saying, "Young... Young master."

"You're so cute." Zu An subconsciously rubbed her head. This little girl was quite adorable. He said, "Take good care of your young miss. I'm heading out first."

"Goodbye, young master," Hong Zao replied. She still didn't dare to look him in the eyes. She immediately regretted saying those words. Wasn't she basically inviting him back? Would that make the young miss seem a bit too impatient?[1]

Furthermore, if he really did come back, it would be just like the previous night where she wouldn't get any sleep.

"You worked hard last night. I'll bring you some tasty treats next time," Zu An said with a chuckle. The entire Pei Manor was starting to wake up, so he couldn't continue to stay. As such, he quickly left.

"It wasn't too hard..." Hong Zao had a strange look on her face. It was you and the young miss who worked harder, right?

Only when Zu An retreated into the distance did she dare to raise her head. When she saw his figure quickly fly into the distance, her little mouth opened wide. Young master's cultivation is so high!

Pei Mianman said lazily, "Stop coveting your young master already and help me freshen up."

Every month on this day, Pei Manor would have a small ceremony. That was when everyone would gather in the ancestral hall to hold an offering for their ancestors, and await their ancestors' instructions. Even though she wasn't all that interested, she didn't want to give them any excuses to talk about her.

When she heard what the young miss said, Hong Zao's heart that had just finally calmed down began to pound again. "I didn't..." She denied it while quickly running inside.

Pei Mianman had already sat up from her bed. When she saw her master's wonderful figure, Hong Zao lowered her head to look at her own chest. Sigh, I'm still lacking compared to the young miss.

She quickly found some clothes for the young miss to dress in. She suddenly wrinkled her brow, asking, "Huh? Why is there a smell of heather flowers? Isn't it winter right now?"

Pei Mianman trembled, but then she couldn't help but pinch Hong Zao's chubby cheek. She remarked, "No wonder they call you a dumb girl. Hmph, you'll know in the future."

"Oh..." Hong Zao nodded, only half-understanding. While she helped Pei Mianman get dressed, she quietly asked, "Young miss, is the young master the one you met back in Brightmoon City?"

"Yeah." Pei Mianman grinned. She felt a sweet sensation whenever she thought about him.

"But young miss, wouldn't it be bad to have 'illicit' relations without a ceremony?" Hong Zao asked worriedly.

Pei Mianman was speechless. She took a deep breath, enduring the urge to give Hong Zao a good beating. She said, "If you don't know how to use idioms, don't say them randomly."

"I didn't though..." Hong Zao blinked and looked at Pei Mianman innocently.

Pei Mianman's breath caught in her throat. She could only say, "Who said we were doing any of that? Hmph, we already got married properly, and we even had an entire country as witnesses." A hint of loveliness appeared between her brows when she remembered what had happened in Yinxu's secret dungeon.

"Ah?" Hong Zao looked at her with a strange expression. Did the young miss go crazy? When did she get married to the young master, and even have the entire country as witness?

You always say I'm dumb, but why do I feel like the young miss is the biggest dummy? You gave away your body all willy-nilly, and even your memory is getting messed up.

After some hesitation, she thought that even though the young master had given her that precious golden hairpin, she still had to think for the young miss' sake. She asked, "Young miss, is the young master of the fiend race?"

"Of course not." Pei Mianman was stunned. She turned around to look at Hong Zao, asking, "Why would you ask that?"

"I thought the young master was a male vixen and seduced the young miss or something..." Hong Zao mumbled.

"There's no such thing as a male vixen in this world." Pei Mianman scolded her playfully.

Hong Zao thought to herself, What do you mean there isn't? The young master just looked at me once, and I... was already like that.

"Young miss, will the young master come to Pei Manor to propose marriage?" she asked.

"He said he was going to, but I stopped him. It's not a good time right now; we'll wait until later." Pei Mianman looked at her own reflection in the mirror, which was becoming more and more tender and beautiful. As long as I can be with him, I'll already be extremely happy.

Hong Zao looked at Pei Mianman's back worriedly, thinking, The young miss is pretty intelligent normally, so why does she seem so foolish nowadays? Yet you still say the young master isn't a male vixen.

She began, "But King Qi's heir keeps visiting the manor. He clearly likes the young miss..."

"What does that have to do with me? What, you want me to run over and ask him what part of me he likes, so I can then change that part so he doesn't like me anymore?" Pei Mianman shot back.

Hong Zao burst out laughing, saying, "King Qi's heir might just die from anger if he heard what the young miss said. But King Qi Manor is so powerful! Master and madam want you to marry him as well. What if the relationship between you and the young master is exposed? That would mean big trouble then!"

"I know already! When did you learn to nag like a granny?" Pei Mianman slammed the head ornament she had just picked up onto the table. She felt as if her great mood had suddenly gone up into smoke when she thought about those things.

Seeing that the young miss was upset, Hong Zao stuck out her tongue, but didn't say anything else.

...

Meanwhile, Zu An had just returned to his temporary residence when he happened to run into Pei You and Gao Ying doing morning exercises. He nodded inwardly when he saw them. Even though these two were young masters from distinguished clans, the fact that they were able to have their current level of cultivation at such a young age was definitely because of their own diligence.

The two of them saw him as well. Pei You moved closer and gave him a sniff. He immediately became jealous, exclaiming, "What a seductive smell! Brother Gao, tell me, we train so bitterly day and night, and yet we can't compare to someone who enjoys himself every night at all! What the hell is this? How is this fair at all? Where is the virtue? Where is the morality? Where is the address?" He moved closer to Zu An when he said the last part.

"You're clearly suited to become a Prince Charming, yet you just insist on being a comedian." Zu An couldn't help but chuckle when he saw Pei You's lewd expression.

Pei You harrumphed. "I'm only showing you guys this side because I really treat you two as my brothers, yet you're mocking me! Hurry and tell me the address of the brothel you went to! Only that will repair our little boat of camaraderie."

"I went to investigate a case," Zu An said helplessly.

"My ass." Pei You rolled his eyes.

Even Gao Ying had a strange expression. Brother Zu, shouldn't you at least put some effort into your lie?

Zu An coughed and said, "Whatever. Actually, I need your help in investigating a brothel girl..."

Pei You and Gao Ying's eyes immediately lit up when they heard that.

"Ahem!" Sang Hong walked past them just then. He said in a sincere and meaningful tone, "You are all imperial envoys; you represent the dignity of the imperial court. You absolutely cannot do anything nonsensical."

Pei You's expression froze. He replied, "Sir Sang, do not worry. I do not dare to make any promises for these two, but I will have nothing to do with evil things like gambling or drugs."



Sang Hong was caught off guard by his reply. However, he retorted, "Tsk, you did not mention anything sexual in that vow at all."

Pei You immediately changed his wording. "As long as the emperor and heavens are above me, I, Pei You, will have nothing to do with evil things like gambling or drugs!"[2]

Sang Hong:

Zu An:

Gao Ying:

### **Chapter 1023: Mysterious Case**

"Ahem..." Sang Hong coughed lightly and said, "Do not make a fool of yourselves out here. Follow me to my room; there are some matters to discuss." He led them to his room afterward. He also had the guards remain a bit further out so they couldn't hear what they were going to talk about.

"Ah Zu, did you gain any new information?" Sang Hong asked as he sat down in the seat of honor. He gestured for them to pour their own tea and to be at ease.

"I've already found out the identity of the one who wanted to deliver a message to the capital" Zu An began. He was about to continue, but Sang Hong stopped him.

Sang Hong looked at Gao Ying and Pei You, saying, "We are acting under the emperor's will in this mission, so I believe everyone here understands what that signifies. I know that your clans' relationships are twisted and complicated, and there are even many relatives of yours here in Cloudcenter Commandery..."

Pei You's expression changed a bit. Sang Hong was clearly talking about his relationship with Pei Shao.

Sang Hong continued, "But I still need to ask all of you to discern between what is more important. Cloudcenter Commandery's situation is far more dangerous than you might be imagining. If you take even a single wrong step, we just might all perish here. That is why nothing we discuss here can be spoken of to others."

Pei You suddenly got up and said, "If Sir Sang does not trust me, I just need to not listen."

He was just about to leave when Gao Ying quickly grabbed him. He advised Pei You to stay while apologizing to Sang Hong. "Sir Sang, please feel at ease. We are not people who cannot distinguish between what is important. Forget about the fact that those who are here in Cloudcenter Commandery are just distant relatives, even if they were our close relatives, with how matters stand, there is no way we would leak out any information."

After listening to Gao Ying's persuasion, Pei You cupped his hands and said, "Sir Sang knows that even though Cloudcenter Commandery's City Lord shares a surname with me, Pei Shao belongs to Waterfront Duke's faction, while I belong to Greatdeer Duke's faction. Everyone in the court knows that our two sides are not in agreement. Even though we are not enemies who cannot coexist together, we are like water and fire. How can I sacrifice my own interests and inform Pei Shao's people?"

Sang Hong nodded inwardly. The Waterfront Duke Pei Zheng was the Chief Attendant, and he was a core figure under King Qi's faction. Greatdeer Duke Pei Ming was the Director of the Imperial Secretariat. Even though he didn't get along with the crown princess' father Bi Qi, his son Pei Yi, or Pei You's father, was extremely close to the Bi clan. Otherwise, Pei You wouldn't have been chosen as one of the crown prince's escorts during the crown prince's exam in the secret dungeon.

Sang Hong thus said with a smile, "Please understand that I have no choice but to be a bit more careful; I did not say that to target any of you personally. I hope that worthy nephews do not take this to heart."

Gao Ying and Pei You backed down when they heard that as well. They cupped their hands and said, "You did as you should."

Sang Hong thus looked at Zu An, continuing, "Ah Zu, please share what you learned with us."

Zu An nodded. "I found out that the messenger should be Cloucenter Duke's personal guard Chen Zhou..." Then, he gave them a rough recount of his discoveries. Of course, he left out Pei Mianman's presence.

Sang Hong's eyes lit up. He replied, "Very good. Now that we have found out his identity, we have an opening to start our investigations. Things will become much easier to take care of now."

"Did you discover anything from your side?" Zu An asked out of curiosity.

"We have!" Gao Ying said seriously, "We found a secret passage in the place where Cloudcenter Duke went into seclusion."

Zu An raised his brow, asking, "Didn't the investigation of the disappearance of the Cloudcenter Duke state that it was an enclosed space?"

"There's a chance that they were trying to hide something, or it might be that they didn't find anything."

Gao Ying explained. "That secret passage's mechanism was hidden well. If it weren't because I spent some time studying mechanisms in the past, I might not have found it." A bit of pride appeared on his face when he said that.

"Then is it possible that someone snuck in through that secret passage and assassinated the Cloudcenter Duke?" Zu An asked. He suddenly remembered that he used to secretly meet with Bi Linglong through a secret passage, causing his face to heat up.

"That's impossible." Gao Ying shook his head. "This secret passage can only be activated from inside the private room; no one can go in from outside."

Zu An thought to himself, Bi Linglong's secret passage is also like that. He asked, "Where does the other end of the secret passage lead to?"

"To Jasper Lane, several li out," Gao Ying replied.

"Jasper Lane?" Zu An frowned. Why did that name sound a bit indecent?

Pei You explained with a big smile, "I already looked into that place before! Jasper Lane is Cloudcenter Commandery's largest and liveliest brothel. Every single girl there has a large chest, thin waist, long legs..."

"Ahem, let us talk about proper matters. Do not talk about any insignificant matters," Sang Hong reminded him.

Zu An held back his smile as he asked, "Why is Cloudcenter Duke's escape path a brothel? Don't tell me he has some girls he's close to there?"

He then remembered that Duan Zhengchun, an ancient figure from his previous world, seemed to have ordered his subordinates to dig a tunnel to Gan Baobao and other ladies' chambers because that would make it easier for him to sneak out for a lovers' rendezvous at night. Is Cloudcenter Duke also that kind of person?

"That's not too likely." Gao Ying shook his head. "Madam Yu is the world's number one beauty, and not even all of the girls in Jasper Lane combined together can compare to her. With a beauty like her at home, how could he possibly feel anything for girls from the pleasure quarters?"

"That might not necessarily be the case. Even if you eat the most precious abalone every day, you might still want to eat something else once in a while." Zu An thought about how Yu Yanluo usually lived apart from Cloudcenter Duke. It was hard to say whether he had even had a taste of that most precious abalone.

Everyone else had strange expressions on their faces. After all, Zu An's wife was a devastatingly beautiful woman! Don't tell me this is Zu An's own personal experience?

Gao Ying then said, "We've investigated it on our own. That exit wasn't in a courtesan's courtyard, but rather in an abandoned courtyard. Even Jasper Lane's people rarely went there. That's why Cloudcenter Duke was probably just using a place like Jasper Lane with a lot of regular traffic to hide his own traces. If he encountered anything, it would make it easier for him to get away, and it wasn't that he has any particular relationship with a courtesan queen from Jasper Lane."

"Your analysis is correct." Sang Hong had a look of praise in his eyes. He continued, "But be that as it may, we should still send a few people to Jasper House to investigate that place further. Tread carefully to not alert them."

"Understood!" Pei You's eyes lit up, seizing the chance to be the first to agree. How could he pass up that kind of responsibility to someone else? He could visit the pleasure quarters at public expense? Just the thought alone left him in bliss!

Sang Hong had a strange expression on his face. He thought, It's still Ah Zu who's more reliable. Even though he has a lot of beauties at his side, he at least relied on his own charm to court them and didn't go through a filthy place like the pleasure quarters.

"Ahem ahem, I was able to gain some progress on my end as well." Sang Hong continued, "In this time, I have questioned many servants from the Duke Manor, as well as the people from Cloudcenter Commandery's court. There are two noteworthy pieces of information.

"The first is that everyone calls the manor's head secretary Uncle Ming. It is rumored that Cloudcenter Duke trusts him greatly, and that almost all of the matters in the Duke Manor are managed by him and Captain Gong Pan. Compared to Gong Pan, his status is even higher.

“But after something happened to Cloudcenter Duke, he did not head to Yu Yanluo’s side like Gong Pan and instead continued to remain in the Duke Manor to take care of various affairs. Since Jian Taiding has taken over responsibilities as the Substitute Commander-In-Chief, the Duke Manor is practically completely under Jian Taiding’s control.”

Zu An frowned. “Looks like this Uncle Ming has already been following Jian Taiding for a long time. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been able to start working under him so smoothly.”

Sang Hong voiced his agreement. “Regardless of whether he colluded with Jian Taiding beforehand or used the situation to switch allegiances and rely on Jian Taiding, both of those conclusions require further investigation. We are representing the imperial court, so we cannot condemn anyone based on just random suspicions.”

“Sir Sang is right,” the group responded. Their expressions became serious.

Sang Hong continued, “The second thing I learned from my visit to Cloudcenter Civil Affairs Manor was that there are rumors going around that Jian Taiding has special feelings toward his sister-in-law.”

Pei You chuckled, saying, “With the world’s number one beauty as your sister-in-law, it would be weirder if he didn’t have any strange thoughts.” He was still feeling great regret that he hadn’t been able to see that legendary beauty the last time they visited Yu Manor.

Zu An was paying more attention to another matter. He asked, “Could it be that this is something sir magistrate told you?”

Sang Hong sneered, replying, “That old fox would never say something like that so overtly. It was something I heard from the leisurely chats of the other officials, but they clearly reflect Zuo Su’s own thoughts.”

The group then summarized all of the other details they had collected so far. In the end, Sang Hong distributed the assignments and said, “Gao Ying, you will investigate Chen Zhou’s interpersonal relationships before he passed away and see if there are any suspicious points. Pei You, investigate Jasper Lane, but make sure that you do not expose your identity. Ah Zu, head to the Yu clan and search through Chen Zhou’s belongings. You are the only one who can go there right now.”

“Understood!” They all accepted their orders.

Zu An yawned as he left. Sang Hong reminded him in a meaningful and heartfelt manner, “Even though you are still young and vigorous, you need to pay attention to your body.”

Zu An broke out in cold sweat as he replied, “I was investigating a case late into the night yesterday and haven’t had a chance to rest yet.” To some extent, the other party was already his father-in-law. He obviously couldn’t tell him what he was really doing.

“Hah.” Sang Hong obviously wouldn’t believe Zu An. However, he didn’t say anything else either.

In order to prove that his mind was still sharp, Zu An didn’t go back to his room to rest and instead decided to immediately carry out his task.

...

After Zu An left the room, he first went to Xiao Jianren's room, asking, "Sir Xiao, have you completed the tasks I entrusted with you last time?"

Xiao Jianren cupped his hands, saying, "Sir Zu gave me such detailed instructions. If we couldn't complete something like this, we wouldn't be deserving of our title as the Embroidered Envoy." He handed over a case afterward, saying, "There's an air-isolating formation in place. Sir Zu needs to be careful when using it."

Zu An received it and gave it a look. In the end, he sighed in relief, saying, "You've done well."

Xiao Jianren said in praise, "It's Sir Zu who is formidable, able to think of something so ingenious. However, what do you plan to use this thing for?"

"It'll naturally have a great use soon." Zu An chuckled. He put the case away and headed out toward Yu Manor.

### **Chapter 1024: Subjects of the Skirt**

After an entire night of snowfall, the wind and snow finally ceased. Peddlers began putting up their stalls in the streets, and people began a new day of busy life. The streets of Cloudcenter City were gradually filled with a layer of water vapor.

Zu An ordered a soldier to pick up the horse he had left in the tavern outside the city previously. Meanwhile, he himself went to Yu Manor on foot. Even though a good amount of the snow had already melted, it wasn't suitable for horse riding.

He arrived at Yu Manor soon afterward. After his experience the previous time, the guards at Yu Manor's entrance didn't stop him this time. When he went in, a pretty maid greeted him. "This must be young master Zu? I have received the madam's orders to come and receive you. The madam is currently dressing and grooming herself, so I ask that the young master wait for a bit."

"It's fine; I did come a bit too early." Zu An returned the greeting. He quickly examined the other party. Her appearance was fine, and her physique was excellent. She was a bit older than normal servant girls, so she gave off something of a mature feeling. He asked, "Are you Madam Yu's personal maid?"

"The young master need not be so polite. You can just call me Maid Xing," the maid said with a smile. "I am indeed the madam's personal servant." She continued, "The madam assigned me to take care of some matters before, which is why I have not met the young master yet."

"That makes sense." Zu An wasn't so senseless as to ask her what she had been assigned to do. However, he thought to himself that he had never seen this woman outside of Brightmoon City or in the capital during his encounters with Yu Yanluo. Looks like her responsibilities aren't quite the same as those of normal maids.

The two of them continued toward the inner hall. Several maids scampered off to the side. They appeared to be doing housework on the surface, but their eyes drifted over from time to time.

"Look, look! That's the person the madam's going to meet!"

"How long has it been since the madam met with an outsider man? She's actually willing to continuously make exceptions to meet with him!"

"He's handsome, as expected... No wonder the madam allowed him to come in."

"Hmph, who do you think the madam is? There's no way she'd become a star-struck dummy like you."

"I guess you're right. Then do you think the madam will arrange some servants to serve him?"

"What, do you want to go?"

"If it's for this young master, I'm not completely against it, you know?"

...

What was Zu An's cultivation like now? Even though the maids' voices were low, none of their chatter escaped his ears. He was between laughter and tears when he heard their whispers. It seemed the Yu Manor had remained female-dominated for too long; even the girls were extremely pure.

A blush appeared on Maid Xing's neck just then. Then, she quietly shot the maids a look. Those maids were frightened so badly that they immediately shut their mouths and began to focus on their work again.

Zu An narrowed his eyes. She could even hear such quiet whispers? This Maid Xing's cultivation doesn't seem to be low at all!

A while afterward, the two of them arrived at a courtyard. Maid Xing stood by the door and bowed slightly toward the interior, saying, "Madam, young master Zu has arrived."

"Let him in," Yu Yanluo said in her unique voice, sounding tender and gentle. Just her voice alone was enough to make one's imagination run wild.

"Young master, please go in. If you need anything, you only need to call for me." Maid Xing bowed, then slowly withdrew.

Zu An pushed open the door and went in. A familiar heat immediately blew against his face.

"Were you surprised by the heat again?" Yu Yanluo asked with a laugh.

Zu An followed the source of the sound. The other party wasn't lying in bed today; as such, he was momentarily a bit distracted. But his eyes lit up soon afterward. Yu Yanluo was wearing a coat that was even fairer than snow; draped around her shoulders was a fiery red sleeveless jacket. Paired with her brilliant red dress, it made her look even more glamorous.

Her beautiful hair was meticulously combed into an exquisite bun; in her hair was a pretty phoenix hairpin. The tassels on it swayed gently, and any man who saw her would feel as if his heart were swaying along with them.

Zu An had just spent an entire night with Pei Mianman, so he was still a gentleman. After his initial absentmindedness, his expression became clear as he looked at the other party, saying, "I greet the madam."

Yu Yanluo was surprised. She had even dressed herself up a bit today. But she didn't think too much of it and said with a smile, "You came so early; you probably haven't eaten yet, right? How about we have breakfast together?"

Only then did Zu An notice that there were a few dishes that had already been prepared off to the side. There were all sorts of local dishes, as well as two sets of bowls and chopsticks.

“Thank you, madam; I am actually a bit hungry.” He didn’t act too politely and sat down. His stomach was empty after he had toiled for an entire night.

A hint of appreciation appeared in Yu Yanluo’s eyes when she saw how straightforward and open-minded Zu An was. She also slowly sat down across from him. She reached out her hand and pushed her dress forward a bit, exposing the shocking curves of her bottom.

“Young master, please act at ease,” Yu Yanluo said with a smile. “These are all local delicacies of Cloudcenter Commandery. The young master has come from afar, and I just happen to be able to act as a host today.”

“Oh, you’re right. I really haven’t tried these before.” When he saw the dazzling lineup of food before him, Zu An didn’t know where to start.

When Yu Yanluo saw that, she began to introduce the dishes to him. “This one is called Aimanke; it tastes really good when dipped in milk tea or meat soup. This one is called Samusa; the outside is made from roasted flour and sesame seeds fried to a golden brown, and the inside is stuffed with the freshest lamb meat. These are rice intestines... This one is called Western Soulender.”

“Western Soulender?” Zu An was stunned. He looked at the pastry, which had all kinds of nuts preserved in sugar and honey inside.

Yu Yanluo pursed her lips and said, “That wasn’t the original name. It looks exquisite from the outside, but it’s much heavier than it looks. Even if only a small piece is cut off, the amount weighed on the scale will far exceed what people expect. That’s why everyone calls it the Western Soulender. As time went on, everyone forgot its original name.”

“There was actually a story like that?” Zu An had a strange look on his face. He couldn’t help but recall something similar in his previous world[1].

“Even though this name isn’t so elegant, it tastes pretty good. Furthermore, it carries many of Cloudcenter Commandery’s specialties. Come on, have a taste!” Yu Yanluo exclaimed while removing a piece and handing it to him. “Many of the foods in Cloudcenter Commandery require the use of our hands, so please don’t feel offended because my hands are dirty.”

When he looked at her bright and shining skin, as well as her brilliant red painted fingernails, Zu An thought to himself, What man in the world would ever think your hands are dirty?

Even if your hands were dirty, as long as you gave the word, countless men would be lining up to help you lick them clean. At the very least, that Pei You definitely would.

“Madam must be joking.” Zu An obviously wouldn’t be so rude as to receive it with his mouth. He picked it up and put it into his mouth. His eyes couldn’t help but light up as he said, “It does taste very good.”

Yu Yanluo’s eyes smiled. “If it tastes good, eat some more. There are still other kinds of delicious food here.”

Zu An really was hungry, so he couldn't be bothered with appearances. He grabbed all sorts of delicious foods and ate them. Soon afterward, there was a satisfied expression on his face.

"This place really does have a unique side to it." He released a long sigh of satisfaction. However, he asked, "Why is the madam not eating? It isn't because I was a bit too crude in my manners, is it?"

Yu Yanluo had only taken a few small pieces here and there with her chopsticks, only doing so to keep him company. When she heard that, she shook her head and said, "Of course not. It's just that recently, my appetite hasn't been great and I can't eat much."

"The madam's appetite isn't good, yet you've prepared so many things for me." Zu An thought for a bit and said, "I'll prepare something another day. Who knows, it might help change madam's appetite."

"Then I'll have to thank you for that ahead of time." Yu Yanluo smiled. She clearly didn't treat it as a big deal. What kind of thing could possibly change her appetite?

"Is the madam going to leave the manor today?" Zu An asked, giving her luxurious outfit a look.

"That's not it." Yu Yanluo shook her head. "After sleeping for so long, I should move around once in a while. This manor is quite boring as well, so I decided to put on some makeup. Since you just happened to have come, I didn't do this for nothing."

Zu An was stunned. Wasn't there a bit of ambiguity in what she said? She seemed to have been flirting with him a bit for a while too. Don't tell me she really does use her charms to subdue the men around her and make them into her slaves?

He felt a bit unhappy when he thought of that, and he didn't want to engage in any more idle chatter. He went straight to the point and said, "I came today because there's something I wish to consult the madam about."

"Please speak your mind, young master. As long as I know anything, I'll tell you frankly." Yu Yanluo always had a warm expression on her face.

After some hesitation, Zu An asked, "Does madam know about Wuyang Jade?"

## **Chapter 1025: Warm Darling**

Zu An had originally wanted to directly ask about Chen Zhou's matter. But seeing how polite she was, he instead felt a bit nervous, so he decided to ask about Wuyang Jade instead.

Wuyang Jade was one of the essential ingredients for Daji's breakthrough. He had asked the imperial hospital back when he was in the capital, but not even those experienced physicians had known about that item. They had said that if that item existed in this world, no one would know more about its existence than Yu Yanluo. After all, the Yu clan was in control of the world's precious stone business, and Yu Yanluo was the clan head.

"Wuyang Jade?" Yu Yanluo was stunned. Then, her face turned a bit red as she said, "Please wait a moment."



Zu An thought to himself, Why would her face turn red? Yu Yanluo turned around, and some rustling followed. Judging from her movements, she was either adjusting her jacket or dress; but as it turned out, she had actually taken out an object from near her abdomen.

Yu Yanluo turned back around again. Her usually dignified and composed air was replaced with slight shyness as she asked, "Is this what you're talking about?"

She reached out her hand and spread it open. In the center of her palm was a thin piece of jade. It was entirely snow white, and there seemed to be a red flame moving around inside. That white color with a tinge of rosininess looked just like her own skin.

Zu An took it and looked it over. He could feel the body heat that was left on it, as well as a scent that resembled both the smell of orchids and another natural scent. He didn't know if it was Yu Yanluo's smell or the smell of the piece of jade itself.

"I've never seen it before. I only know that Wuyang Jade is of the fire attribute, and that it's a rare and precious stone..." Zu An's eyes subconsciously drifted toward the other party's underbelly. She hid this piece of jade over there?

Apart from still blushing a bit, Yu Yanluo had already recovered her usual composure. She replied, "Then this should be it. This jade carries the essence of fire and is rare and precious. I usually carry this piece of jade on me because I fear the cold. It can continuously give off warmth..."

"Huh?" Zu An felt disappointed. His attention shifted to the case off to the side. He said, "Then it seems like I've done something unnecessary."

"What do you mean?" Yu Yanluo looked at the case in puzzlement.

Zu An took out a rectangular pouch and said, "The last time I met madam, I learned that the madam feared the cold, so I ended up getting my hands on this thing. This item is called a 'Warm Darling'. As the name implies, when worn, it can continuously produce heat. Each piece will retain its heat for twelve hours."

"Warm Darling? That name is quite adorable." Yu Yanluo received it. She reached out a finger and touched it, exclaiming, "Hm? I don't feel any heat."

"You'll soon feel it once you apply it to your body," Zu An explained. Yu Yanluo hesitated, then turned back around.

Zu An quickly reminded her, "You can't apply this directly to your skin, or else you might end up burning yourself. It's best if you keep a layer of personal clothing in between."

Yu Yanluo's movements became rigid, as if she had to change something. Only after a while did she turn around. There was a bit of a captivating redness on her face as she said, "Oh, I really do feel the heat. You really are clever; you ended up creating this kind of female personal item."

"Uh... Actually, it isn't only for women. Men can use it as well," Zu An explained. He didn't want to be treated as some pervert.

"This Warm... Warm Darling only lasts for twelve hours?" Yu Yanluo turned away, as if trying to sense the heat all around her.

Zu An handed over the case, saying, "Yes. It won't work anymore after twelve hours. Once the time passes, you can switch to a new one. There are twenty sheets here. Because I only had so much time, I could only produce this small amount. Make sure to keep the case closed, or else air and water vapors will make the Warm Darlings inside lose their effectiveness."

"Thank you. I like this gift a lot. It's the best gift I've received all these years." Yu Yanluo appeared to be in high spirits, as if she were a little girl who had found a beloved toy.

Zu An had a forced smile on his face as he said, "Madam doesn't need to try to console me. Your Wuyang Jade would be much more convenient than the Warm Darlings. It even has long term effectiveness."

"Even though the Wuyang Jade lasts longer, as time goes on, the fire element inside gradually leaves." Yu Yanluo thought for a bit, then asked, "What are your Warm Darlings made out of? How much is the cost of the materials? If you can't tell me, this question might indeed be a bit rude."

"Madam is overthinking. This isn't anything I can't talk about." Zu An explained. "The things inside are made of iron powder, vermiculite, activated carbon, salt, etcetera. The outside is made from waterproof and airtight cloth. All of the ingredients are rather easy to obtain; the most difficult part instead lies in the cloth used to wrap around the contents."

"Iron powder, vermiculite, activated carbon..." Yu Yanluo nodded. "These are indeed not too difficult to acquire. But it seems like the proportion they're mixed in is the key part. As for the cloth, there are so many cloth shops in this world; I'm sure there are some people who are capable of this level of craftsmanship."

Zu An was stunned. It seemed he had missed out on a key fact himself. He had been thinking about non-woven fabrics, but even though there weren't any technology trees in this world, there were many fields where results similar to those of industrial technology could be produced.

Yu Yanluo continued, "As for what you said about the Wuyang Jade being more convenient, I actually beg to differ. Wuyang Jade is extremely rare, and I was only able to find a few pieces myself. It doesn't have any extensive uses at all.

"But your Warm... Warm Darling is different. As long as the craftsmanship reaches a certain level, the production costs can go down even further. Eventually, it can become something even ordinary people can use. Apart from blocking the cold, it can be used for rheumatism and other lower back and joint pains..." Yu Yanluo's eyes were shining as she spoke. "This is a huge business in itself!"

She got up and paced around the room, thinking to herself for a bit. Then, she looked excitedly at Zu An, asking, "Can you hand this business over to me? Then, after separating the production costs, we'll divide the profits seventy-thirty, with you being seventy and me thirty."

She seemed to have immediately become a different person when she began talking about business. Her previously gentle and weak side was nowhere to be seen, instead replaced with a competent and powerful woman.

Zu An said with a smile, "This was a gift to the madam anyway. I'll give you the prescription later, and madam can do whatever you want to do with it. You don't need to give me any of the profits."

"That won't do! Business is business. Even though our relationship is good, I can't take advantage of you," Yu Yanluo said with a serious expression. "If you do that, I guess there's no choice but to give up on this business. Sigh, but what about all of the unfortunate poverty-stricken common people who suffer from the cold..."

Zu An was speechless. What else could he say when the other party had already gone so far? He said, "Um, if madam puts it like this, then I can only agree. But seventy-thirty is a bit unreasonable. I'm not doing anything myself, so it's enough if you just give me thirty percent. Why would I need seventy percent?"

"You silly child, you have no idea how big of a business opportunity this is!" Yu Yanluo gave him a look. "How about this? We'll just split it fifty-fifty. I won't take any more than that! Otherwise, I would rather not engage in this business." She did have to use a lot of manpower and resources, so fifty-fifty was still fair.

Zu An thought about how much money he needed for his own pill refinement, cultivation, and valkyrie breakthrough materials, and how he was in dire need of money at the moment. As such, he didn't argue anymore and just agreed.

"Then, let's celebrate the future success of our cooperation!" Yu Yanluo leisurely walked over to the table and poured two cups of wine, giving one to Zu An. Zu An wasn't worried that she'd poison his drink. After lightly touching cups to hers, he drained it in one gulp.

This wine was brewed with honey, a local specialty of Cloudcenter Commandery. The alcohol content was high and it was sweet, making it extremely suitable for women.

Yu Yanluo covered her lips with her sleeves, then drank the cup of alcohol. Her skin flushed red immediately. She rarely drank normally, and whenever she did, her entire body would turn red. She pursed her lips and said, "Everyone always haggles over every last cent when doing business. This is the first time I've experienced something like this, where you push interests in the other party's favor."

"I only came to give you a gift today anyway, and yet I ended up starting a business. This is also a first for me." Zu An was also quite moved.

"Wait here for a bit," Yu Yanluo said before going into the inner room. A while later, she came out with a small case, saying, "Apart from that piece, there are two pieces of Wuyang Jade here. I'll just give them to you together. Either way, with your Warm Darlings, I won't be needing them anymore."

"How can I take something this precious?!" Zu An exclaimed. He had already learned how precious these items were from their chat. He obviously wouldn't have the nerve to take them.

"Didn't you give me something incredibly precious too? Those Warm Darlings of yours are even more precious than these pieces of Wuyang Jade." Yu Yanluo didn't allow him to say anything else and pushed them into his arms.

"Then I'll have to thank the madam." Zu An put away the pieces of Wuyang Jade. He felt something stir within him when he smelled their faint fragrance.

Yu Yanluo also shifted her gaze unnaturally. She did feel a bit of regret. She should have only given him the other two pieces, because she had worn that third piece on her very body! But it was already too late to talk about that now. She could only tacitly allow it out of helplessness.

Zu An put the case away and asked, "May I ask where the madam found this Wuyang Jade?"

"Are these not enough?" Yu Yanluo was intelligent. She immediately sensed that something was strange.

Zu An nodded, saying, "I need them for pill refinement, so I'm still missing a few pieces..."

Daji needed five pieces of Wuyang Jade to break through from the sixth to the seventh rank. Later on, she would need even more for each breakthrough.

Yu Yanluo's brow furrowed. She said, "This is indeed a bit troublesome."

### **Chapter 1026: Unexpected**

Zu An became nervous, asking, "What's wrong?" If he couldn't get any more of these things, didn't that mean that Daji couldn't break through any more?

Yu Yanluo explained, "Wuyang Jade grows in the ki stone ore veins, and it must be nourished by Silverflame Flowertrees. It only forms after a long time in that kind of environment. The ki stone ore veins are one thing, since our Yu clan has them, but Silverflame Flowertrees can only be discovered and not sought after."

"Silverflame Flowertrees?" Zu An was stunned. He had never heard of that name before.

"They're plant creatures similar to wild beasts. They're similar to flowers, but also like trees. Since they absorb all kinds of natural ki in the ore veins, they develop all kinds of mutations. At the lowest, their strength is at the seventh rank." Yu Yanluo explained. "The most important part is that such things can only be found and not sought after. In all our Yu clan's years of operations of the ore veins, we haven't encountered them many times. Otherwise, we wouldn't only have these few pieces of Wuyang Jade.

"How about this? I'll tell my people to pay more attention to this. I'll let you know if we find any Silverflame Flowertrees."

"Thank you, madam." Zu An thought to himself that a seventh ranked vicious beast didn't pose much of a threat to his current self anymore. It seemed the difficulty was more about how rare the creatures were.

"Ah Zu, you don't need to be so formal." Yu Yanluo smiled and sat back down.

"There's something else I want to ask the madam about." Zu An took the chance to ask, "Has madam heard about the Milk of Purple Frost before?"

Mi Li's soul was wounded and she needed that item to recover. He had previously received news that Cloudcenter Duke had offered a portion to the emperor in the past. As Cloudcenter Duke's wife, she might know a few things.

But unfortunately, Yu Yanluo shook her head and said, "The Milk of Purple Frost was offered up to his majesty by the last generation Cloudcenter Duke. I don't know any details about it. If Yanyou were still here, he might know some things, but..." She didn't continue her sentence. A hint of grief appeared on her face.

Zu An was confused. Were these her sincere thoughts, or were they fake? If they were fake, that was way too terrifying!

"Madam, please feel at ease. We'll find where the duke went," Zu An said in consolation.

Yu Yanluo sighed. "He's already been gone for so long already; how can I not know that something has already happened to him? You don't need to console me like this."

"Madam and the duke's feelings for each other seem to be very good..." Zu An asked to test the waters.

Yu Yanluo shook her head. "How can my relationship with him be considered good? We were just a bit closer than normal people. But we spent so many years as husband and wife after all, so I obviously wouldn't want to see anything bad happen to him."

Zu An was a bit confused. He hadn't expected her to be so frank about that! Normally speaking, shouldn't she have tried to hide it and say their relationship was extremely good? However, he threw these thoughts to the back of his mind and continued to ask, "Right, is Gong Pan someone loyal to the madam?"

"They were all old acquaintances from the Duke Manor. Now that something has happened, they have nowhere to go, so it was my duty to take them in as well. If they ever want to leave, I won't force them to stay either. That's why there isn't much loyalty or dedication. I'm not the type to strictly manage my subordinates. How they think is up to them," Yu Yanluo replied ambiguously. Soon afterward, a look of suspicion appeared between her brows. "Why did you suddenly ask about this? Could it be that there's something wrong with him?"

Zu An didn't want to alert her too much and said with a smile, "That's not it. I just feel that even though Cloudcenter Commandery looks calm and quiet, there are some things stirring in it. I was worried that something might happen to the madam, which is why I asked about some more things."

"You're surprisingly considerate of me." Yu Yanluo smiled sweetly. Even the winter day seemed to have become warm.

The two of them chatted casually for a while longer. Zu An still had his own task to take care of, so he got up and bid her farewell.

Yu Yanluo was a bit stunned. Other men were always itching to meet with her even once, so every single one of them wanted to chat with her for a bit longer. Yet this fellow was completely different. He instead took the initiative to leave first whenever they were chatting happily with each other.

Is he loosening the reins on purpose so he can grasp them better? Yu Yanluo frowned slightly. But when she saw the other party's pure expression, she couldn't help but chuckle. It was probably she who had become a bit too sensitive from being bothered by men for so many years. With her nature, though, she obviously wouldn't keep him for idle chatter. She had Maid Xing see him out.

When they left the room, Zu An cupped his hands toward Maid Xing and said, “Big Sister Maid Xing, I wish to meet with General Gong Pan. Would it be convenient to do so?”

Maid Xing’s body bent over from laughing. She replied, “That little mouth of yours is quite sweet; no wonder the madam likes you so much. Please wait here for a bit; this maid will invite General Gong over.”

The other party was a guest of Madam Yu, and Gong Pan wasn’t one of the womenfolk who weren’t supposed to mingle with outsider men too much. That was why there was no need for her to reject his proposal.

She brought Zu An over to a lounge to relax. Then, she called over a maid to bring Gong Pan. Afterward, she sat down across from Zu An to chat with him. She asked, “How did the young master meet the madam? I have never seen the young master before.”

“We happened to meet each other in Brightmoon City,” Zu An replied, a bit surprised. This maid was quite bold! Maid Xing’s fiery eyes looked him up and down, as if she were examining a gigolo or something.

“Brightmoon City... The Madam seemed to have encountered some danger and was saved by a young man. So that was you!” Maid Xing patted her large chest. “No wonder the madam appreciates you so much. After all, she has basically refused all guests over these past few years.”

Zu An smiled and asked, “How many years has Big Sister Maid Xing been at the madam’s side already?”

“Oh my, I really cannot accept your address of ‘big sister’,” Maid Xing said. Despite those words, she was still all smiles and enjoying herself greatly. “This servant has followed the madam ever since I was young. It has been so long that I do not even remember too clearly anymore.”

Zu An thought to himself, Then she really is someone Yu Yanluo absolutely trusts.

Maid Xing then asked him all sorts of questions.

“Has the young master gotten married yet?”

“Do you have anyone in mind...?”

Zu An’s expression became strange. He replied, “Why, don’t tell me you plan to introduce someone to me?”

Maid Xing shook her head with a smile, saying, “My goodness, I should forget about that. With the kind of a person the young master is, you are not someone a normal girl can be a match for. If the madam had not gotten married, I could introduce her to you, but there is no chance now.”

Zu An was a bit surprised. Isn’t this maid way too bold? She actually put her own master out just like that! But judging from their interaction, he could tell that Yu Yanluo must treat her subordinates extremely well, which was why they were like this.

...

As the two of them chatted with each other, Gong Pan came over. Maid Xing bowed and said, "I won't disturb the two of you then." She withdrew after speaking.

"So it was young master Zu! May I ask what you sought me out for today?" Gong Pan cupped his hands.

Zu An returned the greeting and asked, "Didn't I ask you about where Cloudcenter Duke's personal guards were? I looked into them and found that many of them died in their line of duty. That's why I wanted to ask you what kind of cases they were investigating back then, as well as take a look at the things they left behind."

He didn't want to let the other party know about his true suspicions, so he didn't ask about Chen Zhou alone, but rather asked about him together with the six other people. The mastermind had gone through such great efforts to make a fake corpse, so they definitely didn't want him to find out the truth so quickly.

"Oh? Could it be that there were some issues with their causes of death?" Gong Pan asked out of curiosity.

"It's just routine business I need to go through," Zu An said without any changes in his expression. "I believe you know that we came to Cloudcenter Duke to appoint a new duke. Before that can happen, we need to properly investigate all things related to the previous duke."

"So that was it." Gong Pan felt at ease. He said, "Sigh, those brothers really passed away tragically..." Then, he gave Zu An a rough summary of the investigations regarding the six individuals.

Zu An paid the most attention to Chen Zhou's case. It was initially rumored that he had been investigating a smuggling case involving the Zhenyuan Merchant Group, but he had later discovered that it was just a misunderstanding. It was another group of smugglers who had bribed one of Zhengyuan Merchant Group's warehouse managers...

Zhenyuan Merchant Group was one of Cloudcenter Commandery's largest merchant groups. They brought goods from all over the country to Cloudcenter Commandery for sale, and they also brought various specialty products from the northwest through Cloudcenter Commandery to all other parts of the empire.

Zu An thought to himself, Chen Zhou was probably already on his way to deliver the message to the capital back then. Investigating Zhenyuan Merchant Group or whatever should just be a pretense. What he cared more about was what Chen Zhou had left behind.

"What about those soldiers' belongings? I heard that Sir Gong brought them back," Zu An took the chance to ask Gong Pan with a smile.

Gong Pan's expression changed slightly, but he quickly replied, "According to normal regulations, those who die in the line of duty have their belongings stored up. After all, their cases have not been resolved yet."

Zu An frowned and asked, "Are those items still in the Military Affairs Manor?"

"That is not the case; they are currently in Yu Manor. I have not had the time to hand them over to the authorities yet," Gong Pan replied. "If Sir Zu wishes to examine them, then please follow me."

When he saw the other party's skeptical expression, he explained, "I will not hide this from Sir Zu. Actually, I wanted to see if I could find any clues from their belongings, to see if I could get revenge for these fallen brothers. You should also know that all of us were personal guards of the duke in the past. After something happened to the duke, we were dispatched to other departments to do these tasks.

"Everyone knows they were leading figures of the last generation, and would not receive the favor of the new authorities. That is why no one would really earnestly examine their cases, and also why I wanted to investigate their cases myself."

"Oh?" Zu An was a bit surprised. He continued, "Then I wonder if General Gong has found out any important information?"

### **Chapter 1027: Increase the Fee**

Gong Pan shook his head. He sighed and said, "I only have my own dullness and lack of aptitude to blame; I was unable to find out anything. I was also unable to get revenge for these brothers who wrongfully died."

When he saw the man grit his teeth and clench his fists tightly, and how his entire body was shaking a bit as he spoke, Zu An thought to himself, If this person is acting, his acting skills are out of this world. He coughed lightly and reminded the other party, "Then, where are those guards' belongings located?"

Gong Pan thus woke up from his daze. He took out six pouches from some drawers and said, "The items are stored inside. They were all unfortunate souls who did not leave behind too many belongings."

Zu An walked over and opened the six pouches one by one. These were the belongings of the six deceased guards. His attention naturally focused on Chen Zhou's belongings. He chatted leisurely with Gong Pan while secretly examining the belongings in Chen Zhou's pack. Inside were a scorched personal blade, a waist token, a fingernail file, a slightly shriveled canteen, a badly burned book, as well as a few books that were still intact.

"What is this?" Zu An noticed that the other people's belongings all had the same book. He randomly picked one up and flipped through it.

"That is something all of us guards have. Recorded in them are their daily patrols and missions. After all, our jobs carry great risk, and we might just disappear from this world one day. To some extent, these can be considered our last words," Gong Pan explained.

Zu An felt relieved. The Embroidered Envoy had similar things called Soul Reaping Books. These books recorded their master's identity, their most recent mission, the people they had encountered, and other such things. That way, even if individual Embroidered Envoys perished, the others could still find various clues through those things.

His eyes landed on Chen Zhou's remains. He thought to himself that most of the booklet had probably been burned up in the warehouse, and the others were found and brought out by Gong Pan from his home.

He couldn't really examine Chen Zhou's things in front of Gong Pan, so he said, "General Gong, I want to bring these things back in order to examine them carefully."



"This..." Gong Pan looked a bit hesitant.

Zu An asked with a smile, "Does General Gong not trust me? I represent the imperial court, and I don't have any relationship with the various factions of Cloudcenter Commandery."

Gong Pan immediately bowed and said, "Sir Zu speaks too formally. Cooperating with your investigation is something I ought to do. However, I need Sir Zu to sign a borrowing form."

"That isn't an issue." Zu An knew that was a formality of the court, so he naturally wouldn't refuse.

...

Zu An returned to his temporary residence after he signed the form, and Sang Hong came over to look through the belongings. Zu An noticed that most of the items were just some ordinary goods. Soon afterward, their attention landed on the booklets.

The book that had been burned looked as if it might crumble as soon as it was touched. Even if one gently flipped through it, the few words that could still be read were pretty much meaningless.

Furthermore, they knew the scorched corpse might not even be the real Chen Zhou, so the booklet was probably fake too. As such, they both began to look through the books that had been taken from Chen Zhou's home. Unfortunately, they only had some recordings of his patrols and stationed locations over the years; there wasn't any useful information.

"Is the trail going to just end here?" Sang Hong's brow furrowed slightly; he was clearly a bit unwilling to just give up.

"This was something to be expected. If there really were anything valuable, wouldn't it already have been erased by Gong Pan or the true mastermind behind the scenes?" Zu An replied in consolation.

"Ah Zu, you visited the Yu clan again today. Do you think Yu Yanluo and that Gong Pan might be the true masterminds?" Sang Hong asked.

"It's hard to say." Zu An thought back to the things that had happened earlier with Yu Yanluo and Gong Pan. He became momentarily absent-minded.

He had originally gone to just sound things out, yet in the end, he had mysteriously started a business. If she really was the true mastermind, wasn't he being pulled onto her pirate ship?

After some hesitation, Sang Hong couldn't help but warn him, "There is definitely more to that woman than meets the eye. So many people have knelt down before her for her favor, and even his majesty in the past... Heh, you should not think of her like those young ladies you have met before. Do not act on impulse just because she is pretty."

Zu An's face darkened. He replied, "Respected uncle is worrying too much. I haven't gotten as far as to let beauty affect my judgment."

At the same time, he was curious. He couldn't be more familiar with the current emperor. If that person liked a certain girl, how could he let the other party refuse him? Furthermore, Yu Yanluo always acted gentle and timid; she didn't look like a cultivator at all. She had no power to resist at all.

Sang Hong wanted to say something else, but Gao Ying suddenly returned. He immediately changed his tone and said, "You were in charge of examining Chen Zhou's interpersonal relationships. How goes the investigation?"

Gao Ying replied, "Chen Zhou was a rather reclusive person. He didn't have many intimate friends. But I learned from his colleagues that he seemed to have begun to smile a bit more. He also seemed a bit younger and happier than before recently."

"Happier?" Zu An and Sang Hong looked at each other in dismay. In their opinion, that should have been when Chen Zhou discovered the truth of Cloudcenter Duke's disappearance. Shouldn't he have been alarmed and dejected?

"Indeed. I found it quite strange as well, so I asked his colleagues about it." Gao Ying also looked troubled. "According to what they were saying, Chen Zhou's only trouble seemed to be that he had some financial issues, so he actually asked to borrow money from them."

"Lending some money here and there to colleagues should not be a problem, right?" Sang Hong asked, puzzled.

Gao Ying replied, "The main problem is that these are the Duke Manor's personal guards, so their salary and bonuses shouldn't be lacking. Others might lack money from indulging in drinking and pleasure, but Chen Zhou was always frugal in his spending. In theory, such a thing shouldn't have happened."

The room became quiet again. Zu An thought over the clues. 'Smile more', 'younger', 'financial issues'... Those key words seemed to be getting closer and closer to some actual truth, and yet he couldn't figure it out.

Suddenly, the door was pushed open. Pei You walked over while mumbling something.

"Oh? We have some progress from Jasper Lane's side," Zu An said in amusement.

"I don't even want to talk about it." Pei You's expression immediately sank. His hand reached up to his mouth and he released a sigh. Then, he ran over to the fireplace for some warmth, saying, "Jasper Lane isn't even open yet."

He had gotten all excited when he heard he could go to the pleasure quarters on a public assignment. That was why he had been so impatient to rush to Jasper Lane. Unfortunately, places like Jasper Lane usually only operated at night. After all, the girls needed to rest after working all night.

As a self-proclaimed connoisseur of the pleasure quarters, Pei You naturally understood that. He had thought to himself that he'd just go later in the afternoon.

But who would've thought that even as he waited and waited, Jasper Lane had still never opened? In the end, he finally couldn't take the cold and went out to ask around. He had found out that it was still too early.

Cloudcenter Commandery was tens of thousands of li northwest of the capital, but Pei You had been waiting for the time the brothels in the capital opened up. However, the sun rose a few hours later into the day than what he was used to, and it would similarly be a few extra hours before it became dark.

Hence, people's daily schedules would be shifted a few hours later compared to the capital. Jasper Lane's hours naturally shifted a few hours as well.

But that meant Gao Ying had been sitting indoors and chatting with some tea, and Zu An had been cared for by Yu Yanluo with good food and wine, while he alone had sat outside in the northwestern cold for several hours.

Pei You had broken down when he realized all of that and sprinted back in shame.

When they heard the whole story, Zu An and Gao Ying burst out laughing. Even Sang Hong couldn't hold back a smile.

Pei You was furious. He was just about to say something when he saw the remains on the table. He suddenly voiced his surprise. "I knew it! Brother Zu really did go to Jasper Lane on his own without us!"

Zu An was completely confused. He asked, "Did you go stupid from the cold? When did I go to Jasper Lane?"

"Are you still going to lie? What is this then?" Pei You pointed at an unremarkable fingernail file on the desk. "This is a small present Jasper Lane gives their guests, something polished from jade fragments. Even though it isn't some precious treasure, it's definitely not cheap. Normally speaking, only the most respected guests have the qualifications to obtain something like this."

Zu An and Sang Hong exchanged a look. They thought back to Chen Zhou's new lease in life, and how he had begun to lack money. They immediately blurted out, "Jasper Lane!"

Pei You was stunned. He said, "Yes, I was talking about Jasper Lane."

Zu An and Sang Hong didn't bother explaining things to him and began to discuss among themselves.

"Looks like Chen Zhou's money was spent in Jasper Lane."

"No wonder he was lacking money. Even though the salary for a personal guard is high, it would never be enough in a money squandering establishment."

"Sigh, I thought he was someone who cared about his family when I met his wife and son. I didn't expect that honest-seeming fella to be that kind of trash!"

...

Pei You was stunned. Only when Gao Ying explained did he understand what was happening. "Then what are we still waiting for? Let's go!" he exclaimed excitedly.

Sang Hong coughed and said, "I will have to trouble you all to investigate this matter. It is inconvenient for someone of my status to go."

He was a glorious Imperial Envoy subject. If someone found out that he had gone all the way to Cloudcenter Commandery to visit the pleasure quarters, just the spit flying from the court's complaints would be enough to drown him to death.

"Little You, we obviously have to leave this kind of thing to you. You should head over to Jasper Lane as a spy first. Brother Gao, investigate Chen Zhou's colleagues a bit more and we'll attack this issue from

different angles. Let's try to see just which girl had an affair with Chen Zhou," Zu An said while patting the other two individuals' shoulders.

"Then what about you?" Pei You asked out of curiosity.

"I'll be here devising the plan, of course, and awaiting your good news," Zu An said with a deadly earnest expression.

Pei You gave him a look of disdain. However, when he thought about how it wasn't long before Jasper Lane would open, he didn't say anything else. After all, going to the pleasure quarters at public expense was just too amazing of a job. Gao Ying was more steadfast in nature, so he naturally didn't have any objections.

When the two of them left, Sang Hong looked at Zu An and said out of concern, "You have been investigating the last two nights without any rest, so you should get some rest to preserve your strength. I will watch over things here."

Zu An said with a smile, "Since respected uncle cares so much about me, I'll return and sleep first."

While looking at his withdrawing figure, Sang Hong thought to himself, What will my daughter do if you end up ruining yourself from exhaustion?

...

After many hours passed, news came back that Pei You had already found out who Chen Zhou had been close to.

Zu An and Gao Ying arrived at Jasper Lane. Pei You was already waiting there, burning with anxiety. He exclaimed, "Hurry up, hurry up! Why are you all so slow?"

When he saw the lipstick marks that hadn't even been completely wiped off Pei You's face, Zu An couldn't help but say with a smile, "Looks like you're having a great time here."

"Hmph, what I'm doing is fully devoting myself to our nation," Pei You stuck out his chest and said proudly.

"Tsk," the other two replied.

"The one Chen Zhou was close to is coming out." Pei You reminded them just then.

"Young master Pei, why aren't you coming inside yet?" A gorgeously dressed woman walked out. When she saw Zu An and Gao Ying, her expression changed. She continued, "There are this many people? I can't entertain all of you at the same time..."

Pei You quickly advised her, "We came from afar because we've heard of your reputation. How can the lady let us leave in disappointment?"

The woman hesitated for a bit. Suddenly, she noticed Zu An's outstanding appearance and presence. A bashful expression immediately appeared on her face. She said, "It's not entirely impossible to let this young master come in as well, but we have to increase the fee!"

## **Chapter 1028: Dummy and Lady**

Zu An was speechless. His complexion darkened. This woman really did leave him at a loss for words. He could only sigh and think to himself that Chen Zhou really didn't know how to pick his girls...

Gao Ying was even more depressed. Even though his appearance couldn't compare to Zu An and Pei You, wasn't being outright ignored a bit too much?

Pei You quickly came out to smooth things over, saying, "Don't worry, we'll make sure to pay you properly. This is Lady Pink; she's precisely the... one we were looking for."

Zu An and Gao Ying played along and said, "Let's talk more inside." The things they were going to ask about were private, so they obviously couldn't let people outside hear anything.

"Young masters, please follow me inside." Pink enthusiastically moved over to Zu An's side and rubbed her breasts against his elbow on purpose. She exclaimed, "This young master is so handsome! Where did you come from?"

Pei You became jealous. Pink had been polite and eagerly attentive when he sought her out previously, and he'd thought he had finally redeemed himself a bit back then. But who would've thought that once she saw Brother Zu, her enthusiasm would skyrocket? I'm not any less handsome than Brother Zu! Why is there such a huge difference in my affinity with women?

Zu An wasn't as happy as Pei You imagined him to be. When he smelled the gaudy scent coming from Pink's body, he couldn't help but frown inwardly. He replied coldly, "I came from Yi Commandery."

"Wow, Yi Commandery is a great place..." Pink immediately began to praise Yi Commandery.

Zu An took the chance to examine Jasper Lane. Its exterior was somewhat cold and desolate, with snow covering the eaves. Overall, its colors were dull. But once they went inside, it was as if they had arrived in a completely different world! It was a dazzling sight filled with a hubbub of activity. The scent wafting through the air seemed as if it could tug at one's soul. The entire place seemed to be heated by some kind of geothermal heat, making the temperature inside feel like spring or summer.

There were beautiful girls dressed in light clothing everywhere. Their steps were alluring and seductive, their voices charming and enticing. Not many men could retain their rationality in such an environment.

Zu An looked around him. What made this place different from the central continent was that there were many women who specialized in selling alcohol, as well as some fiend race girls. If the furries from his previous world saw such a scene, they might just faint from excitement.

The liveliness of the place wasn't at all inferior to, and perhaps even better than, the Hub of Freedom he had visited before. The Hub of Freedom cared about its artistic mood, so the girls had to be a bit more reserved. Furthermore, they didn't have as much staff either. This place was filled with enthusiastic and bold girls.

The group quickly followed Pink to a room, where she said, "My precious guests, please wait here for a bit. This humble one will come back after I change my clothes."

"There's no need for all that trouble; let's just go on with this." Zu An coughed. He obviously hadn't come for a fashion show.

"Ah? Why is this young master in such a rush?" Pink blushed. She secretly gave them a look. She thought to herself that this young master was the most handsome, and she was willing to receive him even if she didn't take any money from him. The young master Pei who had shown up previously was also pretty good. In comparison to the two of them, the boorish-looking man in the very back was a bit uglier. Sigh, I'll just keep him in the back if I have to later. I just don't have to look at his face.

I definitely have to have this white-clothed young master right in front of me later...

She began to loosen her waistband while acting shy. It was a habit that had been trained ever since she was little, so she was already extremely proficient at it. She could be seen as both enticing and also properly displaying the shyness of a girl.

"Ahem, you don't need to undress. We just want to ask you about some things." Zu An quickly stopped her.

Pink immediately pulled her clothes back up when she heard that, replying, "Hmph, did you all come here just to make a joke out of me? You didn't come to Jasper Lane to have fun, but instead just to ask questions?"

She had thought it was going to be a huge business deal at first, and yet they hadn't come to play. She felt that she'd run into bad luck. Even though this white clothed young master is handsome, he can't just not pay!

Zu An took out a silver ingot and placed it on the table, saying, "Don't worry, we'll definitely pay you properly."

Pink's eyes lit up when she saw the large ingot. She immediately grabbed it and bit down on a corner. Then, she put it into her chest and said with a smile, "Young masters can ask me anything you want! This humble one will definitely tell you anything you want to know."

Gao Ying felt a bit of disdain when he saw how quickly she changed her attitude. This really is the best representation of the phrase 'prostitute knows no feelings, only money'.

Zu An didn't really mind. I don't care if you love money; what I'd care about would be if you didn't even love money. He asked, "Do you know someone named Chen Zhou?"

Pink's smile froze when she heard Chen Zhou's name. She began, "You are...?"

Gao Ying harrumphed impatiently and said, "We're the ones asking the questions, not the other way around."

Zu An said with a smile, "Miss, don't worry. We're decent people, and Chen Zhou is our friend."

"Wow, you all were actually that heartless man's friends." Pink seemed to be a bit worked up as she continued, "That fella was so honest looking I thought he was a sincere man. Yet in the end, he was like everyone else. After tricking me and having his way, he didn't care about a single thing anymore."

"How did he trick you?" Zu An asked.

"He said really sweet words, about how he was going to ransom me from this place, and that he was going to make me his wife! He wanted me to wait for him. Yet more than half a year has already passed,

but I haven't seen a single trace of him. I finally understood then that all men are filthy, and that there isn't a single good one in this world." Pink was getting more and more worked up. Eventually, she had basically started denouncing all men.

Zu An sighed and said, "He's already died."

"Died and gone where?" Pink instinctively replied. Then, she suddenly had a blank look on her face as she asked, "What, he died?"

"Indeed. He died in the line of duty on a mission and was burned to death in a warehouse. I don't think he was trying to fool you." Zu An obviously couldn't let this woman hate Chen Zhou, since he wanted information from her.

"He actually died just like that? He was let off easy." Pink said with a laugh. However, everyone in Zu An's group was a powerful cultivator. They keenly sensed that her voice was shaking a bit compared to before, and her eyes had become a bit moist as well. As such, no one disturbed her at that moment.

A while later, she regained some composure and continued, "In the past, those fortune-tellers told me I was destined to be without a husband. I didn't believe them then. Now, it seems best if I stay in the brothel and not think about that nonsense."

Zu An sighed and said, "Miss, please don't feel too bad."

"Feel bad? Why would I feel bad? It's not as if he was my man." Pink's voice immediately became louder. As if she were recalling the past, she mumbled to herself, "That guy is an idiot. What kind of place is Jasper Lane? Everyone who comes here looks for pleasure. Yet the first time he met me, he actually chatted with me the entire night."

"He was really wooden and slow. He didn't know what to say to me at all in the beginning, and it was I who always had to find a topic."

"Then, he asked me why I had to do this kind of work, and he even advised me to marry and leave this job... Advising a girl from a brothel to marry and leave this place is the dumbest thing ever..." Pink sounded as if she were mocking him, and yet her words were also tender. "We encounter this kind of thing all the time in the pleasure quarters. The big mamas taught us how to deal with them. I just made up a sad backstory and said my mother is seriously ill, and that I have a younger brother. I said that I had no choice but to do this kind of thing."

"That dummy actually believed my stupid story." Pink even felt that it was laughable when she remembered that scene. "He even gave me all of the money he had on him at the time."

"I didn't even have to entertain a guest, and yet I could get silver, so why would I refuse it? From that day forth, he would find me from time to time and give me money. Later on, he found a medicinal recipe to help my mother's fictional illness."

"He even stupidly asked me where my family was, saying that he'd help me take care of my mother and little brother. I obviously couldn't tell him. Not only did he not feel any suspicion, he instead became extremely worried."

"He really was a dummy..."

As Pink continued, her voice became softer and softer.

Zu An exchanged a few looks with the others. None of them interrupted her. Even though she was making fun of Chen Zhou, they could sense that there was a different meaning behind her words. Even Gao Ying's expression was no longer as harsh as before when he looked at her.

Pink lowered her head and remained silent for a long time. In the end, she suddenly raised her head, her eyes burning with emotions as she asked, "Was he sent to his death by someone?"

Zu An hesitated for a moment. In the end, he nodded.

"Was it you who harmed him?" Pink's voice was shaking a bit as she continued. She was clearly very scared..

Zu An shook his head and said, "We came to investigate his cause of death." As he spoke, he took out his imperial court waist token and showed it to her.

"As if I can tell if that's real or fake..." Pink said. Despite that, she still looked at it carefully.

Zu An let her look at it, then said, "We noticed that there was something strange with Chen Zhou's death. We wanted to investigate further, but we have no clues. When was the last time you met him? Did he say anything strange to you, or give you anything?"

Pink continued to look at his waist token again and again, then asked about their identities. When she learned that they were part of the imperial envoy, she then said, "I didn't realize anything before, but now that I think about it, his expression seemed to be a bit frenetic the last time I met him. He gave me a case to hold onto for safekeeping, and said he'd come back for it later."

"A case?" Zu An and the others' expressions became serious.

"I opened the case and looked inside before. It was just a shoddy key. I thought it would be some treasure or something," Pink said while fiddling around with her bed area. She took out a case and handed it to the three of them.

Zu An and the others opened it up. Sure enough, there was only a key inside. Gao Ying even examined the case himself, but he didn't see anything.

"I have no idea where the lock is, so what does having a key do for me?" Pink exclaimed angrily, feeling as if she had missed a treasury or something.

Zu An's group asked her a few more questions. When they were certain that there wasn't anything they missed, they got up to leave.

"Wait!" Pink called out after them. She picked up the silver ingot she had placed in her chest earlier, saying, "I'm giving this back to you guys. I don't want it."

"We've used up the lady's time. This is something the lady should accept," Zu An replied.

Pink shook her head and said, "I owe that dummy way too much. You're all getting revenge for him, so how can I take your money?" She didn't even wait for them to refuse and threw the silver ingot over. Then, she slammed her door shut.



Even though there were still shouts of happiness and laughter outside, the three with their higher cultivations could vaguely hear sobbing in the room. Zu An exchanged a look with the other two. His mood became heavier.

Gao Ying sighed and said, "Everyone says that actors are heartless and prostitutes have no morals. Today, I've learned that there are exceptions."

"I've misunderstood that Chen Zhou as well," Zu An said quietly.

Pei You said with a sigh, "A woman like this who is affectionate and true, I definitely have to come and help her out with her business more in the future."

Zu An and Gao Ying were stunned.

### **Chapter 1029: Inevitable Clash**

The group returned to the temporary residence and reported about the information they had received.

Sang Hong wasn't the slightest bit concerned with Chen Zhou and Pink's story. All of his attention was focused on the key. It was a bit larger than most commonly seen keys, and its shape was a bit strange. The lock it was designed for was definitely not an ordinary lock.

Their attention shifted to the small characters engraved on the key: Jia. Zi. 1204.

"It seems to be a sexagenary cycle[1]. Is it referring to a specific time?" Sang Hong stroked his beard as he thought to himself.

"But it isn't the year of Jiazi[2]! And what does 1204 mean?" Gao Ying voiced his doubts.

"It seems to be a number. Could it be that it refers to a specific location?" Pei You was an outstanding genius from the Pei Clan. There was more in his head than just matters of the pleasure quarters.

Zu An thought of something and remarked, "Perhaps it's the key to a safe deposit box?"

"A safe deposit box?" Sang Hong and the others were a bit confused. They had clearly never heard that term before.

Zu An gave them a rough summary of what the term meant. He had watched so many movies in his previous world depicting Swiss banks, and they all had personal safes for their clients. They always made the process seem all high-end and classy.

"There is a chance!" Sang Hong's eyes lit up. "Hurry and bring Sir Xiao here." During their time together, he had also learned that Xiao Jianren had a bit of knowledge regarding all kinds of crazy and bizarre things.

Sure enough, Xiao Jianren had an idea after giving it a look. He said, "As for the safe deposit box Sir Zu talked about, there should be two possible powers in Cloudcenter Commandery who have enough wealth and authority to have such places. The largest is the Zhenyuan Merchant Group, while the other is the Pegasus Merchant Group. Even though the latter can't compare to Zhenyuan Merchant Group, they should be able to offer such a service."

“Zhenyuan Merchant Group?” Zu An was alarmed. This was the second time he was hearing that name. Chen Zhou had been investigating the Zhenyuan Merchant Group before something happened to him.

“Then we’ll split up into two groups. One group will proceed to the Zhenyuan Merchant Group, and the other to the Pegasus Merchant Group!” Sang Hong quickly gave the order.

His objective was clear. At the moment, many people were paying close attention to their movements, and someone needed to remain present to oversee the temporary residence. That was why he couldn’t move about randomly.

Zu An’s cultivation was high, so Sang Hong didn’t need to worry too much about him. He could take care of Zhenyuan Merchant Group’s side on his own. Gao Ying and Pei You would work together to take care of Pegasus Merchant Group’s side.

After they left the temporary residence, the groups went on their assigned paths. They were already used to making detours to avoid attracting attention.

After making seven or eight turns to throw off their pursuers, Zu An hurried to the Zhenyuan Merchant Group. Even though it hadn’t been long since he came to Cloudcenter Commandery, he had already heard about the Zhenyuan Merchant Group’s great reputation.

Zhenyuan Merchant Group was the largest merchant group in Cloudcenter Commandery, or even the entire northwest. They were involved in all kinds of matters ranging from food, housing, and transportation. Every single person in Cloudcenter Commandery would use some of Zhenyuan Merchant Group’s services in some way during their day. The influence of Zhenyuan Merchant Group on Cloudcenter Commandery was just like Tencent in Zu An’s previous world. It was easy to imagine just what kind of scale it operated on.

Zu An followed Xiao Jianren’s instructions straight to Zhenyuan Merchant Group’s general headquarters. That was also where the Zhenyuan Bank was. He didn’t expose his identity and only entered the bank as if he were just a normal client.

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On the bank’s second floor, a beautiful silhouette sat, leisurely sipping on some black tea. She was dressed in a warm yellow dress, draped in a white fur-trimmed sleeveless jacket. Her sitting posture was graceful and elegant. There wasn’t the slightest flaw that could be picked out of anything she did.

A tall and slender middle-aged man stood properly off to the side of the table. Anyone who saw that would definitely feel their jaw drop, because that man was the Head Banker Qian Dong of Zhenyuan Bank.

Normally, there were many people who wanted to meet with him, and yet wouldn’t get the chance. He was someone who would be treated as an honored guest even in the Civil Affairs Manor. But today, he was standing respectfully next to a young lady who was leisurely sipping on some tea, and yet both of them felt that was completely natural and appropriate.

“First miss, these are the last two years’ account lists from our bank.” Qian Dong handed over a booklet.

“Alright. Uncle Qian can leave that here; I’ll slowly look over them.” The woman showed him a sweet smile.

Even though he already knew that the young lady’s smile was a weapon, Qian Dong was still left stunned by that sweet smile. However, he snapped out of his daze after a moment, his face heating up. He coughed and said, “First miss, I should not be saying this, but I still wish to remind your respected self to not play those games. If there were an accident, I would not know how to explain things to the master at all.”

“I know that already! I’m so smart, so how can there be any accidents?” The young lady suddenly paused when she said that, because the scene of that man ‘threatening and tormenting’ her reappeared in her mind. Her pretty face turned red.

“That scoundrel is the worst. Hmph, he actually tried to scare me? What Brain Parasites Pill and Pill of Alteration? There are no such things in this world!” she mumbled to herself. She really had been scared badly that night. She had immediately used all of her resources to search for those two kinds of poisons as soon as she returned. In the end, her uncle had come back to tell her that those two poisons didn’t exist in this world at all.

With her uncles’ knowledge and experience, if they said the poisons didn’t exist, they didn’t exist. But she still hadn’t felt at ease, so she had asked several of her uncles to check her pulse. They had all said that her body was extremely healthy and that there weren’t any strange poisons inside of her at all. When she learned that truth, she knew she had been duped by that man. She was furious, and yet also found it ridiculous.

“Damn brat, you better not let me see you again, or else...” She was mumbling to herself when she saw a familiar figure out of the corner of her eye. Her expression froze. She quickly stood up and looked down. Sure enough, those eyes, those brows, and that faint smile... Who else could it be but the one who had left her with a nightmare all this time?

The other party seemed to have sensed something and turned around. The young lady jumped in fright and quickly hid behind the pillar behind her.

Qian Dong was a bit surprised when he saw how she was acting, asking, “Young miss, what is wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I just saw an enemy of mine.” The young lady harrumphed. Why would that guy show up?

She actually knew that the other party had come to Cloudcenter Commandery. After all, he was part of the imperial envoy; their whereabouts had already been decided ahead of time. Whether she had come to Cloudcenter Commandery for the first time ever because she really wanted to look over the accounts or because of something else, even she herself might not know if one asked her.

She thought, But why did that guy come to the Zhenyuan Merchant Group?

“An enemy?” Qian Dong’s bowed figure immediately straightened up. “Who in the world is so bold as to dare to offend the young miss, and even come here?” He was already rolling up his sleeves, prepared to help her with this problem of hers.

The young lady was startled. She quickly stopped him. “Stop, stop, stop! That guy is really strong; you’re not a match for him.”

Qian Dong frowned and said, "Even if I am not his match, this is our territory. We can call over as many experts as we want. No matter how formidable that man is, there will only be death awaiting him. Young miss, you need not be scared."

The young lady quickly waved her hands and said, "Don't surround him with cultivators." When she saw the other party's confused expression, the young lady realized that she was acting out of character. She coughed lightly and recovered her usual calm demeanor, saying, "I can deal with this person myself."

"Oh..." Qian Dong's expression became strange. He recalled how the young lady's expression didn't seem right previously. That young man was quite handsome-looking too. Don't tell me...

A strange expression flickered in the young lady's eyes as she said, "You should go and take a look. Why is he here?"

"Yes, young miss!" Qian Dong bowed, then quietly left.

...

Meanwhile, Zu An looked upstairs in puzzlement. He seemed to have sensed that someone was spying on him a moment before. But he didn't see anything when he turned around. He obviously wouldn't think it was just a misperception. In his cultivation realm, cultivators were especially sensitive in that respect.

But that spying feeling had already disappeared. As such, he concluded that it was probably the bank's experts examining the guests who were coming and going.

A servant quickly came out to welcome him, asking, "Has this guest come here to deposit or withdraw silver?"

Zu An took out a key and dangled it in front of him, saying, "I came to take out what was stored here."

He was a bit nervous. If the other party said they didn't have anything, he had to immediately deliver the key to Gao Ying.

Fortunately, the servant smiled when he saw the key, saying, "Respected guest, please come inside."

Zu An soon followed him into a private room inside. After confirming the number on his key, the servant fiddled with the mechanisms on the wall. Soon afterward, gears spun and a case came out from the hole in the wall.

"Respected guest, please help yourself." The servant left and closed the door after completing his task.

Zu An sighed in amazement at the high level of technology he had witnessed. He quickly opened the case, seeing a booklet inside. It was one of the booklets the guards kept at their side.

He immediately opened it. When he read the contents inside, his expression changed greatly.

### **Chapter 1030: Swift and Decisive**

After skimming through it, Zu An put the booklet away and left in a hurry. After he left, Qian Dong reported to the young lady, "First miss, that man has retrieved a case that was stored here."

If Zu An were present, he would have discovered that the one Qian Dong was being extremely respectful to was actually the hostess he had met at the Hub of Freedom, Tang Tian'er.

Tang Tian'er frowned, asking, "He's someone from here?"

"I do not believe so. We do not require names for items to be stored here. As long as you have the key, anyone can retrieve the contents." Qian Dong thought to himself for a bit. "I do not think this person has come before. I do not have any impression of him."

"What was in that chest?" Tang Tian'er asked out of curiosity.

Qian Dong looked troubled, saying, "First miss, you should know about our rules. We do not privately examine the items stored here. Otherwise, if news got out that we did, our long-term reputation would be completely ruined!"

"Then go and check to see who it was that deposited this case here. I want to know why that guy's investigation would take him all the way over here." Tang Tian'er looked in the direction the other party had left in. There was a bit of worry in her expression as she said, "For some reason, I have a bad feeling about this."

"Understood!" Qian Dong quickly left. He called over his subordinates to investigate the information about that case.

...

After both sides separated, Zu An quickly returned to the temporary residence. He also sent some people to call back Gao Ying and Pei You. They all examined the contents with grave expressions.

"Is this for real?" Pei You gulped. He wasn't in the mood to visit Jasper Lane anymore either.

"I fear it most likely is. Every single record is detailed and accurate. It includes times, names, locations, and goods." Gao Ying's voice was grave.

Zu An sighed. "I didn't expect this at all... After investigating all this time, you end up finding out that your allies are actually the greatest villains."

He couldn't help but sigh when he saw it. What was written in the booklet was that Magistrate Zuo Su was colluding with the fiend races, that he was the one who had smuggled the ki stones and other goods that were strictly controlled by the court.

All this time, they had been investigating Jian Taiding, and they had viewed him as their final boss too. But Jian Taiding didn't get along with Magistrate Zuo Su, so they had all subconsciously treated him as someone on the side of the imperial court. They had even wanted to borrow his power to deal with Jian Taiding at the crucial moment.

Now, it seemed the greatest villain was instead Zuo Su.

"But something's not right." Zu An frowned. He said, "Chen Zhou went to the capital to denounce Jian Taiding. Why is this book instead talking about Zuo Su?"

Sang Hong said seriously, "Jian Taiding is at best fighting with his brother over the seat of dukedom, so in the end, it is only an internal conflict. But for Zuo Su, strictly speaking, he has already betrayed our state and colluded with the enemy. Compared to Jian Taiding, it is better to deal with Zuo Su first."

"Do you think someone might have used fake information to mislead us?" Zu An frowned. He couldn't help but feel that the matter was a bit strange for some reason.

"We will know once we look into it." Sang Hong got up and said, "Gao Ying, Pei You, the two of you are to arrest all of the people mentioned and interrogate them strictly. Check to see if everything lines up with what is recorded in this booklet. Ah Zu, you and I will visit the Civil Affairs Manor to arrest Zuo Su."

Gao Ying was horrified. He exclaimed, "Sir Sang, you absolutely mustn't! Zuo Su has already operated his business in Cloudcenter Commandery for many years. He has many disciples and followers, and he even has troops by the city gates. If there were a huge uprising, the consequences would be too horrible to even think about. Why don't we investigate the other members in the booklet first? If we find out it's true, it won't be too late to arrest Zuo Su then."

Cloudcenter Commandery's military was split up into two groups. The Military Affairs Manor was in charge of the field army. They fought off the invading fiend races or put down revolts. Meanwhile, the Civil Affairs Manor had the troops that oversaw the city gates and bailiffs. They were in charge of defending the city and maintaining public security.

If they weren't careful and caused the other party to rebel, none of them would be able to leave this place alive.

"No!" Sang Hong shook his head and said, "If we investigate the others related to this matter first, with Zuo Su's foundation here in Cloudcenter Commandery, this will not escape his ears. If he really has been colluding with the fiend races, that will instead give him a chance to calmly scheme against us. He can transfer over large amounts of forces to deal with us.

"If we instead act quickly to take him, the leader, down, to paralyze their entire group and not give them any chance to react, we can then take our time to slowly investigate what has been recorded in that booklet. If it has been proven that we have wronged him, we can let him go then. Nothing major will happen once we explain the entire story.

"If it is proven that he has colluded with the fiend races, we will have already detained him. Even if there is some uprising, it will not create a huge disturbance."

When they heard Sang Hong's reasoning, Gao Ying and the others were convinced. "Sir Sang is wise and has considered this from the bigger picture."

...

Sang Hong and the others split up and went their respective ways. They headed to their respective targets.

When they saw troop after troop of the Armed Escort Army move out, the spies from various parties who had been observing them knew that something major had happened. They all went back to report to their respective masters.

Sang Hong couldn't be bothered with them. They were moving out so many people, so there was no way to hide their traces. What was more important right now was seeing who moved faster.

One group quickly arrived at the Civil Affairs Manor. They didn't wait for the gatekeeper to inform those inside and charged straight in. They were the imperial envoy, so none of the guards of the Civil Affairs Manor dared to stop them. The guards could only back down one by one and stare at the vicious Armed Escort Army in alarm.

Magistrate Zuo Su rushed over when he heard the news. When he saw what was happening, his heart sank. However, he still forced himself to calm down. He cupped his hands toward Sang Hong and asked, "Sir Sang, may I ask what the meaning of this is?"

"You have committed a grave crime. Please follow us." Sang Hong remained expressionless. He gestured for someone to remove the other party's official cap and arrest him.

Zuo Su's expression changed. He asked, "Why do you say that, Sir Sang?"

Many guards rushed over to protect him. It was clear that after being the magistrate for so many years, he still had many trusted aides at his side.

Sang Hong narrowed his eyes and remarked, "Could it be that Sir Zuo plans to go against the Imperial Envoy's orders?"

"I do not dare." Zuo Su's fleshy face trembled. He asked, "But Sir Sang needs to at least tell me what happened, right?"

Sang Hong gave him a deep look. He said seriously, "Someone has reported that you have colluded with the fiend races, smuggling ki stones and all kinds of military materials for many years."

An uproar broke out when those words were spoken. That was a great crime, sufficient to have one's entire clan eradicated! The surrounding guards all turned around to look at Zuo Su, their eyes filled with shock and doubt.

"Slander! This is absolutely slander!" Zuo Su's entire body was shaking intensely as he exclaimed, "Sir Sang, you must not believe the evil schemes of a vile character!"

Sang Hong said with an indifferent expression, "I have my own discretion and will investigate the truth earnestly. I will not let down the innocent, but I will not let the guilty go either. If Sir Zuo is innocent, we will let Sir Zuo go afterward, and we will offer our humble apology. However, I must trouble Sir Zuo to come with us for now."

After saying that, he gave Zu An a look. Zu An understood his intent and personally moved along with some men. Zuo Su was a powerful magistrate. If he really rebelled, the other guards wouldn't be enough to detain him. As such, Zu An walked over to Zuo Su's side, on guard against any acts of desperation.

Even though several guards had already subconsciously lowered their blades, there were still some trusted aides present. When they saw that, they all stepped forward, as if as long as Zuo Su gave the orders, they would attack.

Zuo Su waved his hand, gesturing for them to not act recklessly. He said, "Fine; I trust Sir Sang's integrity, that he is definitely not the kind of person to frame someone. I am willing to come with you and cooperate with your investigation." After speaking, he removed his official cap from his head.

"I apologize for offending Sir Zuo." Zu An reached out his hand and swiftly sealed several major acupoints, preventing the other party's ki from flowing. Zuo Su was now no different from a normal person.

"Sir Zu is still so young. Your cultivation truly leaves me amazed." Zuo Su looked at him in shock. Even though he had given up on resisting, for better or for worse, he was a powerful cultivator himself. Those with lower cultivation couldn't possibly break through his defenses, let alone instantly seal up his cultivation.

"Sir Zuo overpraises me. It was because of your cooperation." Zu An smiled.

Zuo Su's expression finally eased a bit. At least this fellow knew how to talk and gave him some dignity.

...

Sang Hong had Zuo Su brought back to the temporary residence. He also locked up all of the other officials who were related to the case, as well as Zuo Su's trusted aides.

News of the major event in the Civil Affairs Manor quickly spread through all of Cloudcenter City. The officials in the Military Affairs Manor were all incredibly agitated and anxious.

"Commander-In-Chief, Sang Hong dared to even arrest Zuo Su. Doesn't this mean he dares to capture you as well?"

Jian Taiding's expression remained calm. Only after sipping on some tea did he say, "He does not dare. No one needs to worry; everything is still within my grasp."

...

In the Yu clan, an exceptional beauty sat half-reclined in her seat. She sighed in amazement when she heard what Maid Xing told her, remarking, "That Sang Hong really is someone who either doesn't act, or acts decisively."

Maid Xing asked worriedly, "Should we make preparations ahead of time?"

Yu Yanluo shook her head and said, "Let's just watch the situation calmly for now."

...

In King Qi's hidden courtyard, when Han Fengqiu reported what had happened, Zhao Zhi sneered and said, "That Sang Hong is quite brave. He doesn't seem to be scared of a revolt at all. Keep an eye on him and see if he might need your help."

...

At the Zhenyuan Merchant Group, Qian Dong and several other managers politely greeted Tang Tian'er. Qian Dong asked, "First miss, do you think this matter is actually targeting us?"