

Immortal 241

Chapter 241: Driving Everyone Crazy

If Zu An had seen her, he would have definitely wondered why this fellow's pectoral muscles were so huge.

She was none other than Pei Mianman. She, like Xie Daoyun, was dressed as a man. However, while Xie Daoyun, aside from her pretty features, managed to pull off the look, this wasn't the case for Pei Mianman at all. Her chest still bulged outwards no matter how she tried to bind it. Add in her enchanting peach-blossom eyes, and anyone could tell with a single look that she was a woman.

That was why she never left her private room.

She was here to investigate Qiu Honglei. Sang Hong wasn't the only one who had suspicions regarding the courtesan's background—King Qi's faction also harbored their own doubts. From earlier reports, the assassinations of many of King Qi's officials seemed to be somehow tied to this woman. That was why she'd made this special trip to the Courtesan's Meeting.

Who knew that she would end up seeing Zu An here? Even more shocking, he seemed to be a complete natural in this environment! Even she couldn't help but blush when she saw what he was doing.

"I really should've brought a mirror stone! If I could record this scene, who knows what sort of brilliant reactions I could get out of Chu Chuyan?" A sly smile appeared on Pei Mianman's face as she considered the possibilities.

She was definitely not the only one looking at Zu An. The window belonging to one of the third-floor rooms cracked open, revealing a pair of cold eyes peering out from within.

"So that is Zu An? He doesn't seem all that special to me. Isn't he just another hopeless pervert? I really don't think he is worthy of junior sister's personal attention!"

The man pulled the window closed, and turned to look at his female companion, who was lying on her side. Even though this wasn't their first meeting, it was still difficult for him to conceal the awe in his eyes. This woman really was too stunning.

"The original plan was to choose someone from the second or third branch to carry out our plans. However, having looked at him closely, I've changed my mind." Her soft and bewitching voice could make any man's bones go limp.

"But he is nothing more than a Chu clan drafted son-in-law!" The man objected, stealing glances at her stunning face. "He doesn't possess any real strength, let alone access to the Chu clan's resources. Wouldn't it be inappropriate to choose him?"

His flickering eyes didn't escape the discerning notice of this exceptional beauty, but she had long since grown accustomed to the infatuated stares of men. "That's precisely why he needs our help. Someone who has everything can't be compared to one who has received aid in a time of desperate need. There's no way he can refuse our help if he wants to control the Chu clan. This way, we can weasel our way

further into the Chu clan's businesses. When the time comes, we might not even need another diplomat."

The man frowned doubtfully. "Junior sister, your words are reasonable. However, all the logic in the world cannot get around the fact that this fellow is still nothing more than a useless son-in-law. He has no status at all to speak of, even within the Chu clan! Even with our backing, will he really be able to control the Chu clan?"

"According to our latest reports, the rumors about him being a good-for-nothing are untrue. In fact, he seems quite formidable. If someone like him managed to obtain young miss Chu's favor and become the Chu clan's son-in-law, how could he continue to endure being beneath others?"

The gorgeous woman sat up and crossed her beautiful legs.

Although the man couldn't see anything, the way her dress kept moving tempted him to no end. His throat became dry, and his breath grew short and ragged.

She seemed to be quite fond of these ridiculous reactions men had towards her. Her lips compressed into a tight smile. "Of course, I haven't finalized my decision yet. Let's see how he performs first."

...

Zu An had no idea so many people were eyeing him. He was completely engrossed in Leng Shuangyue's physiology.

"Young master, please don't be like this..." Leng Shuangyue grabbed his hand, trying to stop him from reaching for her tail. "This is a very intimate thing for us beast-clan girls! I beg young master not to make trouble for this humble servant..."

"What does someone have to do to be able to touch it, then?" Zu An couldn't hide his regret. He really wanted to know if these beast girls had tails or not. After all, they didn't look that different from human girls on the surface.

"A beast-clan girl has to acknowledge a man as her lover before he is... allowed..." Before she even finished speaking, Leng Shuangyue's neck became thoroughly red.

Zu An was truly impressed by this girl's acting, such that even he was starting to get confused. Since she doesn't want me to touch her tail, I guess I'll hold off for now. I'm not the sort of person who bullies girls.

He shifted his focus to the furry ears that stuck out from her hair. He couldn't resist reaching out and kneading them between his hands. "Wow, they really feel similar to a cat's. This really is adorable."

Leng Shuangyue's entire body shook. She felt as if a jolt of electricity had coursed through her body. Her legs closed reflexively, a moan escaping her lips.

"What happened?" Zu An was perplexed. Didn't I just rub her ears? Was there really a need for such a big reaction?

He could see the barely-concealed bitterness in Leng Shuangyue's face. She explained, "The ears of a beast-clan girl are very sensitive. Only the most intimate lover is allowed to touch it..."

Zu An was utterly baffled. “Are you really a brothel girl?”

I’ve always been a good-tempered person, but aren’t you taking it a bit too far with your acting?

Look at that Chu Yucheng over there! He’s got one hand inside that bear girl’s dress, and one hand stroking her ears, but do you see her reacting in this way? She even seems to be enjoying it!

“I’m sorry, young master.” Leng Shuanyue looked at him pitifully, which only made her look even more adorable. However, apart from saying sorry, she couldn’t say much else.

Suddenly, a familiar voice rang out, sounding pleasantly surprised. “Oh! Ah Zu!”

Zu An raised his head to take a look. A skinny, buck-toothed kid was looking right at him.

“Wei Suo! Why are you here?” Zu An was glad to see him. Ever since he had become a teacher, the two of them hadn’t spent that much time together in the academy. Not only that, he’d gone into the dungeon right after that as well. He found that he actually kinda missed this guy.

“I came with my brother!” Wei Suo ran over to him, pointing at Wei Hongde.

Zu An nodded towards Wei Hongde. He’s the one Old Mi wanted me to get close to. However, apart from the few words that we exchanged in the dungeon, we’ve never really spoken to each other.

Isn’t this an excellent opportunity? What better way to build camaraderie than this?[1]

Wei Hongde had no choice but to return the greeting. However, seeing Zu An again immediately triggered the scene from the dungeon, which began to replay in his mind. His expression became bizarre.

Just like Xie Xiu, it had taken him a long time to free himself from this mental shadow. Now, he was back to square one.

How could he allow himself to interact with this guy further? He left Wei Suo with a final few words, then rushed off to a different area of the hall.

Wei Suo was full of excitement as he said to Zu An, “I was just about to ask you what you were doing here! You even have this pretty beast girl with you.”

When he saw Leng Shuangyue in Zu An’s arms, his eyes immediately widened. He always spoke as if he were a hardened veteran of the brothel scene, running his mouth and showing off. In truth, however, he was nothing more than an armchair strategist! He’d only managed to enter this establishment after begging his brother endlessly.

However, who would have expected this docile-looking guy in front of him to be in the thick of combat right away? His mood soured immediately. He really was a master who starved himself in order to teach a mere disciple!

“I came with my clan brothers.” Zu An introduced Chu Yucheng and Chu Hongcai.

Wei Suo greeted them in return, then pulled Zu An to one side. “You people really are something! The members of the Chu clan brought you to a brothel on their own initiative? Aren’t you scared you might piss off young miss Chu?”

“Why would I be scared of her getting angry?” Zu An stuck out his chest and declared, “In my home, if I tell her to go east, she definitely won’t go west! She wouldn’t dare to interfere with my affairs!”

Pei Mianman, who was sipping tea in her private room on the second floor, almost choked to death. My dear Chuyan, you have no idea what kind of husband you’ve ended up choosing!

Zu An suddenly felt a chill run down his spine, as if someone was eyeing him from behind. He cast his gaze around guiltily, only letting out a sigh of relief once he didn’t see Chu Chuyan. I’m really going to screw myself over, planting all these flags for myself.

Wei Suo was stupefied. He stared blankly for a while, then remarked with an admiring sigh, “You truly are my model senior!”

“You are too kind with your praise.” Zu An clasped his fist while laughing.

“My brother is calling for me. Let’s talk some more later.” Wei Suo bumped Zu An’s shoulder and winked at Leng Shuangyue, his appearance as vulgar as vulgar could be.

Zu An sighed. As the old saying goes, ‘there are only incorrect given names, and no wrong nicknames’. Why do I feel like this guy really was named perfectly, though?[2]

He had just turned his attention back to his ‘physiological research on cat girls’ when a violent shout erupted.

“Get lost!”

Chapter 242: Should I Help, or Not?

Zu An immediately jumped in fright. Who in the world would act like this in the Immortal Abode?

Even though this was only a brothel, there was no way a business of this size didn’t have anyone backing it.

He wasn’t the only one startled. All heads in the Immortal Abode turned towards the source of the sound. Everyone wanted to see who was causing trouble on such an important day in the Immortal Abode.

Their gazes fell on a burly man with a sword in hand. He had one foot on a chair, and his blade was stabbed straight through a table. He eyed the young masters seated there angrily, as if they had somehow provoked him.

What attracted even more attention was his eye-catching red hair, which lent him a rugged and powerful air.

Zu An snorted under his breath. Your hair is messy and looks like ramen noodles. How many people can pull off this sort of look? Do you think you’re Xiaoli Feidao?![1]

This was also the first time he’d seen someone with red hair since coming to this world. Could there be green hair too?

Smack!

As Zu An let his imagination run, one of the young masters at the table slapped his palm down and stood up to confront the man. “How dare you! Do you know who is sitting here?”

“Oh? Do enlighten me.” The red-haired rogue dragged a chair over and dropped into it unceremoniously, his expression full of interest.

The young master who had stood up felt a sudden nervousness when he saw the overbearing man’s subordinates. However, he reminded himself that this was Brightmoon City, and he was in the Immortal Abode, which helped to calm him down a little. He pointed at the luxuriously-dressed young master at the head of the table and said, “This is Wang clan’s young master, Wang Yuanlong! Have you never even heard of the Chu, Yuan, Zheng, and Wang clans, which are Brightmoon City’s four major clans?”

Zu An was stunned by this revelation. He remembered Chuyan telling him that the Chu and Wang clans had always been on good terms, and could even be considered allied clans.

“Tsk. And here I was, thinking it was someone important.” The burly, red-haired man picked his ear with his pinkie. Then, with a flick of his finger, a clump of earwax landed right smack on young master Wang’s face. “I might have had some reservations if you mentioned that you were Duke Chu’s princess or City Lord Xie’s young master. How does the son of an insignificant grain merchant find the courage to holler in this sort of place?”

Wang Yuanlong’s lost his composed expression immediately. This guy was trying to trample all over him!

A brothel administrator came over, leading a group of Immortal Abode guards. “Kind sirs, may I ask how you all entered this place?” he asked the ruffians. Wang Yuanlong was a frequent visitor of this establishment. His family had money, and he was fond of spending extravagantly, so they had to treat him well. They couldn’t allow him to suffer such perceived injustice.

“With invitation cards, of course!” The red haired man said, tossing a crumpled invitation card onto the table.

“Please forgive my unobservant eyes. Our Immortal Abode doesn’t seem to have issued your distinguished self an invitation. If I may ask, how did you obtain this invitation card?” The administrator didn’t even need to open the invitation to know that this invitation card was real.

After all, these invitation cards were specially made by the Immortal Abode. They were unique in terms of their design and the materials used, and could not be easily replicated by others.

“You guys indeed didn’t send me one, but obtaining them wasn’t difficult. Isn’t it all right for us just to snatch a few for ourselves?” The burly man shrugged his shoulders. He seemed unruffled, as if his actions were perfectly normal.

The entire place erupted in a sudden commotion. This group of ruffians actually dared to commit—and admit to—such acts so openly!

Some of the more intelligent ones in the crowd quickly realized something else. The Immortal Abode only sent their invitation cards to prominent, well-established individuals. If these ruffians were able to steal so many in one go, then this man’s strength was really worth consideration.

The expressions of those from the Immortal Abode changed. His comment was the same as a blatant slap in the face. "This establishment does not welcome you. I must ask all of you to leave," the administrator said coldly.

"Hm? Are you scared that I don't have money?" This red haired man tossed a bag onto the table, which jangled with the familiar sound of silver ingots.

This move only drew a sneer from Wang Yuanlong. "Bumpkins will always be bumpkins. With so many reputable figures around, who would be so stupid as to bring actual silver here? All of us come with banknotes."

"You little bastard! You're courting death!" The red haired man immediately erupted in fury, as if prodded in a sore spot. He grabbed a plate of food and threw it at Wang Yuanlong's face.

Wang Yuanlong immediately dodged. Even though he wasn't a prodigy at cultivation, his status as a young master of the Wang clan ensured that he never lacked for cultivation resources. Wealth could still nurture a respectable level of strength.

However, things had happened too quickly. Although he managed to avoid getting hit in the face, the food still splattered all over him, leaving him in a rather sorry state.

"Preposterous, utterly preposterous!"

Wang Yuanlong's entire body was shaking.

The Immortal Abode's administrator couldn't continue watching this. He immediately ordered his men into action. Unfortunately, his strong and vigorous guards were all beaten up miserably by the red-haired man's subordinates before they could even get close to the man himself.

The red-haired man didn't even glance behind him. He grabbed a clump of melon seeds from a plate next to him, tossed them into his mouth, then spat the shells everywhere. "This is a matter between the two of us, so why are you dragging other people into it? If you have the skills, why don't you just settle things with me?"

Wang Yuanlong's expression was beyond awful. Even though he was fuming, he wasn't stupid. With the speed at which the red-haired man had thrown the plate at him, and taking into account the strength of his subordinates, all the evidence pointed to these overbearing people being stronger than him.

An invitation card only allowed the bearer to bring a single guest, so all of his subordinates had remained outside. If they really started a fight, the one on the losing end would definitely be him.

However, if he backed down, how could he maintain any semblance of respectability in Brightmoon City?

He wouldn't have any dignity left!

Today was also the day of the Courtesan's Meeting. If he embarrassed himself in the eyes of Qiu Honglei, he would cry until he had no more tears left to shed.

As he struggled to find a way out of this tight spot he was in, a voice sudden cut in, dripping with ridicule. "Hm? This brother seems unfamiliar to me. I reckon you probably don't show yourself much around the city."

Zu An was stupefied. Wasn't Chu Yucheng busy enjoying his bear girl? Why is he suddenly stepping forward? This doesn't seem like him at all.

Noticing his confusion, Chu Hongcai explained, "Our Chu clan is in the salt business, and we need to trade some of our salt for the Wang clan's grain in order to trade with the border settlements. Third brother Yucheng works closely with the Wang clan, and has a good relationship with Wang Yuanlong."

He rose to his feet as he was speaking. He clearly didn't want to see that red-haired man make things difficult for Chu Yucheng.

Zu An shook his head. Madam really needs to look into what's going on in the Chu clan! The relationship between the main branch and the second and third branches are merely lukewarm, but the second and third branch seem to have forged a close-knit relationship!

"Brother Yucheng!" When he saw Chu Yucheng step forward, Wang Yuanlong was almost moved to tears.

Chu Yucheng didn't even have time to reply. The red-haired man immediately rolled his eyes and said, "Where did this fat porky come from? We don't need you interfering in our affairs!"

Chu Yucheng's breath caught. He was usually quite proud of his build, and saw it as the epitome of peak performance.

And yet, this fellow had dared to call him a fat pig to his face. How could he possibly let this slide?

"I'm going to bloody kill you!" Chu Yucheng roared in anger, sending a palm flying towards the red-haired man's face.

His subordinates immediately rushed to defend him, and the crowd immediately cried out in alarm. After all, those tough-looking guards had been beaten up so easily by these subordinates. It seemed to all the world like this little fatty was done for as well.

Zu An rushed to Chu Hongcai's side. "You're not going to help him?" he asked urgently.

"There's no need." Chu Hongcai said with a cool and confident voice, his sword still cradled in his hands.

In the time it took for them to exchange these words, Chu Yucheng had charged in like a wild boar, sending his opponents flying everywhere.

"Interesting." The red-haired man sounded surprised.

Almost casually, he gave the chair he was stepping on a quick shove, and it slid perfectly into the line of Chu Yucheng's mad charge, tripping him up and causing him to fall over.

The red haired man laughed disdainfully. "What's the use of having so much strength if you don't know how to use it? A fat porky will always be a fat porky."

Chu Yucheng's eyes became completely bloodshot. He screamed incoherently as he charged toward his oppressor.

This time, the red-haired man didn't dare stay still. Pushing off the table in front of him, he vaulted forward. The scabbard in his other hand flew toward Chu Yucheng's face.

"Be careful!" Chu Hongcai couldn't remain still any longer. From those brief movements, he could already tell that this person's cultivation was considerably higher than both his and Chu Yucheng's. Third brother Yucheng was most likely in trouble.

He hurriedly drew his sword and leaped into the fray, thrusting it at the red-haired man.

Zu An alone stood rooted to the spot, feeling slightly conflicted. Should I help them out?

Madam Chu already seems to be on guard against the second and third branches—she might even be eager to get rid of them. However, these two took such enthusiastic care of me just now. It doesn't sit right with me if I don't help them out.

Chapter 243: I Would Never Hide My Name

The battle swiftly reached a climax. Chu Hongcai's sword flicked out treacherously like a snake, heading straight for the red-haired man's vitals.

The red-haired man took no chances, and immediately moved several feet to the side.

Chu Yucheng used this chance to escape the misfortune of taking the thug's scabbard right to the face, but he was not quick enough to dodge the foot that was flying towards him. His opponent's kick connected, and his body rolled across the floor like a giant meatball, slamming into a pillar. The entire Immortal Abode seemed to shudder from the impact.

You bastard! He'd been humiliated in front of everyone, and especially in front of that bear girl he had just begun to get close to! What dignity did Chu Yucheng have left? His eyes grew even redder and he charged again, screaming at the top of his lungs.

His defensive strength drew sighs of admiration from the onlookers. This fatty had suffered such a heavy impact, and yet he still seemed perfectly fine!

Zu An watched with the cool eyes of a spectator. He could roughly gauge that, in terms of cultivation, both Chu Yucheng and Chu Hongcai were at the pinnacle of the fourth rank.

However, their styles were totally different. The former possessed a powerful defense but a weak offense, while the latter possessed a powerful offense but a weak defense. If the two of them ever fought, Chu Hongcai would have to try to kill Chu Yucheng in one blow. The longer the fight dragged on, the more unfavorable it would be for him.

Zu An sighed. From what Qin Wanru had said earlier, the main branch of the Chu clan had a rocky relationship with the second and third branches, and were always on guard against them.

But when he saw Chu Yucheng and Chu Hongcai fight together like this, he could tell that they were extremely close.

Sigh, I really wonder if it's because Qin Wanru's a failure as a person, or something like that. Self-reflection is important!

Also, where did this red-haired dude come from? He has no trouble facing these two brothers at all. His cultivation seems to be much higher than theirs!

Is he fifth rank or sixth rank? Zu An couldn't tell. That red-haired man didn't use any elemental power. Instead, he relied on his physical strength, speed, and combat experience, which seemed enough to easily deal with the situation facing him.

Wang Yuanlong finally gathered himself. He took out a folding fan and rushed to join the fray. "Brother Yucheng, let me help you!"

Unfortunately, his cultivation was far inferior even to that of the Chu clan brothers, which meant that there was an astronomical gap between him and the red-haired man. What could he even do?

"Ah..."

There was a miserable cry, and he was kicked away as soon as he charged in.

He didn't have the powerful defensive fat that Chu Yucheng possessed. The kick, and his subsequent tumble, seemed to have knocked even his internal organs into disarray. He lay on the ground groaning, unable to rise.

A sharp crack rang through the air. The red-haired man had finally found an opening. His scabbard struck Chu Hongcai's arm.

Chu Hongcai immediately felt intense pain erupt from where he had been hit, and he almost lost his grip on his sword.

Although he just managed to keep a hold of his weapon, the flow of energy within his body was interrupted. He quickly harmonized his breathing, but it would be a while before he could continue the fight.

Chu Yucheng understood what had happened. He interposed himself between his Second Brother and the red-haired man to buy Chu Hongcai some time.

The red-haired man struck Chu Yucheng several times. If he'd been facing an ordinary person, these strikes would have fractured bone, and perhaps even caused severe internal injuries. However, this damned fatty in front of him seemed perfectly fine.

He landed several more blows before growing impatient. He drew his blade. "Damned porky, let's see if your body can handle a few strikes from my blade!"

Chu Yucheng's immediately grew pale. If they couldn't even defeat their opponent when the latter didn't use a weapon, what were they going to do now that he had drawn his sword?

No matter how tough his body was, it was still made of flesh and blood. How could it possibly withstand an expert's blade?

However, an arrow on a bowstring had to be fired. Since he'd chosen his course, he could only brace himself, hoping that he could at least dodge a few attacks until Chu Hongcai recovered.

Unfortunately, the red-haired man's strength had been amplified several-fold, now that he was using a blade. His figure was quickly shrouded under layers of cold light.

Zu An knew he had to step in now, before Chu Yucheng had a layer of fat sliced off him.

He looked around. Picking up a teapot, he chucked it towards the red-haired man's head.

After his ordeal in the dungeon and the transformation of the Primordial Origin Sutra, his strength and speed were both already around the fifth rank.

Furthermore, he had timed his attack well by launching a sudden ambush from behind.

By the time the red-haired man sensed the danger, it was too late to dodge.

Piang!

A shrill, clear note rang out. The teapot shattered to pieces.

Scalding hot tea drenched his entire body.

However, Zu An had no time to gloat. His eyes turned grave as he looked at the red-haired ruffian.

A transparent layer of light flickered around his body, the tea flowing along its surface making the barrier especially obvious.

Several cries of alarm came from the second floor, which were quickly suppressed.

There were clearly some well-informed people in the main hall as well. Someone shouted out, "Sixth rank!"

Originally, the onlookers had figured that this thug was just some country bumpkin who had gotten lost, and they had been content to watch things play out for their amusement. However, now that they knew that he was at the sixth rank, their expressions changed drastically.

A sixth rank cultivator would already be considered a top level expert in Brightmoon City. Many teachers in the academy were also at the sixth rank.

The red-haired man turned around, skewering Zu An with a fierce glare. "Attacking from behind isn't something an honorable person would do."

Zu An roared with laughter. "So, stealing invitation cards is honorable, then? I am someone who clearly distinguishes my benefactors from my mortal enemies. Show me a hero, and I'll treat him like one! But against a lowly, despicable character like you, I really have no choice but to stoop to some despicable methods."

"Haha haha~"

Laughter immediately erupted, none more excited than Wei Suo's, who enthusiastically cheered Zu An on. Wei Hongde had to push him back into his seat several times to avoid attracting unwanted attention.

"Who are you?" The red-haired man had a face as dark as a thundercloud, but he didn't act recklessly. This person had thrown the teapot with him with an extraordinary amount of strength, which was beyond what an ordinary person could possess. Remaining vigilant was still the most important thing.

"I would never hide my name no matter what I do! My surname is Xie and my given name is Xiu!" Zu An thumped his chest proudly, his voice filled with conviction.

All around the hall, jaws dropped open in stunned disbelief.

Do you not know what that phrase means?

Even Chu Yucheng and the others around him gave him questionable looks.

"Pfft!" Xie Xiu immediately choked on his tea.

What the hell?

"Did I hear my name?"

Xie Daoyun nodded at her brother, trying her hardest not to laugh. That fellow below really was full of surprises.

But when she thought about having a younger brother this shameless, her face immediately flushed red. If that ever happened, she would probably be better off ending her own life.

In the next room, Pei Mianman rested her chin on her hand, wearing a pensive look as she watched the scene below. "As expected of this shameless little scoundrel... I really don't know how that frosty Chuyan had ended up taking a liking to him."

The stunning woman in the third-floor room sat by the windowsill, watching the commotion below. When she heard Zu An's words, she couldn't help but smile. "Isn't this fellow a bit too shameless?"

The man at her side flared his nostrils, greedily sucking in her body's scent. His hands moved subconsciously towards those endlessly seductive hips several times, but he didn't dare to actually touch them. "How can a shameless guy like this be entrusted with such an important mission? Junior sister, it's not too late for you to change your mind."

"It's actually the exact opposite." Her lips spread slightly in a faint smile. "Only a shameless person like this can fulfill our plans. Hehe, I am growing more and more interested in him."

Even though he knew that her words didn't carry any romantic implications, just hearing this gorgeous woman express her interest in another man was enough to drive him mad with jealousy.

"It's time for me to head down before the situation gets out of hand." The stunning woman turned around, her eyes sparkling like gemstones. She locked gazes with the man beside her. "Senior brother, I need to change."

The man jumped up immediately. "I'll leave right away..."

The thought of her changing was enough to arouse his excitement.

The woman saw him out. Just before she closed the door, she paused for a moment, and then said with a smile, "Senior brother is not allowed to peek~"

That man's face immediately flushed beet red. He stammered in a panicked voice, "This senior is definitely not that type of person!"

To prove it, he turned around and took huge strides down the corridor, quickly disappearing into the stairwell.

"Thanks senior~" She closed the door, and the beautiful smile on her face immediately vanished without a trace.

A hint of coldness crept into her eyes. Her senior's less-than-subtle movements earlier had not escaped her attention. "At least he isn't that much of an idiot."

...

In the main hall, the red-haired man furrowed his brow. "You are Xie Xiu?"

"Who else would I be?" Zu An stuck out his chest proudly. "In all of Brightmoon City, the young master of the Chu clan aside, who else can compare to me in terms of handsomeness?"

Chapter 244: Getting Too Worked Up

On the second floor, Xie Xiu's handsome face had gone completely red.

Xie Daoyun was covering her mouth, desperately trying to contain her laughter as she rocked back and forth on her seat. It took a while for her to finally recover her composure. "Ah Xiu, I always thought that you were extremely shameless by constantly provoking other girls. But today, I've come to the conclusion that, in terms of shamelessness, you are a mere junior."

Xie Xiu said in annoyance, "Don't try to stop me! I am going down to have a proper talk with him! Being inferior to him in other aspects is something I can endure, but how could I possibly lose to him in terms of handsomeness?!"

He recalled the scene from the dungeon again, and it was clear that there was one area in which he could never hope to compare. How could he tolerate losing in other areas as well?

"Who is stopping you?" Xie Daoyun blinked her eyes, her face full of amusement. "Hurry up and go, then. Everyone in the hall can be the judge of who is the more handsome between the two of you."

"There's no way I could end up as the loser!" As he took in the sea of people below, Xie Xiu's handsome face burned up. "Big sis, you're learning from bad examples."

Xie Daoyun's face reddened slightly. "Isn't it because I've hung around guys like you for too long? All of your dirt is rubbing off on me."

All those who knew what Zu An and Xie Xiu looked like were dumbstruck. Just where did this fella get his confidence from? He dared pretend to be the young master of the City Lord's Estate in front of so many people?

You're just a puny little drafted son-in-law, so stop thinking you're all that!

Only Wei Suo gave him a big thumbs-up. "As expected of this humble one's boss! No wonder you have won the hearts of so many exceptional beauties!"

"You know nothing! It's because of his..." His big brother Wei Hongde cut himself off with a strangled croak. His expression became extremely ugly.

Damn it, I'm thinking about it again!

"Because of what?" Because Wei Suo was too weak, he hadn't entered the dungeon. Everyone else who had entered had tacitly agreed to keep events strictly confidential, so not even a well-informed gossipmonger like him knew a thing.

"Nothing. Don't ask about it." Wei Hongde said with a huff, turning his attention back to this scene.

...

Chu Yucheng and the others had grown wise to the red-haired man's considerable prowess. They didn't dare recklessly charge at him again, and regrouped at Zu An's side.

Seeing Zu An's unconcerned expression, a strange feeling welled up within them. Was this guy too stupid, or was there something wrong with his head? Why didn't he feel any fear?

After all, in their eyes, this fellow's strength was far beneath their own.

"Be careful. He might be at the sixth rank." Wang Yuanlong didn't know about Zu An's secrets. He was extremely grateful to Zu An for helping them out, so he felt compelled to warn him. He was worried that Zu An might be in danger because the latter wasn't reading the situation correctly.

Unexpectedly, Zu An dismissed his warning nonchalantly. "Just the sixth rank? Previously, I fought a grandmaster to a standstill! What is so special about someone at the sixth rank?"

Zhang Han had been at the ninth rank, and Shi Lezhi, at the eighth rank. Not to mention that Devouring Kun that Shi Kun had summoned. He had fought against all of them before.

He wasn't sure of big sis empress' cultivation level, but he figured that she was at least at the grandmaster level. The two of them had exchanged several hundred blows. Even though he'd made it through because of the Heiress Ball of Delights, he had still experienced what it was like to fight against an extremely powerful opponent. That was why a sixth rank cultivator really didn't scare him.

Clearly, no one else shared his thoughts. A strange silence fell across the hall. Then, everyone present erupted into thunderous laughter.

"Did this guy go mad?"

"Fought a grandmaster to a standstill? Who does he think he is?"

“I reckon just a breath of air from a grandmaster would kill him!”

“Forget about a grandmaster, he’s probably never even met a ninth rank cultivator in his entire life!”

...

Mockery and ridicule erupted from all around him. It was clear that no one believed him.

On the second floor, Xie Daoyun’s beautiful brows drew together in a frown. “Did you guys face a grandmaster in the dungeon?”

Xie Xiu shook his head. “No, but a power greater than the ninth rank appeared within, so there is a chance that he came into contact with it. But a grandmaster... he is probably bluffing.”

Xue Daoyun snorted. “I despise men who lie, let alone those who stoop to such absurd and obvious ones. Not only is he dishonest, but he has no wisdom to boot. He really is a disappointing man.”

Xie Xiu observed a moment of silence for Zu An. His sister was an easygoing and gentle soul, and always treated others in a graceful and dignified manner. He had never seen her castigate someone so thoroughly before.

Pei Mianman, who was in another room, didn’t share her opinion. She exclaimed in surprise, “Did this fellow really face a grandmaster before?”

After all, the two of them had fought fiercely before. Although she’d fought with all of her strength—barring her use of her elemental power—she still hadn’t been able to deal with him.

At that point in time, it seemed that he had just started cultivating.

His strength really couldn’t be judged using conventional means, and so the idea of him fighting against those of a higher rank wasn’t impossible.

However, she still shook her head, dispelling this thought.

Grandmaster? That’s just too absurd.

Chu Hongcai and the others who stood together with Zu An were trapped under the intense stares of the crowd. All of them were completely embarrassed.

If Zu An hadn’t just helped them out, they might have already run far away.

“I never expected the glorious young master Xie to be so arrogant. Grandmaster? Heh.” The red haired man sneered.

In his second-floor room, Xie Xiu ground his teeth audibly.

This was the same as getting kicked while he was already down!

Zu An met his sneer with an equally cold laugh. “I would never hide my name! I already told all of you my distinguished name. Isn’t it only proper that you should reveal your own as well?”

That red haired man said proudly, “I am Xuan Cheng!”

Zu An replied, “Never heard of you.”

He gave his companions around him a quick look. Chu Yucheng, Chu Hongcai, and even Wang Yuanlong shook their heads. They had never heard of this person before either.

“After tonight, my great name will echo through Brightmoon City. Let’s start with you.”

The red haired man didn’t seem angered. He stared straight at Zu An. “Since you claim to have faced a grandmaster, do you dare to endure three strikes from me?”

Zu An gave him a mocking smile, and replied in a leisurely manner, “I seem to remember someone saying that he would have reservations if he were facing either the young miss of the Chu clan, or this humble Xie Xiu. Could you be feeling scared now? Are you deliberately offering me this ‘three strikes’ agreement to give yourself a way out? After all, we all know you can’t afford to offend either me or my father, the City Lord.”

The red-haired man exploded in fury. “Your mom can eat dogshit!”

A loud noise came from upstairs, as if a teacup had been smashed.

Xie Daoyun’s face was entirely red. “This bastard dares to curse my mother!”

On the other side, Xie Xiu rolled his eyes. “Sis, aren’t you getting too worked up? I am right here. The one down there is Zu An.”

“Of course I know that!” Xie Daoyun grudgingly acknowledged that her reaction had been a little excessive. However, she continued stubbornly, “But that guy doesn’t know! He thinks the one he is talking to is Xie Xiu, and yet he still cursed his mother. Isn’t that the same as humiliating our mother?!”

Xie Xiu was completely stunned. Was that really the way this worked?

No wonder he could never understand it when the girls he was courting became upset.

Zu An noticed some Rage points coming in, and his expression grew serious.

You have successfully trolled Chen Xuan for 444 Rage points!

Chen Xuan?

His mind was immediately shaken. Chen Xuan, Xuan Cheng!

Xuan Cheng should be Chen Xuan’s alias.

He recalled Chu Chuyan warning him about a Great Bandit Chen Xuan, who operated outside Brightmoon City and plundered the merchant caravans plying the trade routes. The Chu clan’s caravans had been robbed multiple times by his gang.

Because of his high cultivation and elusiveness, they had never been able to completely eradicate them.

Why is this fellow suddenly so brazen, even daring to enter the city? Also, why does no one here recognize him? His red hair is so conspicuous!

Zu An was momentarily puzzled, but he quickly recovered his composure. This fella is rumored to be extremely vicious, so he must have silenced all those who have seen him. This would explain why nobody recognizes his appearance, and also why he dares to strut about in the city so openly.

“You’ve succeeded in angering me. I wanted to leave you with your life out of respect for City Lord Xie. However, since you don’t treasure your life at all, don’t blame me for being impolite.”

Chen Xuan was always wild and arrogant, and never hesitated once he made the decision to kill someone. So many irritating things had already happened to him since he’d entered the city, and now, this fellow even dared to provoke him? He was way past his boiling point. So what if he was the young master of the City Lord Estate? He couldn’t care less right now!

“Why is this place suddenly so lively today?” A soft and gentle voice cut through the tension. It was beautiful enough to soften even the hardest heart.

“It’s Lady Qiu!”

“Lady Qiu!”

...

Everyone in the Immortal Abode began to cheer. They immediately turned their attention towards the second floor, losing all interest in the fight between the two boorish men.

Even the previously-cautious Chu Hongcai couldn’t resist turning around, his eyes completely entranced.

The red-haired man—who had, just a moment ago, been hollering murderous threats—also looked towards the second floor. He wanted to see for himself which gorgeous chick this pretty voice belonged to.

Chapter 245: A Heartbreaking Tale

The doors to the second floor opened. A sweet, fair, and graceful figure slowly walked out, stopping just behind the pearl curtains.

Even though her face was covered by a veil, her extraordinarily beautiful features could still be vaguely seen, providing just enough to trigger the endless fantasies of all who saw her.

A strange tranquility fell upon the main hall.

Those who frequented such establishments naturally saw their fair share of beauties. However, this woman before them was completely different.

Beneath her simple yet elegant brows were a pair of clear yet mysterious eyes. All those who saw them felt a powerful urge to cherish and protect the one they belonged to.

A faint smile graced her soft lips, which were tender and beautiful. They seemed to sparkle like the morning dew, giving off a unique charm that left one’s mouth dry.

As her tender gaze landed upon each one of them, it made each of them feel unique and special, as if her affections were reserved for them alone.

These thoughts swept across the minds of everyone in the Immortal Abode, from the aged elders to those who were barely of age, and their collective breathing began to hasten.

“Gulp~”

The sounds of saliva being swallowed came from everywhere in the Immortal Abode, and no one was sure who started it first.

All those who had been invited were respected figures in Brightmoon City. This sort of shameful act reflexively made their faces flush red, but no one seemed to think it inappropriate. On the contrary, this was a perfectly normal reaction to seeing such an exceptional beauty in the flesh.

What formidable charm! Observing from her second-floor private room, where the door was always shut, Pei Mianman clicked her tongue quietly. As a woman herself, she was skilled in this field as well, so she wasn't too affected.

She sneered as she took in the utterly captivated expressions of all the men present. “Nothing more than a group of dirty lechers.”

A thought struck her, and she turned her gaze in a certain direction. Surprisingly, she noticed that Zu An's eyes were still clear. Apparently, he wasn't as shameful as the others.

At least there's still something good in this fellow. The corners of Pei Mianman's lips curved upwards ever-so-slightly into a smile so enchanting that not even a flower-covered field could compare with it. It was just a pity that no one could see it.

If she'd had an inkling of what was going through Zu An's mind right at this moment, she might not have been so quick to praise him like this.

Zu An came from a different world, after all. He was used to seeing female celebrities on TV, and could swipe through the updates of countless beauties on TikTok. There was also the 2D world, which was full of perfect women who didn't really exist. After all this exposure, his concept of beauty naturally exceeded that of the men of this world by a fair margin.

Moreover, his wife was Brightmoon City's number one beauty. Even if this Qiu Honglei was pretty, there was no way she would be prettier than her.

There was also big sis empress, the gorgeous principal, Shang Liuyu, and many others. Any one of them was a match for her, and he was already close to all of them. He was already numb to all but the most exceptional beauties.

This woman's bearing and seductiveness made him subconsciously think of Pei Mianman. The two of them actually shared some traits, with one of them being more flirtatious, while the other's seductiveness carried a hint of innocence.

However, there was no denying that Pei Mianman's chest was far more developed than hers!

Zu An carefully sized up Qiu Honglei's chest. Even though it was majestic, it still lacked sauce.

If Pei Mianman had known what was inside his head, she would have been torn between laughing and punching him in the face.

On the surface, Qiu Honglei looked like she was looking at everyone, but in reality, half of her attention was on Zu An. When she saw how quickly his expression had cleared, she couldn't help but feel amazed.

After all, she had tremendous confidence in her own charm. Just look at everyone else's reactions!

As expected, this fellow is different. She reminded herself to be more careful when dealing with him in the future.

She was none other than the woman who had been observing Zu An with her senior from their private room. After getting changed, she had decided to come out to appease and distract the crowd, and defuse the life-and-death battle that was on the verge of taking place.

While she was still praising Zu An for being an upright gentleman, she suddenly noticed that his eyes were staring wantonly at her chest.

This fellow is really...

She was momentarily stumped. She had just been praising him a second ago, and yet, in a flash, she immediately regretted doing so.

Despite all the passionate stares that were trained on her, she was able to remain calm and composed, her heart not even fluttering once.

Yet, for some reason, this fellow's gaze seemed to pierce right through her, making her feel as if she wasn't wearing any clothes. She subconsciously pulled her clothes tighter around her body.

Her skills of seduction had long been practiced to perfection, and even an unintentional movement such as this worked to tug at the hearts of men, emphasizing the breathtaking nature of her graceful curves.

Her movements did not escape the eyes of the other men. Cries of alarm rang out from around the Immortal Abode.

Out of all of them, Wei Suo's performance was the most disappointing. His body trembled uncontrollably. He looked around guiltily, then heaved a huge sigh of relief when he realized that nobody had noticed.

Despite this, he still backed away slowly, withdrawing from the crowd while covering the front of his pants with his hands.

His heart weighed heavily with shame and regret. What was wrong with him these days? He had never imagined his body would be so weak! He decided that he was going to head to the local pharmacy to buy some six-flavored foxglove pills for supplementation.[1]

Instead of the jealousy shown by the rest of the crowd, Zu An was full of disdain. So many madams in those period dramas cover their faces with veils, but those veils are all thin to the point of being almost transparent. Why do they even bother?

Who would have thought that the girl in front of him would also use the same trick? That veil didn't cover shit!

Did she wear it just to add a hint of mystery and enticement?

You might as well just make your clothes a bit more transparent, then!

His disdainful expression didn't escape Qiu Honglei's eyes, which showed just a flash of irritation.

You have successfully trolled Qiu Honglei for 33 Rage points!

When he saw the Rage points, Zu An was stunned. What was going on? How did I end up provoking her? After all, the two of them didn't know each other at all! Furthermore, he was buried in a sea of people. Shouldn't it be hard for her to notice me even from where she's standing?

He looked up with a puzzled expression, but Qiu Honglei had already turned her gaze away.

"I have humbly prepared a song for everyone. I hope everyone can offer me your kind opinion."

As she said these words, the corners of her lips curved slightly upwards, forming a faintly discernible smile. Her voice was soft and velvety, carrying subtle undercurrents of nuance.

The same feeling arose in the hearts of everyone present. My soul truly belongs with this gorgeous woman!

Xie Daoyun couldn't help but sigh in admiration as well. "I've always thought highly of myself, but in terms of temperament and charm, she's completely out of my league."

Xie Xiu was quick to console her. "Big sister, you're going about it wrong. You are the glorious daughter of a city lord, and a well-known talent. No matter how pretty and charming she is, these are nothing more than cheap brothel tricks. How can she compare to you?"

He was not only someone who frequented such places of romance, but also a playboy who broke the hearts of countless women, and he'd seen through such tricks a long time ago. As such, he was also able to snap out of Qiu Honglei's bewitching charm.

Aside from Zu An, he was probably the most clear-headed man in the Immortal Abode.

Xie Daoyun's smooth, porcelain face became tinged with redness. "You oily-mouthed smooth-talker. So there are the skills you obtained by deceiving all those girls. No wonder all those distinguished young misses suffered so badly."

Xie Xiu immediately voiced his injustice. "Sis, I was trying to help you out!"

"Quiet! She's getting ready to play." Xie Daoyun made a shushing gesture, and then settled in to observe the performance attentively.

As a well-known talent in the arts, her skill at the zither was naturally flawless. Now that she was here to evaluate a performance that was within her specialty, her demeanor became more serious.

Her momentary sense of inferiority vanished without a trace, replaced by a glowing radiance which spread outward from her cheeks to the rest of her face.

Xie Xiu looked at her delicate features, and sighed deeply. "Truly, a great beauty. It really is a pity, too much of a pity."

Even though Xie Daoyun was seriously evaluating Qiu Honglei's zither skills, she was still distracted by her brother's words. "What is a pity?"

Xie Xiu winked and said with a crafty smile, "It's a pity that you are my dear older sister! Otherwise, why would I need to go looking for other girls?"

After saying this, he immediately leaped out of her reach. Sure enough, Xie Daoyun huffed in shame and annoyance. "You little brat, you even dare to tease me!"

She jumped up and began to chase him. When she caught him, she immediately twisted his ear.

"Sis, please have mercy~" While Xie Xiu was pleading, a melodious wave of music washed over them. Qiu Honglei already began to play.

Everyone pricked up their ears, paying special attention to the heavenly music. After all, it was rumored that Qiu Honglei would choose to meet someone personally that day, but no one knew what method she would use to choose her guest. That was why no one was willing to let any clues go. She might ask everyone for their opinions after she finished playing.

As the crowd was entranced by Qiu Honglei, the female brothel-keeper Hua Weimian made her way out from a corner of the hall and said to Chen Xuan, "It truly was inconsiderate of us not to have prepared an invitation for your distinguished self. Our Immortal Abode has specially prepared a feast for all of you to enjoy."

After finding out that he was a sixth rank expert, the Immortal Abode had quietly changed their mind about him.

After all, this was a world that revered strength above all else. Within the boundaries of Brightmoon City, someone at the sixth rank could already be considered a top-notch expert.

Such an expert was worth buttering up and being on good terms with.

No one around them was at all surprised by this. In fact, it was only natural. This was just how the world worked.

Chen Xuan frowned. He still wanted to settle his score with Zu An, but since Qiu Honglei had begun to play her zither, causing a further disturbance might incur the wrath of everyone here.

Moreover, he was also interested in this great beauty and wanted to listen carefully as she played, so that he could form a considered opinion when asked.

Not wanting to stir up further trouble, he nodded at the brothel-keeper. With a member of the Immortal Abode staff leading the way, they were brought to a table on the other side of the hall.

Hua Weimian sashayed over to Zu An and the others, apologizing profusely to Wang Yuanlong and Chu clan's brothers. She arranged a new spread of food for them, and assured them that their expenses for the day would be fully covered by the establishment.

With the offer of such generous treatment, there was no room for them to object. On top of this, they were worried they might miss out on Qiu Honglei's music. Chu Hongcai was already engrossed, straining to catch every nuance. How could he spare any attention for Sister Hua?

Zu An sighed. This Sister Hua really was a formidable woman. Her grasp of timing was impeccable.

She seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth just as they had been about to fight to the death. Yet, once Qiu Honglei began to play the guqin, she had immediately emerged to mediate things. A great crisis was quietly averted without any fuss.

Zu An kept his silence. This was the wisdom of survival, after all. There was nothing more to be said about it.

He let himself be drawn in by the music of the zither.

The music carried a special type of magical power. Even though there were no lyrics, the melodious sounds still managed to craft a poignant series of images in the mind.

A cool breeze brushing past,

The falling blossoms beautiful and diverse,

A man drinks alone by a lakeside pavilion,

Like an immortal exiled from heaven.

A lady's heart ripples, summoning courage as she steps forth,

The two face each other before the flowers and under the moon, paying their respects in love.

One day, the man leaves without a farewell.

The woman waits by the lakeside every day,

Only for the man to never return again.

After many years, the man comes in search of the woman, his face covered in wind and frost.

The woman is nowhere to be found,

Because she has long passed away.

Heartbroken and grieving, he drinks away his feelings by the lake,

Only to learn from the mouth of a fisherman:

There used to be a woman who sat here waiting for her man,

However, she didn't manage to wait until his return.

One day, as she held a jar of wine,

She sat by the lakeside, drinking and weeping.

When the people found her,

She had already drowned.

No one knew if she had lost her footing, or if she had chosen to die.

When he learned about all of this, the man wept silently.

...

As the mournful music washed over them, all the men who had come seeking pleasure began to weep.

Chapter 246: Where Is My Soulmate? On the Other End of the World

Pei Mianman, overcome with emotion, let out a long, shuddering sigh. "That woman actually has such a soft heart underneath her flirtatious exterior. No one would want to make an enemy out of someone like this..."

In the other private room, Xie Daoyun quietly dabbed at the corners of her eyes. As she looked at that fair and graceful figure behind the pearl curtains, she too sighed deeply. "If we speak purely on her technique at the zither, I might still be slightly above her. However, in terms of imbuing emotions into her playing and moving the soul with music, I am truly inferior."

Xie Xiu echoed his sister's admiration. "I've heard many courtesans play the zither before. In the past, I was always generally appreciative of their playing. Only now do I realize that, compared to her, the others aren't even worthy of carrying her shoes."

He pivoted the conversation smoothly towards consoling his sister. "But sis, you don't have to put yourself down for this. You've always lived an extravagant life. You've grown up in a warm and blessed environment, and your emotional experiences are like a blank canvas, so it's not shameful at all to be inferior to another in this aspect. She has experienced far more than you have in this place of romance. Although she still looks like a sweet and innocent young lady on the surface, her heart has surely been riddled with hurts."

His tone didn't carry the slightest bit of disdain, but was instead filled with praise. "Only someone with such deep wounds could bring out so much emotion through her playing."

Xie Daoyun gave his brother a considering look. She had not expected him to be so knowledgeable. Father was usually always cursing him for being irresponsible, but it seemed like his curses were uncalled for.

As the song ended, the audience was filled with frustrated disappointment. They were totally unaware that their faces were already drenched in tears.

"Excellent!"

Many in the audience immediately rose to their feet with applause and cheers. They were all trying to outdo one another, as if they were afraid that the goddess on stage would overlook them if they were too quiet.

Qiu Honglei also stood. Leaving her zither behind her, she gracefully walked over to the railing. As she approached, two pretty girls helped to pull aside the pearl curtains to allow her to pass through.

A beautiful face that could overturn the heavens appeared before everyone's eyes. She bowed slightly and said with a smile, "This humble girl Qiu Honglei greets everyone."

Only now, when she was standing by the edge of the railing, did everyone notice that her arms were barely covered in a layer of snowy silk. Her snow white arms, as smooth as jade, were faintly visible.

This woman really is good at using her physical assets. Pei Mianman could see through her tricks with a single look.

It was a pity that the men below weren't as sharp as her. When they saw this sight, their breathing immediately became ragged, and their mouths lost all moisture. If only they could drag Qiu Honglei into their embrace, tear apart her snowy silk dress and ravage her exquisite body...

Unfortunately, these would forever remain fantasies. With the whole world watching, who dared to court public anger and do such a barbaric thing?

Zu An sneered. Mister Lu Xun really was right after all.[1] The human mind's ability to make associations really was too rich. It could conjure up the image of the naked body just by seeing an arm. Clearly, it worked the same way no matter which world he was in.

Chen Xuan chose this moment to stand, boldly and confidently. "My lady, I am Xuan Cheng. It is an honor to meet you!"

He lived a blood-soaked life, and so he was much bolder than others, and had fewer misgivings. As he spoke, he assessed her in an unrestrained manner.

This face, this chest, this waist, that butt... even if you added up all of the girls I seized, they couldn't even compare to a single one of your toes!

I must obtain this woman! He continuously repeated this mantra to himself with conviction.

Qiu Honglei was unfazed by his provocative expression. She had long grown accustomed to the predatory male gaze.

A faint smile appeared on her face. She bowed slightly. "Well met, Sir Xuan."

Xuan Cheng laughed heartily. "I never thought the day would come when I would be called 'sir'! I am the type of person who usually hates this sissy way of addressing someone. If others addressed me so, I guarantee you that their heads would have been swiftly separated from their bodies. However, when I hear Lady Qiu addressing me so, it instead feels extremely arousing."

The others all glared at him, feeling offended.

However, at this critical moment, none of them could spare him any attention. They were all striving to be the first to strike up a conversation with Qiu Honglei and impress her.

"This humble one is Du Chunfeng, my family runs a fur business. It's an honor to meet Lady Qiu."

"This humble one is Zhao Dezhu, my father is the city's..."

Before he could finish, his voice was drowned out by another's.

"This humble one is Yuan Junhui. It is an honor, Lady Qiu."

"Hello Lady Qiu, my name is Wu Yun. My father is Wu Gang."

...

Introductions rose and fell in succession. Most didn't even have a chance to finish their sentence before they were interrupted by someone else. Everyone was trying to leave the deepest impression possible in the shortest amount of time.

Some even resorted to smashing teacups to attract Qiu Honglei's attention.

Unfortunately for them, she had served as a courtesan for so many years, and had already seen every trick in the book. A simple thing like that was not enough to faze her.

Besides, the place was too noisy. The sound of a teacup shattering was quickly covered by the endless introductions.

The young masters Wang Yuanlong and Chu Hongcai abandoned all vestiges of propriety. They crammed their way forward to introduce themselves, their faces red with the effort.

Even Chu Yucheng threw aside the bear girl he'd been glued to just a short while earlier, shoving his way forward while incoherently shouting his own introduction.

Zu An watched all of this with great disdain. Didn't he just say that he liked buff and well-developed women, and that he didn't care for the slim ones?

Even though Qiu Honglei's chest could be considered well-developed, she didn't have any fat to speak of. She would have been considered chubby if she'd had a bit more meat on her, or skinny if she had a little less.

Such a figure should definitely be considered a stick in Chu Yucheng's eyes.

And yet, who would have expected him to go completely mad for her?

In the end, aren't you all only concerned with her face?

Zu An really was looking down on them.

"Young master, why aren't you heading over to introduce yourself?" Leng Shuangyue asked curiously, blinking in puzzlement.

These girls knew that their job was to entertain their customers when they returned to their seats.

"What kind of introduction is this? It's basically putting on a monkey show!" Zu An snorted in contempt. "Look at that Qiu Honglei. She looks so cheerful and engaging, nodding towards all of these people, but she hasn't spared an ounce of interest for any of them.

"All of them said that they came to a brothel to pick a girl to have fun with. Why does it seem like the girl is the one doing the choosing instead?" Zu An's tone dripped with disdain. It wasn't that he had anything against Qiu Honglei. Rather, he couldn't stand the way these men were behaving, as if they had never seen a girl before.

All of you are really embarrassing our male gender! Even if she is pretty, there's no need for you guys to simp for her so much, is there? Look at me. Even though I am living off a woman, I have to do it resolutely! Can't all of you just learn a little from my example?!

Unable to read his thoughts, Leng Shuangyue merely assumed that he was dissatisfied with Qiu Honglei. She looked towards the second floor and explained quietly, "You know, it's not easy for Lady Qiu, either. Even though she doesn't care much about them, she will still have to remember everyone's names. It is really hard for girls here to do that."

Zu An stared blankly. He couldn't help but sigh in amazement. "It turns out becoming the queen of courtesans isn't something you can achieve with just looks..."

Leng Shuangyue nodded, clearly overcome with emotion. "Correct! Our trade never lacks pretty girls, but it's no mean feat to become the queen of courtesans! Especially for someone like young miss Qiu."

Zu An gave her a strange look. "Seems like you're quite close with this Qiu Honglei."

"We aren't that close," Leng Shuangyue hurriedly explained, "but all of us are in the same brothel, after all. With all of us so close to each other, there's always the chance to overhear some things."

"Oh." Zu An let the matter lie. "By the way, since all of you are from the same place, you should know quite a few things about her, right? Can you tell me some?"

"I don't actually know that much... What does young master want to know?" Leng Shuangyue sighed inwardly with relief. He didn't seem to want to continue badgering her about her physiology.

However, she was afraid that he might remember again, so she decided to attempt to distract him by answering any questions he had. As for the questions she couldn't answer, she would just claim not to know.

"The things I want to know, you definitely know." Zu An said with a chuckle. "Has she ever had a boyfriend before?"

"Boyfriend?" Leng Shuangyue blinked but did not immediately reply.

"You know, like a partner." Zu An explained.

Leng Shuangyue gave a startled cry. "Of course not! Everyone knows that Lady Qiu is perfectly pure. How could she have had a partner?" She waved her hands adamantly to punctuate her point.

Zu An still wasn't convinced. "Don't be scared, it's just the two of us here. There's no need to worry that you'll somehow harm her reputation."

Leng Shuangyue hurriedly said, "She really hasn't had one before! I can guarantee this with my life! Lady Qiu has never had any partners, and she has always remained a virgin..."

"Is that so?" Zu An's gaze drifted automatically to the beautiful figure on the second floor. This really was quite strange.

From her second-floor room, Pei Mianman observed the scene below her with undisguised contempt. Those fawning men were really putting up a shameful display.

Men were good for nothing but being the playthings of women.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she cast her gaze around for another figure.

She finally caught sight of Zu An, who was sitting leisurely, and not embarrassing himself like the others. She nodded in satisfaction.

You didn't end up disgracing Chuyan. You're not like all of these rotten and uncultured men.

However, just as she started to smile, she noticed Leng Shuangyue at his side, peeling grapes and feeding them to him one by one.

Zu An ate until his entire mouth was dripping with juices, yet he never forgot to tease the girl, messing with her until she squirmed in obvious discomfort.

Pei Mianman's smile immediately turned cold. "Men aren't good for anything after all!" she declared with a dismissive snort.

After enduring the mindless display, Qiu Honglei finally parted her red lips to speak. "Thank you everyone for all your love. However, I feel like my skill at the zither has reached a plateau recently, and I would love it if everyone could give me some pointers. Please help me see if there are any areas that can be improved."

As soon as she had begun speaking, the rowdy hall instantly became quiet. No one wanted to make her unhappy.

When they heard what she said, they began to get all jittery.

It's happening!

The consensus had been that Qiu Honglei would use her song as the means to choose the one she most admired. Sure enough, it was now starting!

"Lady Qiu must be joking! The song you played just now was truly sonorous and resonant, the notes lingering in the air perfectly. Your skill at the zither is clearly at its peak. How could there be anything beyond that?" one of the men, Zhao Dezu, piped up immediately. His introduction had been cut short earlier, and he was looking for a chance to redeem himself.

Idiot!

Everyone else immediately gave him the same damning assessment. Qiu Honglei was clearly trying to test everyone. What is your stupid bootlicking going to accomplish?

As expected, Qiu Honglei smiled faintly. "Young master is too generous with his praise. Unfortunately, I wish to hear some more concrete opinions to address my inadequacies."

After saying this, she turned to the others, her eyes filled with encouragement and expectation.

As her gaze moved to sweep across the private rooms above the main hall, she sneered inwardly.

Chapter 247: Messed Up

All her suitors exchanged dismayed stares when they saw Qiu Honglei's encouraging expression.

Her skills at the zither had clearly reached great heights. How could any of these laymen hope to say what she wanted to hear?

Even if some of them did know a thing or two about playing the zither, how could they ever compare to an expert like her?

If they made a rash guess and pointed out something by mistake, wouldn't they just make a fool of themselves?

That was why they all looked at each other, but not a single one of them was willing to take a risk. After all, there was only a single opportunity! They would lose their chance to get closer to their goddess if they couldn't satisfy her.

All of them wanted to listen first and scope things out.

When he saw their fear, Chen Xuan sneered. These young masters who lived like princes were all anxious and worried over nothing. They couldn't be considered real men at all.

The thing about women is that the more you flatter them and tend to them, the further away they will stay from you!

As such, he walked over casually. Thumping his chest, he said, "Lady Qiu, I do not know much about the details of playing an instrument, so I won't embarrass myself. However, in your music, I was able to hear the story of how a love was betrayed. I do not dare guarantee anything else, but if anyone dares to bully you in the future, I will immediately have my men cut him down, and I will make a wine cup out of his skull!"

His appearance was wild and strong to begin with, and his words served to further enhance his masculinity. His proud, manly figure clearly set him apart from the other sissies in the hall.

"In that case, this humble girl will truly have to offer my thanks to such a brave warrior." Qiu Honglei looked at him with her bewitching eyes. Her beautiful red lips parted slightly, and her eyes almost welled up with tears of gratitude.

Seeing how he had obtained Qiu Honglei's favor, the surrounding young masters were instantly regretful. Had they known that this would have been the result, they would have stepped out first.

The first man always left the deepest impression on a girl.

Having been embarrassed by Chen Xuan earlier, Wang Yuanlong was in a rush to redeem himself. He said in a rush, "Lady Qiu, I am but a humble young master of the Wang clan, and I do not possess many other skills. However, my clan's caravan routes extend far under the heavens, and so I still know a thing or two about the many different lands. If my lady has a need for anything, I am most willing to have my men help you. I am sure that they can swiftly find what you seek."

After a slight pause, he looked at Chen Xuan and continued, "After all, no matter how formidable a single person is, their energy is still limited in the end. How could it possibly compare to the power of a clan?"

He knew where his strengths lay. Even though his cultivation was far inferior to that of Chen Xuan, he was still the Wang clan's only son. Where wealth was concerned, this barbarian wasn't even worthy of wiping the dirt off his shoes.

Chen Xuan naturally knew what he was referring to. With a sneer, he said, "Just another piece of trash who depends on his family. Not even your words are original."

He was clearly implying that Wang Yuanlong was imitating his style.

“What did you say?!” Wang Yuanlong became furious.

“Hm? Could it be that you want to fight? Come on then!” Chen Xuan also stood up, favoring the young man with a sinister smile.

Wang Yuanlong’s expression turned sickly. They hadn’t even won when it was three-against-one earlier, and he himself had been left half-dead from a single kick. How could he possibly dare to fight with this person again?

However, there was no way he would admit that he was scared when such a beauty was present. He froze, unsure of what to do.

Fortunately, Qiu Honglei helped him out of his predicament. “Sirs, please do not be like this. If the mood was ruined because of me, that would truly be an irredeemable sin.”

As Qiu Honglei blamed herself, tears about to fill her eyes, the sound of countless hearts shattering echoed across the hall. Everyone turned to glare furiously at the two miscreants.

How dare they hurt Lady Qiu’s feelings?!

Setting Wang Yuanlong aside, even Chen Xuan, someone who was used to licking the blood off his blade, grew flustered. He hurriedly apologized and promised not to cause any more trouble.

With that, Qiu Honglei beamed. Her smile radiated with the warmth of spring that melted away ice and snow and heralded the blooming of a field of flowers. The hearts of all the men thumped wildly. They knew that they would never be able to forget this smile.

Pei Mianman couldn’t help but sigh. “She really is a great beauty... it is hard even for a girl to resist her charms.”

After a momentary silence, the hall quickly grew lively again. All the suitors seemed to regain their confidence, as if they had been given new life by that smile.

Chen Xuan and Wang Yuanlong had blazed a trail for them, and now all of them began to speak up, giving comments on Qiu Honglei’s earlier playing.

For the sake of winning her favor, all of them began giving it their all.

Some of them flexed their literary prowess, praising her performance as if nothing in the heavens above or earth below could compare, and only occasionally sprinkling in one or two comments on her so-called ‘flaws’. As he listened to their rambling, Zu An grew more and more stupefied. He never expected this world to have this many graceful and elegant adjectives.

Some of them flaunted their family backgrounds. Zu An was surprised at how many of them were scions of wealthy merchant clans in Brightmoon City. At the very least, he now had a better idea of how this world was structured.

Some displayed their strength and potential, and there were even some fifth rank academy students in the mix. However, with a sixth rank cultivator present, they only paled in comparison.

...

Zu An continued to watch as the show unfolded, idly chewing on some melon seeds. Only then did he remember that he was actually a teacher at the academy.

Hmph, I'll remember that student. He didn't even greet me when he saw me! I'm going to fail him in my next class.

Qiu Honglei responded to each one of her suitors with a sweet and engaged smile, making them feel as if they were wrapped in a warm spring breeze.

Zu An felt endless admiration for her. This woman's communication skills really were top-notch.

But why hadn't that crazy fan Chu Hongcai said anything yet?

While he was still trying to puzzle it out, he noticed Chu Yucheng bringing Chu Hongcai to the front to see their goddess up close. They got so close, in fact, that they even managed to catch a whiff of her fragrance.

Chu Hongcai almost fainted.

Fortunately, he still remembered what he had come for, and asked hurriedly, "I wonder who Lady Qiu pictured while playing that song. Who could have had the fortune of obtaining Lady Qiu's favor?"

Noticing that he was the young master of the Chu clan's second branch, Qiu Honglei scanned the area around him, but didn't see the one she was looking for.

Letting her gaze roam further, she noticed that Zu An was talking and laughing with Leng Shuangyue at one side of the hall, completely unconcerned with what was going on.

She was bewildered.

Have I not revealed enough of myself? Or are his standards just too high?

You have successfully trolled Qiu Honglei for 128 Rage points!

The influx of Rage points left Zu An startled. The previous time might have been an accident, but for it to happen twice in succession can't possibly be a coincidence, can it?

Why did this girl keep targeting him?

Could it be...

That I am too handsome, and she can't help but drool over my suave face?

By the time she looked at Chu Hongcai again, Qiu Honglei's expression had long since returned to normal. She said with a smile, "I'm afraid the Chu clan's second young master has misunderstood. I do not have a lover. The song I shared just now was an interpretation of a folk story."

Despite it being known that Qiu Honglei was pure and unblemished, many of her suitors still secretly harbored fears. When they heard her say that she didn't have any lovers herself, there was a collective sigh of relief.

This was how men were. They would be able to brush it off if they couldn't obtain something themselves. However, if someone else obtained that very thing, there was no way they could handle it.

“No wonder!” Chu Hongcai exclaimed, like someone who had suddenly seen the light.

Those around him became impatient. “Are you done yet? Everyone else is waiting!”

“Exactly! What are you playing at!”

Chen Xuan also muttered, “If you have a fart, then release it. Why are you beating around the bush?”

Chu Hongcai’s breath caught momentarily. A hint of anger flashed across his face.

Qiu Honglei didn’t seem to have heard any of this. A curious expression appeared on her face, and she asked, “Why did you say ‘no wonder’?”

A smile spread across Chu Hongcai’s face. Only then did he reply, “No wonder I caught some disharmony as I was listening to Lady Qiu’s song earlier. I was sure that it was because of Lady Qiu’s tender age. Without personally experiencing such an unforgettable love, there wasn’t a way for you to truly reproduce such a soul-wrenching feeling.

“With Lady Qiu’s brilliant skill at the zither, I was worried I might be spouting nonsense, just like those academic critics who constantly nitpick the works of others, fussing over nothing.”

Many of the suitors around him nodded inwardly. This fella was indeed quite clever, playing his cards in this manner.

In reality, everyone could understand this reasoning. Even though Qiu Honglei was a courtesan who made endless connections, she had never taken it further with another man.

Since she had no experience with true romance, she could only rely on her imagination to portray these emotions that only existed for her as literature. As such, they couldn’t be considered real emotions.

However, her performance had really been too moving, so no one had pursued such a thought. Even if some did, they felt like voicing this out would be disrespectful, so they didn’t dare to say it.

Chu Hongcai’s breathing became ragged. He had been preparing for this moment for a long time.

All of this was for the sake of leaving behind a deeper impression on his goddess.

The flattery that some of the others resorted to was certain to fail. Those who flattered while trying to point out some make-believe flaws were even more unacceptable.

Only he himself, who pointed out an issue that really existed, might truly obtain her favor.

As expected, Qiu Honglei’s expression did indeed change. After a long pause, she let out a long sigh. “I had hoped that the second young master of the Chu clan would have some penetrating insight. However, it seems like you weren’t able to understand my playing at all.”

Seeing Qiu Honglei’s disappointment, the suitors around him—who had initially been full of regret—were overjoyed, and began roasting him.

“Exactly! Why don’t you take a moment to think about who Lady Qiu is? Of course she can put in true emotions when playing!”

"Instead of being a decent person, you just had to try a dirty trick like this! You're definitely getting what you deserve!"

"Who does this fellow think he is? How dare he criticize Lady Qiu like this?!"

...

Chu Hongcai couldn't care less about the others hitting him while he was down. Right now, Qiu Honglei's disdainful expression was the only thing that filled his mind.

After all, no matter how coarse and boorish the others acted, she had always maintained a pleasant countenance. He was the only one she had treated with absolute ruthlessness.

I'm finished, I'm done for...

These words echoed throughout his mind as his soul slowly left his body. He could see Chu Yucheng moving his mouth, but he couldn't hear anything.

Zu An was surprised by this unexpected development. Even though Chu Hongcai's words had been a little too direct, they were still reasonable. Qiu Honglei had served as a courtesan for so many years, so there was no reason why she would lose her composure just like that.

"Little catgirl, why would lady Qiu get so upset?" Zu An asked the young lady next to him curiously, subconsciously rubbing her ears.

Leng Shuangyue's face immediately reddened. "I... really... don't know... ah..."

Zu An was brushing her ears with more force than before, causing the cat girl's entire body to tremble continuously. She hurriedly stammered, "Maybe... maybe it has something to do with that matter..."

As Zu An listened to her explanation, a sudden revelation came to him.

Qiu Honglei's gaze had already moved towards the second floor. "Young master Xie arrived a while ago, and yet he still hasn't said anything. I wish to hear the opinion of young master Xie."

Chen Xuan was stunned. "Young master Xie? Which young master Xie?"

"How many young master Xies does Brightmoon City have? Of course she's referring to Xie Xiu!" Someone near him sneered. What a bumpkin. He was completely led by the nose, and he still has no idea!

Chen Xuan immediately erupted in fury. He glared at Zu An. "Damn brat, you had the nerve to mess with me earlier!"

Chapter 248: Do You Know Who I Am?

"So what if I messed with you? Are you going to bite me?" Zu An sat leisurely in his seat with an arm hooked around Leng Shuangyue, completely unfazed.

Chen Xuan immediately became furious. His blade left his scabbard with a clean, sharp sound. His expression was treacherous, already seething with killing intent.

You have successfully trolled Chen Xuan for 444 Rage points!

In his heart, Chu Yucheng gave Zu An a thumbs-up. This guy really was nasty. In the past, he had always thought that he was some useless drafted son-in-law. He'd never expected him to actually be such a fierce person!

But that's what I like to see!

Knowing just how powerless they had been before that red-haired man, he fervently wished for that bastard's face to be covered in as much dirt and grime as possible.

He tried to drag Chu Hongcai over, out of worry that Chen Xuan would erupt in violence.

Unfortunately, Chu Hongcai was still in a daze. He had shut himself completely off from the outside world, so Chu Yucheng was left to back Zu An up alone.

After some hesitation, Wang Yuanlong stepped forward as well.

Zu An was somewhat surprised. He hadn't expected these silver-spooned fellows to be this loyal when it really mattered.

Chen Xuan sneered. "Do you think you're all that just because there are more people with you now?"

As one, his subordinates all rose to their feet, and his side instantly gained the numerical advantage.

Seeing that conflict was about to break out, Qiu Honglei spoke up once more. "I hope that everyone can indulge me this once. Could you all please not cause a disturbance in the Immortal Abode?"

Even the coldest of hearts would melt at her sweet, pleading voice.

Chen Xuan resentfully returned the blade to the sheath. "I'll leave you with your life for now, out of respect for Lady Qiu. We'll settle things once we are outside the Immortal Abode."

Zu An immediately raised his voice. "How dare you claim to have things to settle with me? Do you know who I am?"

Chen Xuan was stunned at Zu An's utter lack of remorse. Instead, that fellow had gotten even more cocky! Don't tell me this fellow really is the heir of some bigshot?

"And who exactly might you be?"

When he heard these words, Zu An chuckled. "It's better if you don't know who I am. That way, you can't find me once we leave the Immortal Abode."

There was a moment of stunned silence, then the whole place erupted with laughter. This guy really was witty.

Chen Xuan was speechless.

You have successfully trolled Chen Xuan for 666 Rage points!

He had been played by this guy over and over again today. How can he possibly endure this? He grabbed his blade and charged at Zu An.

Qiu Honglei hurriedly interposed herself between the two men. She turned a lovely, pitiful expression on Chen Xuan. "Big brother Xuan, you promised me just now!"

She blinked sweetly at him with her large, tearful eyes. Chen Xuan swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. This really is quite the woman. I definitely have to bring her back with me, so that she can take good care of me.

His anger was thus replaced by a deep, yearning desire, and he forgot all about settling his score with Zu An.

He sat back down, a big smile on his face.

"Thank you so much big brother Xuan~" Qiu Honglei smiled. She glanced at Zu An. What was he going to do if I hadn't stepped in?

In his second-floor room, Xie Xiu sighed. "What a pity! That would have been the perfect chance to gauge Zu An's strength. Why did Qiu Honglei have to interfere?"

Next to him, Xie Daoyun remarked, "No matter how formidable he is, he is definitely no match for a sixth rank expert, right?"

"That may not be true." Xie Xiu told her about what had transpired in the mountain behind Brightmoon city, where Zu An had defeated Shi Kun with a single blow of his sword. "This guy's strength is completely unpredictable. I really am curious as to just how strong he really is."

He wasn't the only one who sighed in pity. In her own room, Pei Mianman gently blew out the black flame hovering above her hand. "There's no way that fella will cause trouble without any confidence." Her tone became indignant. "What am I getting all worked up for? He's not even my husband, hmph~"

Qiu Honglei raised her head to gaze towards the second floor. "Young master Xie, you still haven't answered my question... Could it be that young master truly feels my performance was so discordant?"

Xie Xiu appeared by his windowsill, using his body to hide his older sister. He said with a smile, "Lady Qiu must be joking. I was so stunned by your beautiful melody that I fell into a trance! That's why I was unable to reply to the lady's question."

Qiu Honglei laughed while covering her mouth. "It has always been said that countless girls see young master Xiu as their ideal partner. Indeed, your words are just too sweet."

"I was only speaking the truth." In contrast to those crazy men below, Xie Xiu stood casually by the window, his eyes still clear, making him stand out from the rest.

Seeing how the two of them carried on in such a pleasant manner—one, a perfectly beautiful woman, and the other, a stunningly handsome man—the rest of the men in the hall grudgingly conceded that the two of them looked a perfect match.

However, this concession left a sour taste in their mouths, and remembering Xie Xiu's background only served to lower their spirits further. Few would even consider themselves worthy competition.

Chen Xuan was one who had no such misgivings. His heart burned as he saw this girl, whom he already considered his own exclusive property, conversing so intimately with another man.

Furthermore, this Xie Xiu knew that someone else had impersonated him, and yet he hadn't said anything, which allowed for Chen Xuan's embarrassing moment earlier.

These grievances piled up one after another, and he finally couldn't hold back his anger. "Young master Xie, Lady Qiu wanted you to contribute some constructive criticism. Why are you wasting so much time with all this boot-licking?"

Now that someone had taken the lead, everyone else began to echo in agreement. Everyone came to a brothel to see girls. In such a place as this, all men viewed themselves as equal, no matter their social standing. Besides, this Brightmoon City didn't belong to the Xie clan. Many of the men brazenly called Xie Xiu out, their courage fueled by the alcohol that they had consumed.

Xie Xiu remained completely unperturbed by their baseless accusations. He continued, "As for Lady Qiu's performance, there was indeed a slight flaw."

At those words, a displeased chorus of hisses came from around the hall. Here was another idiot, offering up more vulgar claptrap.

Chu Hongcai had just embarrassed himself earlier, and now this idiot was following in his footsteps.

Qiu Honglei's smile stiffened as well. "Oh? I'd love to hear more."

Even though she asked everyone to voice any criticisms they had, she was more than confident in her own skills. She didn't believe that there were any real complaints to bring up.

The constant stream of praise that had been showered upon her by her other adoring fans had also subconsciously inflated her ego. As such, his comments left her feeling slightly resentful.

At her invitation, Xie Xiu continued, "Young miss Qiu's melody truly moved me to tears. Your ability to imbue emotions in your playing is truly magnificent. In this respect, there really isn't anything to pick at."

Chu Hongcai's face paled upon hearing this. He now understood what his greatest mistake was.

It was common knowledge that Xie Xiu was the foremost practitioner when it came to the art of picking up girls, even though his cultivation wasn't anything to write home about. His words confirmed that Qiu Honglei's performance had been full of emotion.

No wonder my words had only angered her. Sigh, I shouldn't have tried to come on so strongly, or made such a risky comment.

As he chastised himself, Xie Xiu continued, "Lady Qiu has already reached perfection in the art of imbuing emotions. However, there are some slight flaws in your technique.

"Towards the end of your song—perhaps because you were too focused and caught up in the emotions of it all—the 'zheng' note was held slightly longer, while the 'yu' note was played slightly too early. This created a slight disharmony in the music."

The 'zheng' note was equivalent to the 'F' note in the modern world's understanding of music. The 'yu' note was equivalent to the 'A' note, which was a higher pitch than the 'zheng' note. This note excelled in expressing anger and other intense emotions.

Qiu Honglei was stunned. She closed her eyes and replayed her own performance in her mind. Only after a long time did she open her eyes again.

“There is a saying among the courtesans of Brightmoon City: ‘a mistake in the song results in endless gratitude for the consideration of our guests’. Today, I’ve finally increased my knowledge.

“Thank you, young master Xie, for your pointers. Otherwise, I would have been left self-satisfied, yet unaware of my own shortcomings.” Qiu Honglei offered him a deep bow.

Xie Xiu hurriedly returned her show of respect. “Young miss Qiu is too hard on herself.”

As he bowed, his heart secretly burned with shame. Even though he did dabble in the zither, he only knew just enough to deceive other girls. His skills paled in comparison to those of a true master like Qiu Honglei. There was no way he could have picked up this slight flaw.

He had only been repeating what his big sister Xie Daoyun had told him.

Qiu Honglei’s high praise drove everyone mad with jealousy, which in turn served to inflate Xie Xiu’s ego. Now that he had earned her full respect, he wondered if he would be the one chosen.

Xie Daoyun’s voice came quietly from behind him, interrupting his musings. “Don’t forget what you promised. You have to bring me with you when you’re invited.”

Xie Xiu immediately felt his head begin to ache. Why in the world did I bring my big sister to a brothel? I’m probably the first one to do something this stupid!

Qiu Honglei’s gaze began to roam the hall, sweeping across those gathered there.

All the men instantly stood straighter, puffing out their chests, hoping that they might receive the similar sort of attention as Xie Xiu.

However, there was nothing left to say that hadn’t already been said. No one had any confidence in giving any better critique.

Seems like that bastard Xie Xiu is the one getting lucky tonight.

The atmosphere in the hall began to sour.

Unexpectedly, Qiu Honglei suddenly said, “I heard that distinguished young master Zu of the Chu clan has also arrived. I wonder where he is right now?”

When they heard her words, everyone’s eyes instantly turned to Zu An. The grape that Leng Shuangyue had just fed him dropped out of his mouth.

“What is this woman playing at?” In her room on the second floor, a dangerous glint flickered across Pei Mianman’s peach-blossom eyes. Her heart mysteriously grew suspicious.

All who were present shared her puzzlement. After all, there were plenty of men who stood higher than Zu An.

Put nicely, he was the young master of the Chu clan.

Put bluntly, he was nothing more than a lowly Chu-clan leech.

Why didn't Qiu Honglei, the crown jewel of the Immortal Abode, bat an eye towards any of them, yet suddenly chose to pay such special attention to him?

Zu An's brow furrowed as he felt the heat of the guests' collective glares. He knew that this woman already recognized him, given the Rage points he'd received, and yet she insisted on pretending that she didn't.

This is really strange!

"You are Zu An?"

Before he could even say anything, there was the sound of gnashing teeth.

You have successfully trolled Chen Xuan for 1024 Rage points!

Zu An was completely shocked as he turned to look at the now-fuming Chen Xuan. Those who provided him with 1024 Rage points in one go were usually those who wanted him dead.

Did I accidentally kill this guy's dad or sleep with his wife or something?

Why in the world are you reacting like this for?

Zu An sighed. "I already tried to keep a low profile so as not to steal anyone's thunder. I left you all to do your thing, but I still somehow ended up becoming the star. Someone as outstanding as me really can't avoid attention no matter where I go..."

Chapter 249: Moving the Plan Forward

Qiu Honglei stared at him, speechless.

So were Pei Mianman and Xie Daoyun, watching from the second floor.

This guy really needs a good ass-whooping!

The same thought popped into everyone's mind simultaneously.

You have successfully trolled the onlookers for 66... 66... 66...

A cool, refreshing feeling swept over Zu An's entire body at the influx of Rage points. It seems like remaining low-profile really doesn't suit me! Being placed in the limelight is still the fastest way to earn Rage points.

You have successfully trolled Chen Xuan for 99... 99... 99...

Zu An gave him a surprised look. From the way he was receiving Rage points, he fully expected this fellow to come charging right at him. And yet, that was somehow not the case.

Qiu Honglei clearly shared his worry. She moved slightly, placing herself between the two of them as if unintentionally. "It turns out young master Zu was here all along," she said with a sweet and cheerful smile.

As she came close, Zu An immediately smelled a natural, delicate fragrance like that of an orchid. She was already extremely beautiful from afar, and her charm up close was even more fatal.

Thank heaven I've already seen my fair share of beauties!

Zu An secretly counted his blessings. If he hadn't spent so much time with Chu Chuyan, his resistance towards physical beauty might not be as high, and he would have probably made a fool of himself here.

Zu An put these thoughts aside and met her gaze directly. "If I am not mistaken, this should be our first meeting. Why would you suddenly ask about me in such a manner?" he said with a smile.

Qiu Honglei couldn't help but feel slightly startled. After all, when other men interacted with her at such a distance, most of them couldn't keep their eyes from flickering all about, while others would stare blankly at her with eyes overflowing with desire. Eyes that maintained their clarity as they stared straight into hers were truly rare.

She quickly put aside her surprise, saying with a gentle voice, "Even though I've never met this young master before, I have long considered you a friend in spirit. I heard that young master found an exceptional treasure, the 'Evanescent Lotus', in the dungeon, whose petals alone could raise one's cultivation by a step. However, young master resisted such great temptation and fed it to his wife without any hesitation.

"Young master's love for his wife is enough to move the hearts of all women in this world. The proverbs are indeed true. Priceless treasures are easy to obtain, but true love is scarce. Young miss Chu is truly blessed."

"Pah!" Pei Mianman spat viciously. What a cunning vixen. My dear Chuyan, my dear Chuyan, if you don't treat your husband right, he is going to get snatched away...

When they heard Qiu Honglei use the words 'friend in spirit', a commotion immediately broke out among the surrounding men.

The news about the Evanescence Lotus only heightened their cries of alarm.

So far, news of this matter had only been circulated within a small circle in the higher levels of society. Now that it was known, almost everyone secretly sighed inside. This fella really goes all-in for women.

A small group silently mocked his stupidity. After all, the gap between him and young miss Chu was already so great. If Chu Chuyan's strength rose further, that gap would only grow.

It was common knowledge that a marriage with too wide a gap was bound to fail.

Regardless of what they thought of the relationship between Zu An and Chu Chuyan, none of them could stomach the sight of Qiu Honglei looking at Zu An with such sparkling eyes. Their jealousy and anger immediately skyrocketed.

Watching this influx of Rage points, Zu An was convinced that this woman was doing this on purpose. Wasn't she basically throwing him onto a rack to be roasted?!

Sucks for you, I am different from everyone else. The more people hate me, the happier I become!

“But of course! I’ve always treated women well. If Lady Qiu is envious of my Chuyan, you can consider being sisters with her. If I find another Evanescent Lotus, then I’ll give it to you.” Zu An said with a big smile.

“This little bastard is too shameless.” Xie Daoyun couldn’t hold back her criticism.

Is it so easy to find an Evanescent Lotus? Are you really trying to bag a beautiful concubine with just these empty promises?

Also, aren’t you merely a drafted son-in-law of the Chu clan? Do you really have the nerve to walk up to them and ask for a concubine just like that?

Her thoughts mirrored those of countless others in the hall. If glares could kill, Zu An would have died a hundred times over by now.

“This humble girl doesn’t dare compete against first miss Chu.” Qiu Honglei’s face flushed slightly. Other men always spoke to her using the most graceful words, out of fear of leaving a bad impression. She had never seen someone as direct as him, actually asking her to be his concubine!

Zu An shrugged in an unconcerned manner. “Don’t worry, she’s told me before that she doesn’t care if I look for other women.”

Pei Mianman almost choked.

Xie Daoyun whipped her head around, giving her younger brother a look of disbelief. “Did young miss Chu really say that?”

Xie Xiu said with a bitter smile, “Who knows if young miss Chu really said it or not? But he has said this more than once, and young miss Chu has never shown any reaction. The relationship between those two might not be what we suspect.”

“Just what kind of person is young miss Chu? How could she possibly allow him to take concubines?” Xie Daoyun’s face was full of disbelief. At the same time, she found herself more and more curious about the man below.

Just what was going on?

The other men in the hall weren’t as kind. Curses rained down on Zu An from all sides.

“You are just a drafted son-in-law! Why are you acting all smug?”

“I really don’t know what your ancestors did to make a goddess like young miss Chu choose you! And yet, you are still looking for other women?!”

“Exactly! You actually have the nerve to set your sights on Lady Qiu? Absolutely absurd!”

...

Even Wang Yuanlong quietly prodded Chu Yucheng. “Did your first miss really say this?”

Chu Yucheng said with a bitter smile, “I really don’t know either... But knowing our first miss’ nature, there should be no way she would allow such a thing.”

Chu Hongcai recovered from his previous daze just in time to give Zu An a look of shock. This guy really has guts! Is he not scared that the first miss would find out? Even if the first miss doesn't intervene, Master and Madam definitely won't hold their peace.

However, since they were all standing on the same side for now, it wasn't appropriate for the two brothers to openly criticize Zu An. They discreetly shifted a few steps away to avoid getting caught in the stream of hate.

No one was more excited than Wei Suo. "All of you should know that this boss is my desk-mate! Half of our school's top ten beauties have already been subdued by him! Compared to that, picking up Qiu Honglei would be nothing much!"

He began to recount Zu An's 'lady-killer' legends in a vivid and colorful manner. Everyone around him was completely stunned.

To mooch off of women to such a degree... isn't he already in a class of his own?

Wei Suo felt as if he were basking in his own glory as he saw more and more expressions of shock. The excitement in his voice grew exponentially.

...

Zu An remained nonchalant as the rest of the crowd grew more furious with each new tale they heard. He quietly watched his Rage points build up.

Curse me all you want! The more fiercely you curse, the more Rage points I get!

Qiu Honglei's smile had frozen on her face. Her usual grace seemed to abandon her, and she was momentarily at a loss as to how to respond to this situation. It took her a while to gather herself, and she finally flashed an embarrassed smile. "The reason I invited everyone today was to listen to some critique for my music. Let's leave other matters for a different time."

Her beautiful brows curved gently as she spoke. The corners of her lips spread slightly upwards, and her eyes swirled with enchanting ripples.

Everyone watching her instantly felt their hearts melt, and they began to speak on top of one another, echoing the same thoughts.

"Exactly! If you don't know anything about music, let someone else speak, and listen humbly to their wise opinions."

"Lady Qiu, you shouldn't waste any more time on someone like this."

...

Despite what was going on, there was one thing that many people remained curious about. Hadn't that red-haired man been after his life? Why did he suddenly go quiet after hearing his name?

It seems like the name of the Chu clan really has sparked some reservations in him.

Hmph, just another loudmouth with a coward's heart.

With the crowd distracted, Chen Xuan had called over all of his subordinates. “Do all of you understand what I just said?”

“We understand!” Those subordinates responded excitedly.

All of them were notorious bandits who were used to living freely, taking whatever and whoever they wanted. Being in this city, bound by its endless rules, had left them feeling suffocated. The rewards they would gain by completing this task would be enough for them to enjoy themselves for years to come.

“If you understand then go, do what you need to do.” With a wave of his hand, Chen Xuan dismissed his subordinates, who immediately dispersed.

He stared at Zu An from a distance away, a malicious glint in his eyes. A nasty grin spread across his face. Luck really is more important than effort. I spent so much effort looking all over for you, and yet you’ve ended up right in front of me. Little brother, I will get revenge for you today.

This man was brothers with Mei Chaofeng! A few years ago, they had been dispatched quietly to Brightmoon City by the Shi clan. One established an underground business in Brightmoon City, while the other established himself as a vicious bandit chief outside the city, killing and plundering the caravans that passed by.

Over the years, the two brothers had generated a sea of wealth for the Shi clan. In recognition of their services, the Shi clan reduced the cut of the profits it was taking from them by half, as a reward for their contributions.

Reducing the Shi clan’s cut by half may have seemed small percentage-wise, but the wealth that passed through their hands was astronomical. In real terms, this small reduction was already a huge amount.

The two brothers were just about to reach the pinnacle of their lives, only for Zu An to suddenly appear.

The younger brother’s successful casino was left in tatters, and the Plum Blossom Sect fell apart soon afterwards.

Worst of all, Mei Chaofeng had actually been killed!

The two brothers were orphans who had depended on each other for survival, and so their relationship was far closer than that of ordinary blood brothers. When he’d heard about his brother’s death, his first reaction had been to avenge him.

Unfortunately, given her status and cultivation, Jiang Luofu wasn’t someone he could afford to provoke.

And so, he had to settle for making Zu An the target of his anger instead. After all, all of this was that little bastard’s fault.

When Shi Kun had come to Brightmoon City, he had agreed to help Chen Xuan get rid of Zu An, and so he had bided his time.

Who would have expected that, not long after the dungeon closed, Shi Kun would suddenly leave without a word?

With Shi Lezhi's death, and the possibility of a ninth rank expert at Zu An's side, Shi Kun had returned to the capital with his tail between his legs. Obviously, he hadn't disclosed this publicly, to prevent embarrassing himself.

Chen Xuan wasn't privy to this information. He had decided that his brother's standing was deemed too low to those higher up, and his death mattered little to them.

Since Shi Kun wouldn't help him, he had to take care of the deed himself.

He had always acted viciously and decisively. All those who had seen his real face had been silenced. As such, he had no qualms entering the city so openly.

His original plan had been to let his subordinates relax at this Courtesan's Meeting, before heading to the Chu Estate to carry out their revenge. Who knew that his luck would be so good, and that he would find this fellow right here?

As such, he decisively moved his plans forward. This guy can laugh all he wants now. He'll definitely pay for it later.

You have successfully trolled Chen Xuan for 631 Rage points!

Zu An noticed another chunk of Rage points drop in. Zu An gave Chen Xuan a look out of the corners of his eyes, and a pensive expression appeared on his face.

Sensing his sudden quietness, Qiu Honglei looked at him with a hurt expression. "Could it be that my performance was so poor that young master Zu has nothing to say at all?"

Chapter 250 - Why Don't You Do it, Then?

Qiu Honglei's hurt expression made all of the men in the hall glare furiously at Zu An. This little bastard actually dared to hurt young miss Qiu!

You have successfully trolled the onlookers for 44... 44... 44...

Zu An was overjoyed!

This visit to the Immortal Abode has really been worth my while! These adorable perverts have gifted me so many Rage points... I'll have to properly tally them all up later.

Sigh, it seems like my previous suspicions were right on. Trying to earn Rage points alone really is too slow, but with a pretty girl at my side, it's just too easy.

Even now, he still cherished that night he'd taken Chu Chuyan out for a stroll. Wherever he'd gone that night, Rage points had been quick to follow.

It really was a pity that Chu Chuyan's skin was so thin. After going out with him once, she had never agreed to go for a walk again.

But now, wasn't Qiu Honglei an excellent candidate for this? With her background, showing herself in public wasn't a big deal at all. Pair this with her bewitching charm, and the results might be even better than what he could achieve in the company of Chu Chuyan.

Buoyed by this thought, he began to consider his reply. Taking advantage of the situation before him, he began, "Young miss' skills at the zither have already been talked about enough just now..."

"Tsk!"

The sound of tongues clicking echoed around the hall.

Qiu Honglei's eyes tinged with disappointment. I've already decided to help you out, but you have to at least put in some effort!

Otherwise, how could we possibly convince everyone here?

After carefully taking note of everyone's reactions, Zu An continued casually, "Though, in my opinion, not a single one of them has commented on the most important point."

At his words, the hall erupted in an uproar. After all, not everyone here was unlearned and ignorant—there were some genuine talents here who had a clear understanding of the zither, and their comments on Qiu Honglei's playing were thoroughly appropriate.

Among them, there was even a great talent like Xie Xiu. Don't tell me that he didn't pick up on this important point, yet you somehow did?

Xie Daoyun shook her fist at him from the second floor. "What is this guy playing at? Don't tell me even someone like him understands the zither?"

While the rest of the crowd believed that Xie Xiu had provided his own evaluation earlier, the truth was that he had only borrowed his sister's expert analysis, which had been formed after her careful listening. And yet, Zu An still felt like her commentary had missed the most important point?

She had enjoyed the arts since she was a child, and her achievements in this field were quite profound. As a proud and established member in her area of expertise, Zu An's words truly rubbed her the wrong way.

To his sister's question, Xie Xiu shook his head. "I don't think he knows much about the zither."

Xie Daoyun scoffed. "It seems like he's no different from the other fellow, deliberately sharing a provocative opinion. He is just teasing that girl, and then he'll move on after."

You have successfully trolled Xie Daoyun for 233 Rage points!

She couldn't even be bothered to remember Chu Hongcai's name. As the daughter of the city lord, she never paid much attention to the affairs of the world, let alone the name of the child of a concubine.

Zu An looked towards the second floor in surprise. So, Xie Xiu's older sister is upstairs too! Didn't that guy say he was gonna introduce me to her? Where is the follow-up on that?

"Why does young master Zu say such a thing?" Despite her slight disappointment, Qiu Honglei still did her best to give Zu An another chance, to see if he could turn things around.

Zu An continued from where he left off. "There are no issues with this young lady's skills at the zither, and the blending of emotions into the notes was also exquisite. However, I couldn't help but notice two flaws."

The crowd was so incensed that they began to laugh instead. This little shit was getting too cocky!

Xie Daoyun knit her brows together in a frown. Even with all of her knowledge regarding the zither, she had barely managed to pick out a single problem, and that problem couldn't even be considered a big one. However, this brat actually dared to claim that her playing had major flaws, and two of them at that?

Pei Mianman put her face in her palm, clearly embarrassed for his sake. It was a good thing Chuyan wasn't here. With her personality, she might have immediately dug a hole and jumped into it.

"Is that so? Then I must ask young master Zu for your advice." Qiu Honglei's expression cooled further. What is wrong with this guy? How are others supposed to even help you out if you behave like this?

You have successfully trolled Qiu Honglei for 250 Rage points!

Seeing such a meager haul, Zu An couldn't help but think that this woman really was stingy. "Young miss, your composition was too monotonous and bland. It lacks a bright rhythm, and the tempo is also unclear. That is why it can't help but sound slightly tedious."

Xie Daoyun scoffed, not bothering to hide her discontent. "This fella really only knows how to spout a bunch of nonsense. The zither's notes are gentle and muted to begin with. It's not an instrument that uses a clear tempo or rhythm."

Qiu Honglei furrowed her brow as well, clearly sharing similar thoughts. However, even before she could speak, several zither enthusiasts began to mock Zu An for being full of shit.

Zu An didn't seem to mind at all. He continued to look calmly at Qiu Honglei.

When she saw that he wasn't flustered at all, Qiu Honglei grew uncertain of herself. This guy doesn't look like an idiot, so why does he insist on saying such things? Don't tell me there really is something more to this?

As such, she pursed her bright red lips and replied, "Perhaps the young master has misunderstood. The music of the zither soothes the self, and soothes the people who listen to it. Since ancient times, the music of the zither has never excelled in rhythm or tempo. Rather, it is used to paint an artistic mood."

Zu An smiled. "It really is interesting that you say the music of the zither soothes the self. When you performed for everyone just now, was it to please yourself or please others?"

Qiu Honglei was stunned into a long silence.

Upstairs, the beautiful brows of Xie Daoyun drew together in a frown. She began to have a vague understanding of what this fellow was trying to say.

Pei Mianman leaned against the windowsill, an ambiguous expression appearing on her face. "This fella really has some strange talents."

Perhaps because standing up was too tiring, she fetched a stool. She supported her breasts gently on the windowsill and sat down, immediately feeling much more relaxed. She stretched comfortably, revealing her truly wondrous curves.

Fortunately, each room had excellent privacy. Who knew how many pairs of eyes this would have attracted otherwise.

Zu An continued, "The notes that a zither produces are moderate and gentle, and its tone reaches deeply into the soul. The songs played on a zither often evoke 'long-lasting peace', or perhaps 'transcendent hope', and other such feelings. These songs are usually played in beautiful and peaceful settings of mountains and flowing rivers, or within a quiet and private inner residence. However, the lady insists on playing it in a noisy brothel! The environment here clearly clashes with the intrinsic quality of zither music, so the music can't help but seem naturally dissonant. I believe that this might also be why the lady has felt her skills plateau recently."

Xie Daoyun let out a cry of surprise from the second floor. She turned his words over carefully in her mind.

Qiu Honglei had initially felt disapproval as well, but as she continued to listen, her forced smile gradually disappeared as she fell deep into thought.

Seeing her smile disappear, the crowd believed that Zu An's words had made her angry. They immediately seized the chance to butter her up.

"That's nothing but nonsense! There are plenty of girls who play the zither in brothels! Who says that it has to be played in a quiet setting?"

Zu An replied, "Isn't it precisely because these establishments want to please all of you so-called 'enlightened scholars', that's why there are so many zither players in brothels?"

"Few ordinary brothel girls play the zither. More of them are proficient in instruments like the guzheng[1] or lute, which are good enough to please the ordinary folk. Those who choose to play the zither are often the queen courtesans in their respective brothels. They need to set themselves apart from the others. Because the zither is refined and elegant, they used it to raise their own status, market themselves differently, as if it would add a bit more of an otherworldly aura to their presence. However, they did not consider that a zither is completely incongruous in a brothel setting."

The voices that were cursing him gradually quietened down. Some of them began to realize that his words weren't entirely without reason.

Market themselves? Pei Mianman was still leaning against the windowsill, but she wore a strange expression. Even though the words this fellow used were crude, they were quite interesting. But now, not only did he end up offending Qiu Honglei, he had also offended all courtesan queens.

As expected, when she heard his evaluation, Qiu Honglei's face became completely pale, and her chest trembled.

Zu An immediately added, "Of course, strictly speaking, this isn't Lady Qiu's mistake. Rather, this is just how things are. There's no need to be too bothered."

Qiu Honglei rolled her eyes with hidden resentment. "How can I not be bothered? After hearing the young master's remarks, I might never play the guqin again."

Anguished wails greeted this pronouncement.

"Please, Lady Qiu! Your playing is really beautiful!"

"That brat is speaking nonsense! He doesn't know anything!"

"Exactly! If you don't play the zither again, then it would be a loss for all of Brightmoon City! No, the entire Great Zhou Dynasty!"

...

These people continued to howl in grief, all the while glaring at Zu An with hate-filled eyes.

As he watched his Rage points rocket up another couple of thousand points, Zu An immediately became full of disdain. Simps and white knights everywhere. Keep licking boots until you find out there is actually nothing left for you.

Of course, without all of you lovely bootlickers, where would I go to farm so many Rage points?

At this moment, Xie Siu tilted his head slightly, as if he was listening to someone nearby. Sudden shock flashed across his face, and he said loudly, "Brother Zu, even though what you say makes a bit of sense, Lady Qiu has already masterfully played her piece, and her emotions were perfectly blended into her music! The things you have pointed out are too vague, and there is nothing concrete."

After saying this, he smiled apologetically to Zu An. It was clear that tearing him down like this left him slightly embarrassed as well.

When he noticed this expression, Zu An guessed that he was merely the mouthpiece, and that these were probably Xie Daoyun's words.

Xie Xiu's objections encouraged the rest of the crowd.

"That's right! Everyone can speak about vague and broad principles. However, only specific pointers of improvement are truly worthwhile!"

Zu An said in a calm and unhurried manner, "The main reason why the zither is not suitable for a brothel environment is because the melodies it produced can be slightly too bland. Its sound color is also concentrated in the middle register. If it can be paired with another instrument that can complement it, the soundscape will become much richer, with more layers, and the tempo and rhythm will become clearer. This will naturally make the music more appropriate to this setting."

Xie Daoyun snorted, and passed her comments to Xie Xiu to convey.

Xie Xiu wore an expression of helplessness, but he still spoke in her place. "You make it sound easy, but different instruments have different sound colors and different qualities. The zither's sound is small and intimate to begin with. If other instruments are added to it, it could be overpowered, and the effect may be jarring."

Qiu Honglei nodded in agreement. “Indeed. In fact, such ideas have been tried by many musicians before, but all of their efforts ended in failure. There is no practical way to implement what the young master says.”

Hisses of glee could be heard from all directions. The crowd were ecstatic to see him embarrassed.

“With the right approach, all this can be easily solved. You all just haven’t found it yet.” Zu An was slightly surprised. Was the level of musical understanding in this world really so shallow that they couldn’t even figure out such a simple issue?

Up on the second floor, Xie Daoyun snorted. Arguing with this fool was surely a waste of her time.

This guy wants to brush over something no zither player from past to present has ever achieved? If only it was that easy!

She had a clear enough idea of what was going on. This fella was most likely a nobody, possessing only the slightest understanding of the zither. To think that she had actually engaged in such a passionate discussion with him just a second ago! The humiliation was almost overwhelming.

By this time, Chen Xuan had also finalized his plans. Knowing that there was no way Zu An could feel good after being put down like this, he took the opportunity to twist the knife further. “It’s always easy to talk—talking is something anyone can do! If you have the skills, why don’t you do it, then?”