

Immortal 271

Chapter 271: Flirting Approved

Whatever. If she's there, then she's there. It'll be the perfect time for her to witness my insane skills. She can look for me in the future if she has some menstrual pain or something.

Zu An gave a huff and walked straight in.

It was much easier to sneak around now with this Mirror Mirage concealment skill. It even saved him from using Grandgale this time.

Of course, this was mostly because the guards posted around the main area of the Chu Estate were concerned with preventing outside intruders. None of them expected someone inside to be sneaking around.

He reached Chu Chuyan's window without incident, and he gently pushed it open. He smiled. It seems like the wife didn't forget to leave this window open today.

He quietly tiptoed to the bedside. He could vaguely make out a seductive figure lying on her side. However, the room was too dark to clearly make out her face.

This time, he didn't dare throw himself onto her and grope around. He could brush off what happened the last time as an accident, but if he touched Qin Wanru again, even Chu Chuyan might just decide to chop off his hand. He shuddered to think of what Qin Wanru might do.

"Wife, is that you?" Zu An probed.

A lazy groan sounded. "Who else could it be?"

Zu An let out a sigh of relief. He hurried over to the bedside and sat down. "What about your mom?"

Chu Chuyan immediately moved away from him to avoid being taken advantage of. "She already knows that you have to treat me at night. How would she dare to stay here shamelessly and embarrass everyone?"

Zu An chuckled. "Respected mother-in-law really is considerate."

"Now you're calling her 'respected mother-in-law'? It looked like the two of you were itching to get your hands on one another earlier." Chu Chuyan said, slightly annoyed. She hadn't said anything earlier, out of consideration for his emotions, but there was no way she would be pleased that he was clashing with her mother.

"Whatever the case, nothing happened in the end, right?" Zu An's face became warm. "Okay, okay. At worst, I'll just ignore her. I won't retaliate even if she hits me, and I won't argue back if she criticizes me. Will that do?"

"Really? This isn't like you at all." Chu Chuyan's eyes sparkled like gemstones as they stared into his. They seemed filled with suspicion.

“Of course! But if she scolds me once, then I’ll kiss her daughter once. If she hits me once, then I’ll...” Zu An’s gaze roved about her enchanting figure as he spoke.

“What will you do?” Chu Chuyan’s heart skipped a beat, and she subconsciously drew her clothes tightly around her chest. Her cultivation was clearly higher than his, yet, for some reason, she was still subconsciously scared of this fellow.

“Then I’ll spank you! What did you think it was?” Zu An grinned from ear to ear at her somewhat flustered expression.

Chu Chuyan was left speechless.

That’s definitely not what this guy was thinking!

But she couldn’t really blurt that out loud. She glared at him, simmering with rage.

You have successfully trolled Chu Chuyan for 5... 5... 5...

Zu An’s heart trembled as he noticed that her cheeks had puffed out slightly. This was much cuter than her usual coldness! He couldn’t help but scooch over.

Chu Chuyan’s eyelashes twitched. She turned her head bashfully to the side, her small hands clutching the bed sheets. She was struggling inside, not knowing what to do.

Seeing that she wasn’t resisting him immediately, Zu An was overjoyed. It seems like all that effort spent treating her these days wasn’t for nothing! First objective cleared! We’re now already a lot closer.

He was just about to kiss her on the cheek when Chu Chuyan’s expression suddenly froze. She reached out a hand to stop him. In an instant, her bashful expression reverted to its usual icy coldness. “You have the smell of another woman on you.”

Zu An almost slapped himself on the mouth. He’d already made this mistake once before, and it was turning into a repeat of that particular disaster!

“You went to that Qiu Honglei’s place again today?” Chu Chuyan asked, expressionless.

Zu An’s mouth worked silently.

Chu Chuyan snorted before he could even say anything. “Don’t even try to deny it. The smell this time is exactly the same as before! Hmph! You just fought with my mother over her, and then you immediately went to see her. You really are something!”

You have successfully trolled Chu Chuyan for 213 Rage points!

Zu An panicked when he saw her rage steadily climbing. I’m really done for if I let this continue...

He said in a hurry, “I’m being wronged! The reason I went looking for her wasn’t because of what you’re thinking! There just wasn’t anything to eat at home, so I decided to have dinner there...”

His voice grew quiet, and he slowly trailed off into silence.

“If you had just ordered any random servant to bring you something to eat, they would have done so! On top of that, should you really go asking for a meal from another woman even if there’s no food at

home?” It might have been better for him if he hadn’t tried to explain himself. Chu Chuyan only grew more incensed at his absurd excuse.

You have successfully trolled Chu Chuyan for 476 Rage points!

Luckily, Zu An’s mind moved quickly. In this short time, he had already come up with something else. “Of course I didn’t go there just for the food! You told me earlier how the illicit salt trade had been giving you a massive headache. I only went to the Immortal Abode because I was worried about you!”

“What does the illicit salt trade have to do with your visit to the Immortal Abode?” Chu Chuyan said with a frown.

Zu An swallowed. He hurriedly explained, “Your Chu clan is a representative of the government, so there are many channels that aren’t open to you. But the Immortal Abode is different! All sorts of people frequent that place, and information spreads quickly over there. Qiu Honglei’s commands a high standing over there, so I figured she might have some useful information.”

Only then did Chu Chuyan’s expression soften. “What sort of information were you able to retrieve?”

“I found out that the biggest illicit salt dealer in Brightmoon City is the Whale Gang. The gang’s leader is incredibly mysterious, and no one even seems to have seen his real face before...” Zu An recounted everything he heard from Qiu Honglei in full detail.

Chu Chuyan didn’t seem impressed by his report. “Apart from some small differences, most of this was already known to us. Was this all you got out of that trip?”

No way, I even got that Mirror Mirage! Of course, he didn’t dare tell her this. It would only end up making her even more furious.

“Of course not! Unfortunately, Qiu Honglei hasn’t paid too much attention to the illicit salt trade. She agreed to help me look into this affair, so I believe we’ll have some new information soon.”

“Does that mean that you’ll be visiting her frequently in the future?” Chu Chuyan was clearly displeased.

“This is all for the sake of the Chu clan’s business! But if my love gives the word, I won’t go even if she calls for me! I’ll just flat out refuse them!” Zu An vowed solemnly.

Chu Chuyan hesitated. She obviously didn’t want him going to that sort of place. However, with the difficult situation facing the Chu clan right now, any useful information that could be gathered from Qiu Honglei would be worth it.

“Why is that Qiu Honglei treating you so well?” She asked instead.

When he saw that she didn’t immediately refuse him, Zu An snickered inside. This girl definitely puts the interests of the Chu clan first.

“Of course it’s because I’m too handsome!” Zu An stuck out his chest. “Even you, the esteemed daughter of a glorious duke, chose me out of an endless sea of candidates! If a simple brothel courtesan like her didn’t fall for me, wouldn’t that reflect poorly on the discerning sight of the young miss from the Chu clan?”

Chu Chuyan had no words to say.

This guy really is too shameless!

She lost the will to argue any further. "Forget it, I won't stop you from going there in the future. However, please arrange a place for one more the next time you plan to go."

Chapter 272: Strip!

Zu An was utterly floored by her statement. "You want to go to a brothel too?"

Chu Chuyan rolled her eyes impatiently. "Of course I'm not the one going. I just want you to arrange a place for one more person."

"Who?" Zu An was a bit curious.

"Wang clan's young master, Wang Yuanlong." Chu Chuyan said seriously.

Zu An looked at her strangely. "There isn't something going on between you and that Wang clan dude, is there? I've heard that our clans get along pretty well. Is he your childhood sweetheart or something? Damn it all, why is my fate so cruel..."

Man, if I'd known about this ahead of time, I wouldn't have saved that Wang kid. I should've let Chen Xuan finish him off.

Chu Chuyan was furious and humiliated. She grabbed his ear tightly. "Stop howling like an idiot already! What could possibly be going on between us? Just what kind of nonsense goes through your head every day?"

You have successfully trolled Chu Chuyan for 123 Rage points!

Zu An's high spirits returned. "Then why do you want to arrange a meeting with him, and in a place like the Immortal Abode?"

"I'm not the one who is going to meet with him. The two of you are," Chu Chuyan corrected.

Zu An blinked his eyes rapidly. Clearly, he was completely lost.

Chu Chuyan explained matters to him. "Sang Hong summoned my father, as well as the heads of the Zheng, Yuan, Wang, and various other clans for a meeting. He mentioned that the royal court will be sending troops north against the foreign tribes. The country is in dire need of provisions, which is why they have asked all wealthy clans to lend a hand by making more contributions."

Zu An nodded. Chu Chuyan had mentioned these contributions before.

"A huge sum had already been requested as a contribution last year. Even the biggest clans would struggle if they were asked to make contributions so often. That is why, this time, there is a reluctance among all of the great clans to contribute."

Chu Chuyan paused for a moment, then continued. "My father used the rampant illicit salt trade as an excuse to explain why he wouldn't be able to make any contributions immediately."

Zu An couldn't suppress a smile. "Master usually seems so proper and honorable. Who knew he had a crafty side to him?"

"Is that how you praise someone?" Chu Chuyan shot him a glare. "Unfortunately, that old fox Sang Hong already predicted that we would use this as an excuse. As such, he made it known that he would assign Sang Qian to help, and that my father could use his unit as he saw fit to take out the illicit salt trade."

Zu An sighed with amazement. "This is probably the exchange of interests you mentioned before. If the Chu clan made contributions, the Sang clan would offer their assistance in rooting out the illicit salt trade."

Chu Chuyan nodded. "My father believes this illicit salt trade has greatly affected the Chu clan's business. Sang Qian has command over the River Patrol Army. With his assistance, we would have a much easier time taking out those illicit salt gangs. If we can take this opportunity to completely destroy the illicit salt trade, it would make it worthwhile to pay these contributions. That is why we have agreed to donate a hundred thousand taels of silver first. Once the illicit salt trade has been completely eradicated and we begin to see revenue from the sale of legal salt, we'll contribute the remainder."

Zu An nodded. "That sounds like a good plan." Chu Zhongtian wasn't the head of the clan for show. Even though he normally seemed a little too square, he still had his fair share of shrewdness.

"Everything did sound good," Chu Chuyan said with a sigh, "but the Wang clan suffered serious losses recently. Their trade station was plundered by the foreign tribes. They had to use a lot of their liquid funds to make up for this loss, and they are quite strapped for silver. Thus, they requested to be excluded from the contributions this time."

Zu An recalled her mentioning that salt in the Great Zhou Dynasty could only be transported and sold with salt permits. However, these permits couldn't just be bought with money alone. Instead, in such dire times of war, the right to purchase these salt permits was reserved only for those who transported provisions to the border.

Many salt traders didn't have the means to send provisions to the borders. This was where the Wang clan came in.

The Wang clan made a business of sending provisions to the border. This granted them the right to the salt permits, which they would then sell off to other salt merchants.

However, continuously transporting provisions to the borders from the cities was unsustainable. The journey itself required a huge amount of resources, and the resulting costs were just too high. That was why merchants like these chose to clear out some of the wilderness close to the border, creating farmland instead. The produce from these farmlands would then be sent to the border.

This sort of settlement was called a trade station.

"Robbed by the foreign tribes?" Zu An sighed. "That's rough."

"Indeed. The Wang clan was really hurt badly this time. They couldn't even fork out these important contributions." Chu Chuyan sighed. "That Sang Hong didn't say much, merely offering some words of consolation. However, he immediately allocated one of the Wang clan's exchange permits to our Chu

clan, one that was for a bordering commandery. He said that this was a reward for those who contributed to the nation.”

“Exchange permit?” Zu An was confused.

After listening to Chu Chuyan’s explanation, he managed to form a rough idea of what it was.

According to the laws of the Great Zhou Dynasty, the transport and sale of salt required salt permits. For the sale or purchase of salt, however, not only were salt permits required, a government-approved exchange permit was also necessary.

Exchange permits granted the possessor the right to sell something within a specified region. A clan could only sell salt in a certain region if they have the exchange permit for that region.

It would be illegal for an individual to sell salt in a region for which they didn’t possess an exchange permit. Not only would they be investigated as an illicit salt dealer, the clan that engaged in this practice would also be punished.

It was just like how tobacco was regulated in his previous world. Inter-regional selling wasn’t allowed.

Having understood all of this, Zu An flew into a rage. “Sang Hong really is ruthless! The Wang clan is allied to the Chu clan. This move not only deals the Wang clan a heavy blow, but it also serves to drive a wedge between the two clans.”

He felt some grudging respect for Sang Hong. He hadn’t had to give up anything of his to achieve this. Instead, he used the Wang clan’s own property to destabilize this alliance.

The most important part was that all of this was done in accordance with the laws of the Great Zhou Dynasty. Since the Wang clan wasn’t able to offer the necessary contributions, the royal court took back an exchange permit from them and gave it to another clan who did. Even if this matter was reported to the capital, no one would be able to criticize this decision.

The Wang clan had no choice but to suffer this blow. All the pent up resentment they couldn’t show the royal court would instead be directed at the Chu clan, since they were the ones who had ultimately gained from the affair.

“All of us are fully aware that he is trying to drive a wedge between us,” Chu Chuyan said, her eyes full of worry. “However, just knowing about it is one thing—actually doing something about it is another. It is hard for people to remain absolutely rational. Quite a few members of the Wang clan have already spoken out against our Chu clan over this. They believe the Chu clan deliberately plotted against the Wang clan in order to secure their exchange permit.”

“There will always be idiots in a clan,” commented Zu An, “and I reckon Sang Hong definitely had some people fan the flames. So the reason you want me to meet with Wang Yuanlong is to explain this misunderstanding?”

“That’s not all,” Chu Chuyan replied. “Clans like our Chu clan, the Wang clan, and the Zheng clan are all large, government-approved merchant leaders. When individual sellers come from different places to purchase salt in bulk, they often need to pay a deposit a year in advance. Meanwhile, once the

merchant leaders receive this deposit, the money would be swiftly moved around. After all, this money would be theirs in the coming year anyway, so it wasn't a big deal if they used it ahead of time.

"However, now that the Wang clan's exchange permit has been given to us, the Wang clan would have to return the deposits to these individual sellers." Chu Chuyan's eyes flickered with deep worry. "In regular times, such a thing wouldn't be too big of a deal. However, the Wang clan is already finding it hard to make ends meet after the plundering of their trade station. If they were forced to return these deposits as well, their flow of funds might truly be cut off. If that happens, the massive Wang clan might collapse altogether."

Zu An was alarmed. "This Sang Hong really is merciless! His actions might cost lives!"

"Indeed. However, our Chu clan won't watch idly while this happens," said Chu Chuyan. "That is why I wanted you to entertain Wang Yuanlong. You can take the opportunity to privately pass the sum needed to pay back the deposits to him, which they can then return to those individual sellers. We can use this chance to ease their sore spot."

Zu An's eyes brightened. "Nice! Not only would this get rid of the Wang clan's emergency, it also ingeniously deals with the wedge Sang Hong wanted to drive between us. I wonder which brilliant person came up with this idea!"

"It can't be considered that brilliant. It's just a trick I picked up after spending all these years in the business." Even though Chu Chuyan spoke calmly, her face blossomed with pride. Clearly, she was that brilliant person.

A smile immediately appeared on Zu An's face. She was normally so cold on the outside. Who knew she had such a youthful side to her?

"But why do you guys have to make such a detour through me? And even in a place like Immortal Abode?"

"The main reason is to fool the rest of the players," Chu Chuyan explained. "After all, we've already declared to the government that our finances are weak. How would it look if we immediately helped the Wang clan by giving them this sum of money? This doesn't make the royal court or our Chu clan look great, and might even give our political enemies a chance to attack."

"The second reason is that the Wang clan is still a great clan in Brightmoon City. If others learned that they couldn't fork out this sum of money, it could easily tarnish their prestige and lower their dignity. If we aren't careful, we might not only fail to achieve our objective, but we could even end up with a feud on our hands."

Zu An couldn't help but sigh in praise. "Honey, you really are meticulous! You've even thought about all of this stuff."

Despite his admiration, he couldn't help but grumble inside. No wonder you could even pick up the slightest hint of female fragrance on me. It seems like I have to be really, really careful in the future.

A faint smile spread across Chu Chuyan's face upon receiving his compliment. "I also know that you helped Wang Yuanlong out in the Immortal Abode last time. Since that's the case, he has to show you proper respect, and I'm sure he won't create any unnecessary misunderstandings."

“Most importantly, though, no one will expect us to pass on such an important task to you.”

Zu An immediately grew upset. “Are you praising me or mocking me?”

Chu Chuyan’s mood gradually lifted, and she revealed a beautiful smile. “Do you really have no concept of how others view your standing within the clan?”

Zu An had no reply to that.

This woman’s mouth seems to have gotten sharper now that she’s hung around me for a while.

“Are you done with all this serious talk yet? If you are, let’s begin today’s treatment already,” said Zu An gloomily.

Chu Chuyan’s face reddened slightly. It took her a while before she quietly voiced her consent.

The evil expression of a tyrannical CEO bloomed on Zu An’s face. He looked at her coldly and said, “Strip!”

Chapter 273: Aren’t We Buddies Already?

Chu Chuyan was left speechless.

Why did the words from this guy’s mouth always sound so strange?

But she couldn’t muster a proper retort, since she really did have to take off her clothes in order for her to be treated.

She turned around bitterly. Her clothes slowly slid down her silky skin, revealing a stunningly snow-white landscape that would make any man go crazy.

Zu An was mildly vexed. This won’t do. I gotta tell her I have to treat her from the front next time.

He held back this time, not wanting to scare her away by being overly hasty.

He struggled fiercely to hold back a nosebleed as he completed the night’s treatment.

Chu Chuyan thanked him with a reddened face. Then, she firmly chased him out of her room.

“Who treats their benefactors like this?” Zu An snorted in displeasure as he left her residence.

At the same time, he glanced down at his unsatisfied little bro. This cannot continue! I’ll get sick at this rate!

What was that saying again? Unsatisfied and undeveloped?

He mumbled to himself in annoyance the whole way back to his own room. A sudden tremor rocked his mindscape. He leaped to the side to dodge the attack aimed at him from behind the door.

“Oh? Not bad. You’ve improved from yesterday.” Flirtatious laughter came from behind the door.

Zu An tracked the source of the sound and saw Pei Mianman leaning against the door, an ambiguous smile on her face.

Her laughter made great waves ripple across her magnificent chest.

Pei Mianman snorted. "Eyes up here," she commanded, noticing his expression. With a flick of her wrist, her fine white hand stabbed towards him.

Zu An jumped back in fright. "Aren't we buddies already? You don't have to react like this just because I stared for a little too long, do you?"

The tender expression on Pei Mianman's beautiful face immediately grew frosty, and her playful eyes glinted coldly with a hint of killing intent.

Alarm bells rang in Zu An's mind. I don't think she got my joke.

He didn't dare let his guard down. His hand immediately moved towards his Tai'e Sword.

Before his sword had even left the scabbard, Pei Mianman was already upon him, shoving his sword back into the scabbard with one hand.

With her free hand, she seized the opportunity to attack him.

If this were any other time, Zu An would have definitely spent some time complimenting this exquisite hand, perhaps even stroking it a little.

But the crazy strength displayed by that hand horrified him. There was no trace of charm or gentleness at all!

He tried backpedaling to evade her, but she doggedly kept on him, not allowing him to put any distance between them.

Zu An had invested everything into his sword techniques, and his unarmed combat skills were lackluster. Without a sword, he could only fight on instinct.

Scant seconds had passed, but several blows from her fist had already peppered his body. If not for Zu An's greatly increased cultivation and the Primordial Origin Sutra's tempering of his body, he might have suffered serious injury, and blood would have been pouring out of his mouth. He would certainly have lost most of his fighting strength.

Even so, any sane person would get worked up after being attacked like this.

His opponent's sudden and unreasonable attacks had already stoked his ire.

He immediately executed the modified Sunflower Phantasm, and his body suddenly split into two identical copies.

Pei Mianman was thrown off. She clearly hadn't expected this.

Her hand accelerated, stiffened fingers landing a perfect strike on the acupoint on Zu An's chest. However, she felt no joy at all. The empty sensation that fed back to her from her fingers told her that she missed.

Sure enough, the 'Zu An' she had struck scattered into countless fragments of light and shadow.

She was visibly shaken. She was just about to dodge to the side, when she suddenly felt something cold pressed against her neck. A sword was already resting on her shoulder.

“What’s wrong with you? Do you accept defeat?”

Zu An had noticed that even though her blows looked heavy, she wasn’t utilizing all of her strength. Since she was holding back, he wouldn’t go too far either.

“You’re no fun at all. Fine, I lose~”

As soon as she said the word ‘lose’, she suddenly twisted her body. Like a beautiful snake, she slipped away from him and sent a blow flying towards him.

Zu An’s eyes widened with alarm. He instinctively stepped backwards, but it was already too late.

He felt his wrist go numb, and he lost his hold on the Tai’e Sword.

As the Tai’e Sword clattered to the ground, Pei Mianman dodged around him, instantly grabbing Zu An’s arm and twisting it behind his back.

The tips of her toes struck him behind his knees. Unable to remain standing, Zu An found himself forced into a kneeling position.

Pei Mianman twisted his arm further, her knee pressing none too gently against his back. “So? Do you accept your defeat?” She whispered, her warm breath tickling his ear.

“I accept... my ass!” Zu An roared. He twisted his body forcefully. His shoulder dislocated with a loud crack, and he was free of her hold.

Pei Mianman hadn’t expected him to be so tenacious. Her face turned pale, her hands instinctively loosening their grip on him.

Zu An already prepared his follow-up moves. He pounced like a furious lion, instantly pushing her down.

Pei Mianman tried to dodge, but her legs were kicked out from under her, and she lost her balance. She fell unsteadily to the ground.

Zu An felt no hesitation this time. He pressed down on her with his weight, and employed the techniques of Brazilian jiu jitsu from his previous world to force her into a submission hold.

Pei Mianman struggled fiercely, but she was unable to exert most of her strength in her current position.

This again... Pei Mianman curled her lips in a snarl, and decided to give up on her struggle.

The two of them had yet to be acquainted with each other the last time they had fought. Back then, he had also managed to immobilize her with a similar move.

Zu An was gasping for breath. He’d expended a tremendous amount of strength in a sudden burst, and he felt more tired than if he had run three kilometers in his previous world.

“Woman, you admit defeat?”

"I admit defeat, I admit defeat." Pei Mianman shot him a look of annoyance. "Big guy, you have to teach me this later."

Zu An didn't dare let his guard down after the painful lesson he just learned. He didn't release her just yet. "What the heck were you trying to do? Why did you suddenly attack me?" he asked.

"It was mainly to train your reaction speed. Aren't you being targeted by that Chen Xuan right now? As a friend, I feel compelled to help you out with your training," replied Pei Mianman. Her peach-blossom eyes almost seemed to whisper to him, glittering with unspoken mirth. She seemed not to be taking any of this to heart.

"Is that really the only reason?" Zu An was a bit skeptical.

"You can't blame me for having some selfish motives. I wanted to test you out for myself. I wanted to see just what sort of skills you had that gave you your usual confidence," Pei Mianman said plainly.

Zu An turned her words over in his mind. He was actually already eighty percent convinced. Even though this lass had attacked him quite fiercely, she didn't seem to really want him dead. Otherwise, she wouldn't have subconsciously let go of him when he had painfully dislocated his own shoulder.

Pei Mianman's annoyance bubbled over when she saw that he was making no move to release her. "Get off me already! Does it feel that good to rub against your wife's close friend like this?"

It would have been better if she'd left her second sentence unsaid. Zu An was already in an irritable mood after leaving Chu Chuyan's room.

These ambiguous words stoked something within him, and his entire body went rigid.

"What is that prodding at me?" Pei Mianman's brow furrowed. "Who knew a brat like you would fiddle around with secret weapons! So, you really did have some more tricks up your sleeve."

Zu An's face turned red. What was he supposed to say? He remained quiet.

Pei Mianman turned around, and her charming face went bright red as well. How could she not figure out what had just happened?

"Damn brat, get off me right now or I'll burn you down!" Pei Mianman said, biting down on her lip. A small black flame burst into life, flickering just above her finger.

Zu An had just been about to release her. However, her threatening tone caused his stubborn nature to flare up immediately.

"No way! If you have the skill, then go ahead and burn me up! Even before I die, I'll drag you down with me. Dying together as lovebirds doesn't seem so bad!" Worried that she might escape, Zu An tightened his hold on her.

"You... scoundrel!" Pei Mianman began to panic at the sudden increase in force.

She couldn't just burn him down over some small matter like this, right? Honestly though, I'll burn him to death if he keeps doing stuff like this, even if he's Chuyan's husband!

Pei Mianman continued to draw these lines in her mind.

Zu An grew extremely amused by the sight of this usually flirtatious and charming woman becoming so flustered.

He carefully examined the girl beneath him, noticing a faint blush spreading across her beautiful snow-white face. This sort of bashfulness really couldn't be faked.

Something stirred within him. He lowered his head and gave her cheek a quick kiss.

"Ah!!!" Pei Mianman was startled. She clearly hadn't expected him to do such a thing.

Her entire body trembled. The black flame on her fingertip flickered violently and went out.

Her breathing became slightly ragged, and her peach-blossom eyes began to tear up slightly.

Zu An was given a fright. Why was her body this sensitive?

A strange silence fell across the room, punctuated by the gentle panting of the two occupants.

It lasted a few moments before Pei Mianman finally calmed down. Messy hair was plastered on her face, hiding her current expression. "Get off!"

Zu An had begun to regret his impulsive action. Guilt-ridden, he released her and got up in a flustered manner.

"Just now, I..." Zu An was just about to apologize, but he was wailing in anguish inside. What was the use of an apology now?

Who would've expected Pei Mianman to cut him off immediately?

"I was merely testing you to see what level you are at. Your movement techniques and sword skills aren't bad, but your hand to hand combat skills are poor. I'll teach you the Entangling Feathersilk Art so that you still have a way to protect yourself against Chen Xuan in situations where you can't use your sword."

Zu An blinked. Are we just going to pretend nothing happened?

Pei Mianman grew annoyed at his blank and unresponsive stare. "Are you listening?!"

You have successfully trolled Pei Mianman for 111 Rage points!

Zu An gulped. "I heard you. But just now..."

"There are no buts. Nothing at all happened just now. The things I am teaching you today... you cannot reveal them to Chu Chuyan either, understand?" Pei Mianman stared at him, her eyes full of admonishment.

"Understood!" Zu An's attitude changed straight away. Since she didn't want to mention what had happened, then he wouldn't continue to flog a dead horse. Either way... he wasn't the one losing out.

"Watch carefully. I'm only going to show this to you once! If you don't pay attention then that's on you!" Pei Mianman blushed slightly. She was clearly trying to deceive herself with her earlier words.

Chapter 274: I Just Happen to be Good with Girls

Pei Mianman began her demonstration.

She had been born beautiful. Paired with the gracefulness of this technique, she didn't look like she was displaying a martial art at all. Instead, it looked as if she was dancing.

This truly was a splendid and wonderful performance; it was as if a goddess had appeared in the world of mortals.

Zu An couldn't hold back a sigh. What the heck was I even watching before? Those period-costume dramas have nothing on this! Those court dancers all look so stupid in comparison.

If the dance performances had been anywhere near this level, then everyone's eyes would have been glued to their screens.

Zu An's eyes tracked Pei Mianman's movements back and forth. He felt as if his own heart was pounding along with her dance.

Pei Mianman explained the technique while demonstrating. When she was done, she looked over at him and noticed his stupefied expression. Her anger flared immediately. "I'm done. How much of it do you remember?"

You have successfully trolled Pei Mianman for 233 Rage points!

"I remember all of it," replied Zu An subconsciously.

"All of it?" Pei Mianman's brow immediately furrowed. It had been in a moment of anger that she said that she would only show it to him once. How could anyone have learned it from just a single demonstration? When she first began to learn this, she had only managed to get a rough idea of it after it was demonstrated to her three times.

"Yup." Zu An wiped the corners of his mouth to check for drool. Thank god I didn't embarrass myself by drooling.

As for the Entangling Feathersilk Art, he really wasn't lying.

After eating those Marrow Cleansing Pills, his brain felt incredibly sharp. His memory and other mental faculties seemed to be working amazingly well. He only needed to see things once in order to learn them, regardless of what he was studying.

Sigh, if I'd had this type of ability in my previous life, I could've just picked whichever Tsinghua University or Peking University to enroll into![1]

"Show it back to me, then!" Pei Mianman sneered. No wonder so many people hate this guy. No one likes a man who boasts.

"Okay."

Recalling her earlier movements, Zu An began to display the Entangling Feathersilk Art back to her.

He got through the better part of his demonstration before stopping suddenly with a cry of dismay.

Pei Mianman had been completely shocked when she saw him perform the Entangling Feathersilk Art flawlessly. When he stopped abruptly, she finally sighed in relief. I guess this guy still forgot some parts of it in the end.

However, reaching this point in such a short amount of time was already quite exceptional.

She was just about to praise him when he suddenly spoke. "I should've said that I don't remember any of it, so that you would teach it to me while holding my hand. That would have been a perfectly legitimate reason for skinship! Is it too late now to say that I don't remember everything?"

Pei Mianman's eyes began to narrow slowly.

Zu An chuckled in embarrassment when he saw her expression turn cold. He didn't dare go too far after what happened earlier.

He performed the rest of the technique right away.

"What do you think? Did I get any section wrong?" Zu An asked in a hurry.

Pei Mianman's red lips moved slightly, but no words came out.

After a long while, she finally exhaled. "There were no mistakes."

Not only were there no mistakes, it had simply been perfect. She couldn't find a single flaw no matter how much she tried to nitpick. This fellow was actually this talented!

Pei Mianman was blown away. No wonder that proud and arrogant Chuyan chose him as her husband! She must have known that he was an unpolished gem from the start.

As to why the academy placed him in the Yellow class after their evaluation, that's probably due to the Chu clan's involvement behind the scenes.

Chuyan is usually so pure and innocent. Who knew that she was actually this two-faced!

You got me completely fooled!

"What's wrong?" Zu An asked, curious about her constantly-changing expression.

"Are you working together with Chuyan to deceive me?!" Black flames suddenly rushed out from Pei Mianman's entire body. A ring of black flames surrounded the two of them, and she seemed ready to burn him to ashes any second.

Zu An's face drained of color when he felt the terrifying heat. His entire body immediately went taut in preparation for a possible attack. "How am I deceiving you?" he said, swallowing in fear.

"The two of you keep pretending to the rest of the world as though the Chu clan thoroughly dislikes you, deceiving me to the point where I foolishly formed an alliance with you. Is Chu Chuyan laughing behind the scenes?" Pei Mianman's willowy brows shot upwards. The fierceness in her eyes wasn't feigned—it was true killing intent.

"You saw for yourself how I am treated in the estate! That Qin Wanru criticized me so much, she almost chased me out! When did I deceive you?" Zu An had an innocent look on his face. He didn't know why she would suddenly get so angry.

"You told me you wanted my help pursuing Chu Chuyan, and that you'd help me look for her accounting book in return, but your relationship with her doesn't seem to be that bad!" Pei Mianman couldn't shake her doubts.

"The two of us really weren't that close in the beginning! I am the young master only in name—she doesn't treat me like a real husband at all. Our relationship only started to warm up after our experiences in the dungeon, where Shi Kun and his experts hounded us all over the place. Even so, we are still far from being considered a real husband and wife!"

"Is that true?" Pei Mianman finally relaxed a little.

"Of course it is!" Zu An carefully moved her hand away from him. "It seems this best friend of hers hasn't done much for me though. You said you would help me grow closer to Chuyan, but I haven't seen you put in any effort! In the end, I figured it'd be faster if I did it myself."

"How could you have the nerve to say this? What about that accounting book you agreed to locate for me, then? You still haven't found a thing!" Pei Mianman said hatefully.

Zu An chuckled in embarrassment. "You could've at least done something. Anyway, my standing in the Chu clan is really too low right now. I don't have access to what you're looking for."

Pei Mianman huffed angrily. Her gaze was suddenly drawn to something off to the side.

"Hm? Your sword doesn't look too bad."

She was a bit surprised to see that the Tai'e Sword had stuck itself deep into the ground as if it was tofu.

Just as she was about to examine it, Zu An hurriedly interrupted her. He was worried that she might discover something she wasn't supposed to know. "Um... aren't you worried about the sudden elemental fluctuations drawing the attention of the guards in our estate?" he remarked.

The first time they'd met, in Chu Chuyan's room, Pei Mianman didn't resort to using her black flames in that life-or-death struggle precisely because she had been afraid of alarming the clan's experts.

Now, though, Pei Mianman had recklessly escalated the situation, and she was sure to have alarmed the guards this time.

Sure enough, Pei Mianman grew flustered. "It's all your fault!"

After spitting him with a glare, she disappeared into the night, her toes tapping lightly against the ground as she made her escape.

Besides anger, there had been something else mixed into the final look that she had given him. As Zu An pondered it over, and a slight smile slowly spread across his face.

Why in the world did I suddenly kiss her?

Stranger than that was how she didn't even show much of a reaction... no, her reaction was actually pretty big...

Yue Shan, commander of the Chu clan's guards, finally rushed over with a group of guards. When they arrived, they saw Zu An staring intently into a mirror. "Young master, did an enemy intrude here?" the commander asked him anxiously.

"Nope," Zu An said in a carefree manner.

The guards took their time searching the area, but their efforts proved fruitless—there was no trace of an intruder. Yue Shan couldn't hold back his curiosity any further. Just as they were about to leave, he asked, "Young master, why do you keep looking in the mirror?"

The other guards shared his confusion. Why is a man like you staring into a mirror so late into the night? So awkward.

"I am trying to figure out if I really am too handsome. Otherwise, why would so many girls end up liking me?" Zu An replied. His mind seemed far away.

It had been Shang Liuyu at first, then Chu Chuyan, and then Qiu Honglei and Pei Mianman. All of them had come forward with all sorts of items and skills as soon as they learned that he was being targeted by Chen Xuan.

How could he not feel cocky about his appearance?

Yue Shan's mouth hung open. He turned around without another word. All of the guards followed suit.

Sorry for disturbing you, we're out of here.

Why do I suddenly feel like throwing up?

Those guards all wore strange expressions as they departed.

When he noticed the stream of Rage points coming in, Zu An couldn't hide his disdain for their pettiness. This was purely jealousy at work.

...

Early the next morning, Zu An was still fast asleep, when he was suddenly awoken by a pounding on the door.

"Who is it?!"

Zu An was feeling terribly cranky. Which idiot is pounding on my door so early in the morning?

He turned his body to the other side, ignoring it. The door was suddenly kicked wide open.

"Lazy-ass brother-in-law, the sun's already shining on your butt. Wake up already!" Chu Huanzhao's uniquely sweet yet unruly voice came through.

When he spied the broken door bolt, Zu An's face darkened. "Girl, would it hurt you to be a bit more lady-like? I'm really worried that no one will want to marry you in the future."

"It's none of your business even if no one wants to marry me!" Seeing him still wrapped in his blankets, Chu Huanzhao threatened him, "Hurry and get up already! I'm going to pull off the covers if you still don't get up!"

Her hands reached for his bedding as she spoke.

Zu An gave a start, and said in a panic, "I'm not wearing anything! If you want to remove the covers then go for it!"

"Pervert!" Chu Huanzhao instantly pulled her hands back, as if she had been shocked by electricity.

Zu An was left speechless. I'm the one sleeping peacefully here, while you're the one barging into my room, so how am I the pervert?!

Chu Huanzhao's face was tinged with red. "Why aren't you going to school today?" she asked, turning away from him.

"Who told you?" Zu An was a bit shocked.

"Big sis told me." Chu Huanzhao gave an angry huff. Earlier, her older sister had told her Zu An wasn't going to school that day, and that she didn't have to wait for him. She had come running for confirmation right after that.

"Yeah, I have some important matters to take care of today." Zu An got up and began to put on some clothes. There was no way he could fall asleep again after being disturbed like this.

"Tsk, what sort of important matters could you possibly be dealing with?" When she heard the sounds of him putting on his clothes, Chu Huanzhao's little face slowly grew redder and redder. Idly, she began to wonder what her brother-in-law looked like without his clothes on.

She was horrified as soon as this thought appeared in her mind. "Pui, pui, pui!" she spat.

"What the heck are you doing?" Zu An asked curiously.

"Nothing! If you're not going then whatever, I'll go by myself!" Chu Huanzhao immediately fled in a cloud of guilt, as if Zu An might find out what she was thinking if she stayed even a second longer.

Zu An was baffled. Why had this girl suddenly gotten all flustered? The minds of younger girls were really a mystery to him.

Soon afterwards, Chu Chuyan informed him that the silver was already being prepared, and that he could start making plans.

Zu An took some time to think the matter through. "I've only met that Wang Yuanlong fellow once. I should drag Chu Yucheng along, to act as a go-between. The two of them already have a good relationship."

Chu Chuyan had no objections. The third branch of the Chu clan was also in charge of the salt business, after all.

Zu An got Chu Yucheng to reach out to Wang Yuanlong. By noon, the three of them had already met up at the Immortal Abode.

Wang Yuanlong couldn't help but sigh in admiration when he saw the figure of Qiu Honglei behind the beaded curtains. "I really respect Brother Zu... If not for you, I would never have gotten the chance to admire Lady Qiu's beautiful zither playing up close."

Zu An laughed heartily. "You're giving me too much credit. I don't really have any other skills, I just happen to be good with girls, haha~"

Chapter 275: I Really Don't Mind Having a Friend Like This

Wang Yuanlong and Chu Yucheng exchanged stony glances. They clearly shared the same thought.

Why do I always want to smack this guy in the face?

The two of them simultaneously turned to look at Qiu Honglei, who was playing the zither. They immediately despaired, having no idea how they were even supposed to respond.

You have successfully trolled Wang Yuanlong for 666 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled Chu Yucheng for 666 Rage points!

Zu An let out an appreciative sigh as he saw the Rage points come in. As expected, we really are good friends! You really didn't have to be this generous, guys...

Behind the beaded curtains, Qiu Honglei paid close attention to everything that was happening. A smile spread across her face. This Ah Zu really was one-of-a-kind.

Wang Yuanlong hurriedly changed the topic to prevent his self-confidence from potentially suffering an irrecoverable blow. "Brother Zu, what made you suddenly free up some time to invite me for a drink today? Do those back home know?"

Hmph, everyone in Brightmoon City knows that Chu Chuyan is proud and arrogant! If you keep visiting brothels like this, your wife might just make you sleep outside tonight.

There was no malicious intent behind his words. They were driven by the natural pride that men felt over such matters, which compelled them to secretly compare themselves to others.

"Are you talking about Chuyan? Yup, she knows. She even gave me some extra silver to play around with when I told her I was coming here. She took pains to warn me that a man absolutely cannot be stingy when playing around outside, and that I cannot offend Lady Qiu!" Zu An said nonchalantly.

"You're joking!" Wang Yuanlong was dumbfounded. Young miss Chu didn't seem like the kind of person who would ever agree to share a man!

Chu Yucheng smiled bitterly. "I fear that he speaks the truth today. Young miss Chu even specially straightened out his clothes for him before we left. She really did tell him these things."

Wang Yuanlong stared at them, mouth agape.

What the hell, man? How is my character or my background any worse than this guy's?

You have successfully trolled Wang Yuanlong for 233 Rage points!

Zu An smiled at this generous donation of Rage points. Guys with too many chicks really can't avoid offending other guys.

Forget it, I won't mess with him anymore. I really don't wanna mess things up today.

Zu An moved the conversation on to other random topics. With a veteran party-goer like Chu Yucheng around and a group of girls to keep them company, a great atmosphere built up naturally.

Feeling that the timing was right, Zu An had the other girls withdraw. "I have a gift here to give Brother Wang," he said, addressing the main purpose of their meeting.

"Brother An is too generous!" Wang Yuanlong was stunned. He immediately declined.

Zu An didn't argue with him. Instead, he dragged out several large chests from the rear hall.

Even though silver was heavy, it wasn't much trouble for a cultivator like himself.

He threw open the chests, and the entire room was lit up with flickering silver light, which was reflecting off the contents of the chests.

"This..." Wang Yuanlong was a relatively competent individual. Seeing the silver, he immediately had a rough idea of what was going on.

"There's two hundred thousand taels of silver here," Zu An said. "Brother Wang should use it to pay the individual salt merchants back their deposits. I must also trouble Brother Wang to speak to your father in my place. Please tell him that the Sang clan is deliberately sowing discord between our two clans. We really do not want the great relationship that we have built up to crumble just because of this."

Wang Yuanlong stared at the silver for a long time, seemingly in a daze. Finally, he said, "Brother Zu, you've truly earned a whole new level of respect from me!"

He naturally understood that the two hundred thousand taels of silver wasn't from Zu An, but from the Chu clan.

His shock stemmed from the fact that it was widely assumed Zu An's title as young master was an empty one. However, he had somehow been entrusted with such an important task! The Chu clan clearly placed great trust in him.

Wang Yuanlong wholeheartedly accepted his request. "Brother Zu, please tell Brightmoon Duke and First Miss Chu that our Wang clan will not forget this kindness!" he said solemnly.

The Wang clan truly was in dire financial straits. This silver would go a long way in bailing them out.

Now that they were discussing important matters, the revelry in Wang Yuanlong's eyes disappeared. He had no desire to continue partying in such a place anymore. He itched to bring the silver back as soon as possible and talk to his father.

Zu An didn't stop him. "In that case, I won't keep Brother Wang. Let's share another drink when all of this blows over."

"But of course!" With his clan's crisis averted, Wang Yuanlong's mood had become much lighter.

“Take care on the way back,” said Zu An.

“Don’t worry, this amount of silver won’t trouble us. I still have at least this much faith in my guards.” Two hundred thousand taels of silver really was an astronomical sum for an ordinary family, but it wasn’t nearly as staggering for a big clan. If it wasn’t for the series of misfortunes that had plagued them, the Wang clan would have easily been able to fork out such a sum.

They were still in the city, where public security was decent, and any other large clan that could afford to offend the Wang clan would surely not do so over a paltry two hundred thousand taels of silver.

Zu An’s remark had been made in passing, without much thought. He had Chu Yucheng see Wang Yuanlong off.

After the two had left, Qiu Honglei slowly emerged from the inner hall. “I’m surprised that the Chu clan entrusted Ah Zu with such a serious mission. It seems like Ah Zu’s standing in the Chu clan is rising steadily.”

Zu An laughed and said, “This is all thanks to you! I could never have gained the Chu clan’s trust so quickly if it wasn’t for the intelligence you gave me the last time.”

As he spoke, his hand moved discreetly to encircle her waist. This woman was clearly scheming against him, so he had to at least get something out of her.

Qiu Honglei evaded him just as discreetly, her smile still intact. “I didn’t expect my intelligence to prove so useful. I’ve just received a new piece of information regarding the illicit salt trade. I wonder if Ah Zu is interested?” she asked.

“Oh?” Zu An’s eyes lit up. “Of course I am! Please enlighten me.”

Qiu Honglei walked over to the entrance of the Abode. She pointed towards the surface of the distant lake, which gleamed in the afternoon sun. “I received information from a trustworthy source, indicating that the Whale Gang will be transporting a batch of illicit salt via the pier tonight. I will leave young master to decide whether or not to seize this opportunity.”

Zu An laughed heartily. “Honglei, you really are my lucky charm! You managed to pick up such an important piece of news so quickly! Come, give me a kiss.”

Qiu Honglei stepped backwards gracefully, evading his clutches. She said with a lovable laugh, “Ah Zu, you should hurry and make your preparations. Time is of the essence. We don’t know when another opportunity would arise if you miss this chance!”

“You’re right!” Even though Zu An wore a smile, he was cursing inside. This woman was always throwing herself at him, yet he couldn’t even lay a hand on her. He was growing tired of this game of chastity.

In the end, all this is just playing around. I have to get back to dealing with this matter properly.

He too left the Immortal Abode in a hurry. However, he didn’t fully trust Qiu Honglei’s information, and secretly took a detour to check out the pier.

From his discreet observations, the pier did indeed seem busier than usual. Several burly men were constantly looking around while they were transporting goods, their behavior extremely suspicious.

He rushed back to inform Chu Chuyan at once, who then quickly contacted her mother.

When Chu Zhongtian learned of the news, he was elated. He immediately prepared to dispatch men to the pier.

Qin Wanru spoke a word of caution. "Even though Whale Gang doesn't have many experts, they have the numbers. The Chu clan might not have enough men to deal with this situation. Should we call over Sang Qian's River Patrol Army too? This is supposed to be their job, anyway, and this was part of the deal offered by Sang Hong. We can't just have them sit idly, especially since we're contributing so much!"

Even though the Chu clan had a private army, dispatching troops into the city without a court order still went against the law.

Chu Chuyan's condition was still poor, so some of the guards had to remain in the estate to protect her. This meant less men would be available to catch these crooks.

Chu Zhongtian agreed with his wife's reasoning. "Ah Zu, bring some men to enlist the aid of Commander Sang. Have him get involved in this operation."

He decided to leave the Chu clan's guards in the estate and entrust this entire affair to Sang Qian's men. If they screwed this matter up, he'd still have something to use against Sang Hong in the future.

"Okay!" Zu An caught the look Chu Chuyan had given him. He knew that this was the chance she fought to obtain for him, so he immediately agreed.

Worried that Chen Xuan might try to assassinate him along the way, the Chu clan sent out a dozen guards to accompany him.

As they made their way to Sang Qian's residence, a sudden thought popped into Zu An's mind. I wonder if that Sang Qian would immediately pick a fight with me if he knew I copped a feel of his fiancée's legs.

In my defense, Zheng Dan was the one who approached me first, so it could be that Sang Qian is somehow secretly involved in it.

Hm... Don't tell me Sang Qian actually has some weird fetish?

I really don't mind having a friend like this!

Chapter 276: Stalling and Stalling

The River Patrol Army was originally set up as a preventative measure against the river flooding. If the river floods, then they need large amounts of manpower to repair the dike. There was also a need of laborers to cut out canals for ease of transportation.

Eventually, as the transportation system developed, the River Patrol Army also assumed the role of ensuring the safety of the trade route along the river. They were in charge of exterminating some wild beasts in the vicinity.

Brightmoon City's area prospered because of the salt industry, and because of the potential profits, the illicit drug trade had always been a problem. The River Patrol Army thus took on the job of suppressing smugglers. Over time, everyone eventually called them the River Patrol Police Camp.

Inside a secret room within River Patrol Camp's government office, Commander Sang Qian bowed respectfully to an elder. "Father's move truly is brilliant. You've effortlessly divided Wang and Chu clans."

Sang Hong lightly stroked his beard. There wasn't much joy in his expression. "How can it be that simple? I really would be looking down on Chu Zhongtian if this was enough to make those two families fall out."

"Is it possible that Chu Zhongtian can still turn things around?" Sang Qian asked with curiosity.

"He will definitely think up some countermeasures, but it doesn't matter." Sang Hong released a light laugh. "The exchange permit is just the beginning, there's still a whole arsenal of tricks waiting for him. We'll cut off their most competent ally first, and then we'll deal with the isolated Chu clan."

"You make Brightmoon Duke sound pretty impressive, but isn't he still being toyed with under father's hands?!" Sang Qian roared with laughter.

Sang Hong shook his head. "It's not that Chu Zhongtian is inferior, but instead that I have the emperor and empress behind me. The irresistible trend isn't something a mere man can go against."

Sang Qian grumbled to himself that his father always loved to blabber about nonsense. He was clearly doing amazing for himself, yet he kept flattering other people. He really was taking modesty too far.

"Oh, by the way, father needs to take good care of your body too. Brightmoon City's rich merchants sent over some of Immortal Abode's 'fine goods' earlier." Sang Qian winked as he spoke, giving his father a knowing expression.

Sang Hong rolled his eyes at his son. "Are you really still holding a grudge because I didn't let you go to Immortal Abode last time? You called for their girls as soon as I turned my back?"

"I wouldn't dare!" Sang Qian bowed his head at once in apology. But inside, he had some other thoughts.

"Father has always been upright and honest. I've made a rash decision in calling those escorts today! This might slander your respected self's name and easily draw political attacks."

"As long as I can take care of the mission the imperial household has assigned me, an honest reputation is pointless. Your dad will give you a piece of wisdom today," said Sang Hong with a heavy voice, "An honest appearance is completely useless apart from having a good reputation. If you want to be an honest and upright official, then you have to be even more crafty than those corrupt officials."

"Only if you receive those clans' gifts would they treat you as one of their own, only then will cooperation become much easier in the future, eliminating some unnecessary misgivings."

"The task we were entrusted with this time is to deal with the Chu clan, take back all of their salt and iron wealth back to the court where it belongs. Everything else is secondary."

Sang Hong bowed respectfully. "Father's instructions are wise."

He couldn't help but sigh inwardly. To even justify sleeping with women with such proper wording and reasoning... perhaps his father was the only one in this world who would do such a thing.

"Reporting! Chu clan's young master Zu An has brought men with him and requested a meeting!" A soldier passed on this message at the entrance.

"Why did he come here?" Sang Qian's brows furrowed. He really didn't like this guy for some reason.

When he thought about how that second-rate rascal ended up obtaining the goddess like first miss Chu, he really felt like this was a flower falling into shit. No, this was a flower falling into an entire hole of shit.

He felt even more irritated when he recalled how Zu An won a few hundred thousand silvers from his own family's casino.

"You are letting your emotions affect you too greatly! How many times have I already taught you? You just don't learn!" Sang Hong said in dissatisfaction. His son was way too immature, not possessing a shred of his father's composure. "Go and see what Zu An came for."

"Yes..." Sang Qian replied resentfully. It's all that Zu An's fault that his dad scolded him again.

...

Zu An was waiting in the hall. He suddenly saw two chunks of Rage points come from Sang Qian.

Zu An was speechless. He was already so upset when the two of them didn't even meet yet?

Does he know about what happened between me and his fiancée?

But apart from having a bit of an ambiguous relationship, groped a few times, nothing really happened either?

I'm really being wronged here!

While he let his imagination run wild, Sang Qian finally came. "Young master Zu, what brings you to River Patrol Police Camp today?"

Calling this fella young master made him want to throw up. How could the two words young master possibly fit someone like him?

But his father always told him not to let his anger get the best of him. If he directly called out this guy's name, wouldn't he feel even more enmity?

He was incredibly conflicted inside. But how could he possibly know that Zu An already knew about his hostility through a different way?

"We discovered that a large batch of illicit salt is being unloaded from the pier tonight. That is why we need Commander Sang Qian to lead your men and completely take out those illicit salt traffickers." Zu An didn't feel like wasting any time with this man either, instead getting straight to the point.

"Illicit salt?" Sang Qian was immediately frightened. "Where did Brother Zu obtain his intelligence? Why did our River Patrol Army not receive any news of this?"

He gave a slight nod to his subordinate while talking. That subordinate nodded slightly as well before silently withdrawing.

Zu An and the others didn't notice anything. After all, there were just too many River Patrol Army men here, and none of them were familiar with this place.

"I do not believe the key issue right now is where the intelligence comes from, but rather that we need to catch those criminals as quickly as possible." Zu An obviously didn't want to bring up Qiu Honglei.

He originally wanted to berate this guy and say that even a brothel has better information than the army actually in charge of this type of criminal activity. Weren't they completely good for nothing?

But after some consideration, the Chu clan still had to depend on them in the future. He held back on these words for now and cook his ass later when things were already decided afterwards.

"It's really not that I don't believe you, but this matter is too important! If we always fail and alarm the true illicit salt traffickers, then that'll only make it even harder to catch them in the future," Sang Hong said with a heavy voice.

"My information is definitely reliable. The commander just needs to do your part and catch them," said Zu An. This didn't come purely from his trust in Qiu Honglei, he himself already scouted things out. There was definitely no mistake.

"In that case, does Brother Zu dare lay down a military order?" Sang Qian also got up, his expression becoming serious.

Zu An's eyes narrowed. He shook his head and said, "I am not a military soldier, why would I bother with any military order?"

Even though he had great confidence, he didn't want to assume risks for no reason.

Unexpected things always happened.

This guy is definitely up to no good by making me give some military order, right?

Zu An frowned. He thought for a bit, and then he felt like this operation might not go as smoothly as he thought.

Sang Qian laughed and said, "There is no need for Brother Zu to feel alarmed, I am merely seeking confirmation. It is just that dispatching troops isn't that simple of a matter. I need to report to the authorities for approval. If we make a huge fuss but end up with nothing, then everyone from the top brass to the low level soldiers will have complaints."

"You need to request for approval from the higher ups?" Zu An was stunned. "Then why are you wasting time here? How long does it take for this process to be completed?"

Zu An's brows furrowed tightly. Where was there any time to waste like this? These fellas are so inefficient! No wonder the illicit salt trade has gotten so out of hand.

Sang Qian then came up with all types of subjects to stall for time. Zu An replied indifferently to all of it.

After a while longer of this, Zu An finally couldn't take it anymore. He got up and said, "If the commander's side won't be able to help, then I'll move my Chu estate's own men to catch the criminals."

Things always had a higher chance of going wrong the more time was wasted. Being held up here already left him with a vague ominous feeling.

"Please do not be impatient Brother Zu, it'll be completed soon." Sang Qian changed the topic.

"Furthermore, the arrest of the illicit salt trade is our River Patrol Army's responsibility, so how can we make Brightmoon Duke go through the trouble? If the governor, City Lord, heard about this, then I will be severely punished for negligence."

"I will wait another ten minutes. If there is still no progress, then I will head over to deal with it myself."

Zu An also knew that Chu Zhongtian most likely sent him here out of reservations towards the regulations, to prevent his political enemies from having more things to use against him.

But he couldn't wait here limitlessly. If someone really scared those illicit salt traffickers away, then everything would go down the drain.

"Minutes?" Sang Qian didn't really understand this measurement of time, but he roughly guessed Zu An's intentions. "We'll receive news soon. Please be patient, Brother Zu."

After waiting a few more torturous minutes, Zu An finally couldn't take it anymore. He got up and began to walk out.

Unknown if it really was a coincidence or not, a soldier suddenly ran in and said, "We received orders from above!"

Sang Qian said with a laugh, "Good, we'll immediately mobilize the troops. Depart!"

The soldiers in River Patrol Army's drill ground began to gather. When he saw how slow these soldiers were moving, their armor not even on straight, Zu An frowned. Are these soldiers or riffraffs?

With this type of army in charge, no wonder the illicit salt trade has grown so rampant.

Sang Qian's expression also became a bit unpleasant, hurriedly explaining, "Yesterday's drills ran a bit late. I reckon that the men haven't completely recovered yet."

He spoke while roaring at his subordinates, "Hurry up, stop dilly dallying!"

Unfortunately, no matter how he roared, those soldiers only put on a bit of an act. In reality, they didn't move that fast.

Just the assembling of the troops took half an hour.

But thank the heavens they still departed in the end.

Sang Hong silently watched as the troops departed. He fiddled with a smoking pipe in his hand and quietly took a hit. His slim face flickered behind the rising smoke.

A wave of confusion rose within him. "How did Zu An manage to pinpoint the illicit salt traffickers' activity?"

Zu An brought Chu estate's guards and River Patrol Army's soldiers towards the pier.

Out of worry that the illicit salt traffickers already ran, Zu An was extremely anxious. He urged the horse to charge crazily.

As a result, after only covering half the distance, a palanquin suddenly rushed out from a street.

Zu An hurriedly reined his horse in. Even though it stopped at the final moment, those porters were clearly alarmed.

The palanquin on the shoulders of the men who fell over also leaned to the side.

"Aiya~" A young lady's alarmed voice sounded from within.

Chapter 277: Will You Take Responsibility?

Hm?

Despite the obvious alarm in the young lady's voice, it still sounded extremely pleasant. Moreover, it seemed somewhat familiar.

Even though he hadn't bumped into her, it was his actions that had indirectly caused her to fall. As someone who came from a different civilized world, he could just ignore this.

He hurriedly got off the horse and asked, "Miss, are you all right?"

Even though the weight of the palanquin and its occupant was heavy, he had little difficulty supporting it thanks to his cultivation.

Unfortunately, his good intentions instead made things worse. There was a sound of something heavy bumping against the side of the palanquin. The sudden movement of the palanquin most likely made its occupant lose her balance. The palanquin rocked back and forth.

"Ah!!!"

Its occupant was clearly having a rough time. She instinctively tried to clamber out of the palanquin. Unfortunately she wasn't able to steady herself, and fell out instead.

"Be careful!" Zu An hurriedly reached out a hand to support her.

Something soft and gentle landed onto his hand. Zu An was startled.

He was confronted by a lovely but displeased face. Her elegant brows and graceful nose made her seem like a noble lady of the court.

"Miss Zheng, what are you doing here?"

There was no mistaking this woman's appearance. Who could it be other than Zheng Dan?

Good thing it's someone I already know. I'll be in a lot less trouble this way. I wonder if there are the equivalent of car crash scams in this world.

“Ah Zu, why are you here?”

Zheng Dan recognized him as well, a look of pleasant surprise on her face.

“Ahem, ahem~” Sang Qian’s dissatisfied cough came from behind them. “How long are you two planning on embracing each other?”

Only then did they realize that they were snuggled against each other. They leaped apart at once as if shocked by electricity.

Zheng Dan was extremely flustered.

Zu An grew indignant. Why do I feel like I was just caught red-handed while engaging in an affair?

Bro, I just saved your wife! You should be thanking me.

A strange flame burned within Sang Qian. Zheng Dan didn’t even let him hold her hand, yet she was being so intimate with another man right in front of him.

This was the last thing he had expected to witness. Why, then, was there such a strange feeling within him?

“Ah Zu, where are you headed to in such a rush?” Zheng Dan asked. She had finally recovered some of her composure. She fussed at several stray strands of hair which had come loose in the earlier chaos, tucking them behind her ears.

Why are you asking me this and not your fiancée?

Despite his puzzlement, Zu An still replied, “We have things to take care of. We’ll explain things to miss Zheng when we return.”

With that, he mounted his horse.

Zheng Dan took in the surrounding troops from the police camp. “Are you all cracking down on some salt smugglers?” she asked.

Zu An’s narrowed his eyes. “How did you know?”

Were they already exposed?!

Zheng Dan smiled. “There’s no need for you to be nervous. Aren’t the troops at the police camp in charge of capturing those salt smugglers? A large portion of our Zheng clan’s revenue comes from the salt trade, so I’m familiar with these things.”

Her reply helped to settle Zu An’s nerves.

“Take me with you. My Zheng clan also hates these smugglers bitterly,” said Zheng Dan. “I’ve never seen these smugglers get caught, so this’ll be a good experience.”

“Don’t cause trouble. We are taking care of official matters. How can we allow our women to come along with us?” Sang Qian gruffly refused her request.

Zheng Dan smiled. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I haven't joined the Sang clan yet. Strictly speaking, I am not the Sang clan's woman, but rather a daughter of a salt merchant. My request to witness this scene is perfectly reasonable, don't you think?"

Zu An's eyes widened as he watched this exchange. Zheng Dan always seemed so warm and reserved before. Why did she suddenly decide to spit in Sang Qian's face like this?

Isn't she screwing herself over if she's going to marry into his family?

Maybe she's just putting on an act because I'm here? Sigh, it really sucks to be too handsome. You end up ruining other people's households.

Sang Qian snorted. "So what if that's the case? We are in a hurry, and your palanquin won't be able to keep up."

"I can ride a horse as well!" Zheng Dan proudly tilted her chin upwards, her snow white neck stretching like a beautiful swan.

Sang Qian frowned. "I don't have any horses that you can ride. These are all army horses, and not for personal use. I'll be accused of misconduct if I let you ride them."

Zheng Dan pursed her lips. She knew that he was telling the truth. She found herself in a quandary. Just then, a voice came weakly from off to the side. "This horse of mine isn't an army horse. I can bring you with me."

Steam almost shot out of Sang Qian's ears and nose when he heard this. Are you flirting with my fiancée in front of me?

Bring her with you? Are you shitting me? Are the two of you going to ride on the same horse?

How could my subordinates ever respect me again as a commander if they see this happen?

You have successfully trolled Sang Qian for 666 Rage points!

Zu An sneered inwardly. Why does this guy get angry so easily?

Did Zheng Dan really not approach him with ulterior motives this time? Oh baby, that makes things way more interesting.

Zheng Dan considered Zu An for a moment, then looked at Sang Qian. In the end, she shook her head. "Thank you young master for your good intentions," she said to Zu An, "but there is no need for that."

If the two of them had been alone, she might have agreed on an impulse. Her honey trap was still in play, after all.

However, riding with another man in such an intimate manner, and in front of so many other witnesses, would definitely mess up the marriage alliance between the Zheng and Sang clans.

The Sang clan would never allow themselves to become laughingstocks.

Even the Zheng clan might start whacking her with broomsticks.

Zu An was only testing the waters—he wouldn't really be that brazen.

He quickly had one of his guards give up his horse for her. Then, they headed out.

After a stick of incense's worth of time, their group finally arrived at the pier. The pier was bustling with activity, with countless boatmen busy unloading their cargo.

"Immediately cease everything you are doing! Comply, or you will be executed for smuggling without exception!" Sang Qian hollered.

He was already furious to begin with. It felt good to finally have a channel to vent his resentment.

His voice carried loudly across the pier, and his command was backed up by his soldiers dispersing across the pier. All other activity ceased in an instant.

Zu An was a bit alarmed. This guy is actually pretty strong.

"Zu An, according to your sources, who is the one engaging in the salt smuggling?" Sang Qian didn't bother being polite.

Zu An frowned. He didn't know which clan it was exactly. Qiu Honglei's intelligence wasn't that detailed.

His mind raced, and he thought up a suitable response. "We'll investigate the goods first!"

The illicit salt trade could generate staggering returns, but it was also dangerous. If the smugglers shifted too little each time, then they wouldn't make much profits. If they tried to shift their goods too often, then the risk would increase greatly. That was why they had to find one chance to smuggle in a lot of their product.

Sang Qian nodded. With a wave of his hand, his subordinates fanned out.

Their search provided instant results. A group of soldiers brought a middle-aged man up to Zu An and Sang Qian. "Reporting! Most of the goods on the pier belong to his clan."

Zu An looked at this middle-aged man once over. His appearance was completely ordinary, and wouldn't have stood out in a crowd.

The only thing worth noting was his smooth skin and his hands which were not callused. It was obvious that this guy normally lived quite the good life.

"Uncle Hou, what are you doing here?" Zheng Dan suddenly said in surprise.

Zu An was startled. He turned around to face her. "Do you recognize this person?"

Zheng Dan nodded. "He is our Zheng clan's butler, Hou Yun. Father has put him in charge of many things."

"Oh?" Zu An's expression grew immediately curious.

A thought surfaced in his mind. Zheng Dan's sudden appearance might not actually be a coincidence.

After all, they had been stalled for almost an hour because of her. Maybe she was trying to buy time.

Does that mean that Sang Qian has no clue, then?

Sang Qian questioned the butler. "Hou Yun, what are you doing here?"

"Some goods that our Zheng clan imported were scheduled to arrive today, so I came to monitor the situation." Hou Yun replied with an apologetic smile.

"Since these goods belong to the Zheng clan, there shouldn't be any issues. Examine the other goods." Sang Qian waved his hand, indicating that he was letting this matter go.

"Hold on!" Zu An ordered.

What the heck is going on here? How can this guy be let off that easily? There was no way Zu An was going to let this matter rest just like that. He stared straight at Hou Yun and asked, "What goods were you expecting today?"

"Just some ordinary goods," Hou Yun replied respectfully.

"Don't feign ignorance. What are they?" Zu An said fiercely.

Zheng Dan stepped forward. "Ah Zu, are you suspecting my Zheng clan of taking part in the illicit salt trade?"

Zu An snorted in his heart. Is there even a doubt? Could it be any more clear? Who would have expected the Zheng clan, one of Brightmoon City's biggest salt merchants, to be engaged in the illicit salt trade?

It kind of makes sense, though. The Chu clan dominated the market share for salt in Brightmoon City, while the remainder was split between the other three clans. This was certainly not enough to satisfy their appetites.

There was no way Zu An would voice his suspicions out loud. "Of course not," he said instead.

"However, I am worried that some of your subordinates might be a little too daring, and do some foolish things under the Zheng clan's name. If such matters were to be explosively revealed later on, the Zheng clan's reputation will be severely tarnished! That's why we should still examine this matter carefully."

Zheng Dan smiled. "Ah Zu has thought things out well."

She turned to Hou Yun and said, "Uncle Hou, did you hear what he said? Just report things as they are." Her voice remained as calm as the surface of a winter lake.

Zu An sighed secretly in admiration. He really had no idea anymore if this woman was innocent, or if she was just pretending. Her acting skills truly were amazing.

"We're expecting some cotton and other raw materials. The Zheng clan runs a large clothing business. Transporting these things shouldn't be illegal, right?" Hou Yun bit out. He was in a sour mood after having been doubted, and his reply carried more than its fair share of attitude.

"What about the gate procedures and the written official approval? Bring them out so we can have a look." Zu An reached out a hand.

Sang Qian gave him a sideways glance. Didn't everyone call this guy an ignorant and incompetent fool? Why does he know about all these things?

This was where he was mistaken. While Brightmoon Academy's Yellow class received few lessons on matters relating to cultivation, they were lectured often on practical and business matters.

Many students found these lectures boring, but Zu An listened to everything he could, in order to gain a better understanding of this world.

Such a large shipment of goods definitely required corresponding official approvals.

Hou Yun gave Sang Qian an inquiring look. Sang Qian snorted. "What are you looking at me for? Zu An is here representing Brightmoon Duke. Do as he says."

"Yes, yes, yes~" Hou Yun immediately handed over the official documents.

Zu An examined them, and noted that they were indeed for cotton and other raw materials.

Despite the official documentation, he still had his doubts. He walked straight up to the cargo ship.

"Open up the cabin! I want to search this place."

Hou Yun immediately grew angry. "But the goods have already been properly stowed! If you open up the cabin now and search it, we would have to load everything up again, and we'll be delayed by at least a day! Our Zheng clan has to pay compensation if the goods do not reach their destination on time."

Zu An ignored his protests and repeated coldly, "Open up the cabin!"

With a wave of his hand, the Chu clan's guards spread out to secure key areas of the ship. They were ready to make a move if given the order.

Hou Yun's darkened further. He said fiercely, "If you don't find anything, will you take responsibility for the Zheng clan's losses?"

Chapter 278: Incompetent and Angry

Zu An was completely unaffected by his fierce rebuke. Instead, he turned to Zheng Dan, who was beside him.

"Isn't your young miss here? She's obviously the one who should take charge of such an important matter. If she wants me to take responsibility then I will. If she doesn't, then I won't. What does miss Zheng think?" Zu An said with a chuckle.

Zheng Dan blushed. Was this fellow deliberately trying to take advantage of her? Despite this, she still replied, "Everything the young master is doing is for the sake of the government. How could I make you take responsibility?"

Zu An laughed heartily. "I'm really happy that miss Zheng doesn't need me to take responsibility. It seems like our relationship is pretty good."

From the side, Sang Qian's brow furrowed. He subconsciously adjusted his helmet. His headgear seemed somewhat uncomfortable today.

"The young miss has already given the word." Hou Yun said. "Follow me." He walked to the front and gestured to his subordinates to open up the cabin.

Sang Qian waved his hand. His soldiers entered in a single file and began to carry out a search.

Zu An gestured to his men as well, and the Chu clan guards followed the others inside. He clearly didn't trust Sang Hong's people.

Still uneasy about the situation, he followed them in personally.

Sang Qian and Zheng Dan exchanged a look, then went in as well.

Inside the cabin, sacks were piled up like a mountain. The soldiers were extremely rough with their search, stabbing their blades directly into the sacks and allowing their contents to spill out.

Hou Yun couldn't bear the sight of all the cotton tumbling out of the ruined sacks. He cried out, "Everyone, please be more careful! Just tell me which bag you wish to inspect, and I'll open it up for you!"

His pleas fell on deaf ears, so he could only entreat with Zu An. "Chu clan's young master, you've already inspected what you want to inspect. Respectfully, you should be most satisfied with what you have uncovered, yes?"

Zu An made no comment. He pushed him aside and entered the deepest level of the ship. He saw more densely packed sacks piled up on each other.

He wanted to examine the sacks at the very bottom, but it seemed unrealistic to be able to, unless someone completely unloaded all the goods on this ship.

However, he quickly realized his mistake. He had subconsciously used his previous world's experiences as a reference. In this world of cultivation, however, the strength of cultivators was many times greater than ordinary people.

As such, he personally began to move away the sacks, trying to expose the ones right below.

The Chu clan guards also rushed over to help. In no time at all, they had made a hole measuring three square feet.

"Chu clan's young master, what are you doing?!" Hou Yun panicked. He immediately rushed over to stop them, but was stopped by Feng Daniu and the others.

Zu An's face had grown extremely dark. He fished out one of the sacks that had been buried the deepest.

"Why is butler Hou so nervous?" Zu An inquired, tossing the sack at his feet.

"Nervous? I'm not nervous at all, hahaha~" Hou Yun laughed a few times. However, the sheen of cold sweat on his face was clearly visible.

Zu An gave Zheng Dan and Sang Qian a look, and snickered inwardly at their grave expressions.

He fished out a blade and stabbed into the sack.

Everyone around craned their necks to see. What came out wasn't cotton.

Zu An was disappointed. There was no white salt flowing out. Instead, a vast quantity of yellow sand leaked out.

Zu An blinked. "Why did you store yellow sand among the goods?" The premonition he'd had earlier was finally becoming a reality. He was somehow unsurprised by the outcome so far.

Hou Yun chuckled. "The young master has never had to fend for yourself, so of course you don't understand our difficulties! These sacks of sand are used to weigh the ship down, to stabilize the ship when faced with great winds and mighty waves."

Everyone knew that Zu An had merely been an impoverished kid before he became the Chu clan's young master, while Hou Yun seemed to have done quite well for himself all these years. His words sounded terribly mocking to all those present.

Zu An's eyes narrowed. This guy wants to play games with me! Sure, come at me!

He wasn't interested in trading insults with this man. He quickly examined the other bags too. Most of them contained yellow sand. He sneered. "Is there a need for so much of this just to stabilize the ship?"

Hou Yun began to wipe at the cold sweat covering his forehead. "It's not illegal to bring extra yellow sand onto the ship, is it?"

Zu An pointed at the goods in this ship. "If I am not mistaken, most of the goods on this ship should be yellow sand. Is this how the Zheng clan does business?"

His eyes fell on Zheng Dan as he spoke.

Zheng Dan frowned slightly. This did seem somewhat suspicious.

"This... this..." That Hou Yun continuously wiped away his sweat. He clearly couldn't find any excuses to get himself out of this situation.

"Take him away and interrogate him!" Zu An ordered immediately.

Sang Qian stepped forward. "I fear that this might be unsuitable. The Chu clan doesn't have the authority to enforce the law in this situation. This task ought to be handed over to our police camp personnel."

Zu An said coldly, "This operation should have gone smoothly. However, after making a trip to the police camp, the salt smugglers somehow received news ahead of time, and managed to swap out the goods. Isn't it inappropriate to continue to leave this matter in the hands of your police camp personnel?"

Sang Qian's fury was swift. "Are you saying that I leaked out the information?"

You have successfully trolled Sang Qian for 213 Rage points!

Zu An replied indifferently, "I didn't accuse Commander Sang of leaking out anything. But we all know that those in underground businesses have eyes everywhere. There might be spies on the inside. I have no choice but to act carefully."

"Nonsense! You are not only slandering me, but also slandering the hardworking soldiers of the River Patrol Army!" Sang Qian's gaze was full of hate.

The expressions of the other River Patrol Army soldiers became hostile as well. Their hands moved towards their sword hilts.

You have successfully trolled River Patrol Army soldier A for 66 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled River Patrol Army soldier B for 66 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled River Patrol Army soldier C for 66 Rage points!

...

The Chu clan's guards rushed over, looking nervously at the soldiers around them.

Zu An wasn't worried at all. Sang Hong had taken such pains to scheme against the Chu clan in secret, so he was definitely not one to resort to force.

So many people already know that I came to the pier, and there are even so many Chu clan guards present. If something really does go down, then all his plans would be blown up.

Sensing the escalating tension, Zheng Dan took a step forward, interposing herself between the two sides. "Ah Zu," she said, "you seem to be suspecting our Zheng clan of participating in illegal trade."

"That's not my intention at all," Zu An replied. "But if those under you are hiding their illegal activities from those higher up, then all of you will become implicated in the end. I'm sure the rest of you want to get to the bottom of this affair too, isn't that right?"

"Of course we want to get to the bottom of this. However, if others find out that our Zheng clan's butler was arrested, their first thought would be to cast suspicion on the whole or the Zheng clan. This will deal irreversible damage to our clan," said Zheng Dan.

Zu An smiled. "Those who are clean will remain clean, and those who are dirty will have their filth exposed. Why does miss Zheng need to worry about these things?" He clearly had no intention of backing down.

There was no way Sang Qian could let him take this person away. He found himself in a tight spot.

Right at that moment, there came the sound of a group of orderly footsteps, accompanied by loud laughter. "In that case, why don't you just hand him over to us?"

Zu An turned around and discovered that this voice belonged to a familiar face. Vice Magistrate Pang Chun was walking over, leading a group of bailiffs.

Sang Qian said coldly, "This area is under the jurisdiction of the Police Camp! Isn't the vice magistrate overstepping your bounds?"

Pang Chun was simmering inside. He said with a slight smile, "Commander Sang is a little too excited. Since neither side wishes for the other to have custody of the suspect, wouldn't it be better for a neutral third party like us to interrogate him?"

Neutral my ass! Sang Qian seethed inside.

Pang Chun continued without missing a beat. "Commander Sang and the Zheng clan are engaged to each other. Since someone from the Zheng clan is involved, shouldn't we handle things in a way that avoids the most suspicion?"

Sang Qian knew he had lost. He understood that there was no way he could take the butler in hand anymore. In that case, giving him to Pang Chun was still better than giving him to the Chu clan.

Zu An didn't have any objections either. Pang Chun was someone on City Lord Xie's side. Strictly speaking, City Lord Xie wasn't on the same side as the Chu Clan, but neither was he in Sang Hong's camp. Moreover, the Xie clan and the Chu clan's relationship was still considered close.

Pang Chun quickly took Hou Yun and his workers into custody, while bringing forward his own people to act as witnesses.

Zu An and his guards hurriedly returned to the Chu clan estate to fill them in on what happened.

When both sides had left, Sang Qian called Zheng Dan over to a quiet corner. He wore a dissatisfied look. "Why was Hou Yun left behind? And why were all those sacks in the boat filled with yellow sand? Anyone could tell that something was wrong!"

Zheng Dan replied, "By the time we received the news, it was already too late. Even if we tried to stall him longer, it still wouldn't have been enough. Where would we be able to find that much cotton in such a short time? Using the yellow sand as a substitute was the best we could manage. Thank goodness we had enough of that.

"As for Hou Yun, we needed to have someone competent around, to make sure that the tasks were completed quickly. He was the best candidate."

Sang Qian knew that she was telling the truth. However, the fact that Hou Yun had been taken into custody left him feeling anxious. "Sure, but Hou Yun was still brought away by Pang Chun's men in the end! Things will get really tricky if he ends up saying something he shouldn't say!"

Zheng Dan smiled, "Don't worry. Uncle Hou has already worked for our clan for so long. He is completely trustworthy. Besides, he's lived through several decades of a turbulent life. Small things won't be enough to scare him. Furthermore, there wasn't any concrete proof today."

Sang Qian sneered. "Many times, proof isn't needed at all for them to handle a case. You might not know how vicious the methods employed by the Yamen can be. Only a handful of individuals could endure their torture. That Hou Yun seems like he's been enjoying life recently. If he were in my hands, I guarantee that he would spill everything within three days."

Zheng Dan sighed. "That is why we must save him as soon as possible to prevent our worries from multiplying."

"He's already in Pang Chun's hands. The Chu clan is paying close attention to this situation too. How are we going to save him?" Sang Qian said in frustration.

Zheng Dan's expression was still calm. "Don't worry. I've already thought of a way as soon as I was notified. I've informed Uncle Hou as well. He should have mentally prepared himself for a potential arrest."

"What are you planning?" Sang Hong asked hurriedly.

"You'll find out tomorrow morning," replied Zheng Dan. "Of course, I will need your father's cooperation at that time."

Sang Qian wasn't in the mood to pry further, especially since Zheng Dan was acting all mysterious. He'd just make himself look dumb. Instead, he moved on to a different topic of concern. "By the way, where did all the illegal salt go?"

Zheng Dan sighed with pity. "We were in a rush, so of course we dumped it into the river. Our Zheng clan would have been finished, otherwise."

"That dogshit Zu An made us lose so much silver again!" Her words made Sang Qian curse in fury.

You have successfully trolled Sang Qian for 999 Rage points!

Zheng Dan maintained the smile of a wise and virtuous lady, but sighed deeply inside. This fiancé of hers was usually somewhat charming, but just look at how flustered he got after encountering the merest trouble! He could only get angry at his incompetence. In this respect, he was just too inferior to his father.

On the contrary, that fellow Zu An normally looked like an idiot, but he was terrifyingly calm and difficult to deal with at crucial times.

When she recalled what had happened between the two of them earlier on, she suddenly felt her heartbeat quicken. Her fair cheeks grew flushed with a faint tinge of redness.

Chapter 279 - Robbed and Killed

Zu An hurried back to the Chu clan to inform them about the most recent developments.

"What? We didn't end up finding any illicit salt?!" Qin Wanru was just about to erupt when she heard his report, but suddenly remembered that there might be something loose in this fellow's head. The last time, he'd exploded after some light criticism, and she was worried that this situation might get out of hand again. She reined in her urge to scold him, and merely snorted angrily.

This is weird, though. Why would I be scared of this brat? There's nothing he can do!

The more she thought about it, the gloomier she got, and she almost spoke out in anger anyway. However, now that she had interrupted her instinctive reaction, she found it much harder to say something.

In the end, she could only stare resentfully at him, plotting her next chance to settle things properly with this brat.

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 9... 9... 9...

Zu An felt a bit strange when he saw these points. This woman really did hold a grudge!

If you're going to get mad, you can't be this stingy. Honestly, if you're only going to give nine points at a time, why would I even care? It's just way too little.

Chu Zhongtian gave his wife a surprised look. Why was she so even-tempered today? This didn't seem like her!

He decided to just treat this as the results of his wife's mental training. It was quite a relief for him.

Chu Chuyan smiled slightly from where she stood beside the two of them. She alone understood what her mother was thinking—she was likely worried that things would blow up like last time.

“We cannot blame Ah Zu for this matter. At the very least, we now know that the Zheng clan is secretly involved in the illicit salt trade, and so is the River Patrol Army as well. What a filthy way of living,” Chu Zhongtian said, his voice heavy.

Chu Chuyan was full of worry too. “No wonder Brightmoon City's illicit salt trade has gone out of control. This is why it keeps growing no matter how many prohibitions are put in place. It turns out they were colluding with other merchants! If they are playing both sides like this, there's no way we would ever have discovered anything!”

Zu An voiced his concern as well. “Even though we know who is working behind the scenes, we don't have any proof. That's the biggest issue right now. I fear that even the Vice Magistrate won't be of much help either.”

Chu Zhongtian stood up. “I will pay the City Lord Manor a visit and discuss this matter with Lord Xie.”

He knew that, for people like them, actual proof didn't really matter, nor what could be found through interrogation. It was more important to discuss mutually beneficial arrangements behind the scenes.

As long as both parties reached an agreement, they could even arrange for the innocent to be found guilty—although, this time, the Zheng clan was truly guilty.

However, it wasn't that easy to make that old fox Xie Yi stand by them completely.

A hint of worry appeared on Chu Zhongtian's suave face. He hoped that the City Lord wouldn't ask him for too much this time.

Suddenly, a flustered servant rushed in. “Reporting to Master and Madam! Something happened to young master Yucheng!”

Everyone present was stunned by this report.

Even Zu An was confused. What could have possibly happened to that damned fatty?

That guy's defensive abilities were almost unrivaled! Those who were weaker than him would surely have been steamrolled! Moreover, he was with Wang Yuanlong this time. The Wang clan had many elite guards.

Wait!

His expression suddenly changed. A terrifying possibility emerged in his mind.

Soon afterwards, a bloodied Chu Yucheng was brought in on a stretcher.

Two people would have been enough to carry a normal stretcher. However, this guy was just too fat. Even four was barely enough to move him.

“My son!”[1]

Chu Tiesheng's wife, Hu Lijing, had rushed over when she had heard the news. Chu Tiesheng himself maintained some semblance of calm. Hu Lijing threw herself over her son, tears pouring down her face.

The first time Zu An learned the name of Chu Tiesheng's wife, he'd suffered a terrible fright. He'd looked over her repeatedly back then.[2]

Her facial features were still presentable, and she could be considered a classy middle-aged woman.

However, even though she was the same age as Qin Wanru, age had clearly left much more of a mark on her.

In both her appearance and physique, she was far below Qin Wanru's standard. She really couldn't be called some sexy vixen.

Wait, why did I subconsciously use Qin Wanru as a comparison?

Pui, pui, pui! Disgusting!

A guard had followed the servants in. "Young master Yucheng had staggered back to the estate, covered in blood," he reported. "He said that there was something important to report, but he collapsed as soon as he finished speaking! We immediately brought him in."

Chu Zhongtian hurried to the side of the stretcher. He placed a palm on Chu Yucheng's chest, sending a wave of ki into his body.

Chu Yucheng groaned, gradually regaining consciousness.

"Yucheng, what happened?" Chu Zhongtian asked hurriedly.

"I was escorting Wang Yuanlong back to his estate. We made it about halfway when Chen Xuan attacked us. We fought a bitter battle... Wang Clan guards all killed... Wang Yuanlong captured. I barely escaped!" Even though his words were somewhat disjointed, his meaning was clear.

"Chen Xuan!" Chu Tiesheng erupted with fury. "Spawn of a dog, the two of us cannot live under the same sky!"

Chu Yucheng was ashamed and guilty. "Yucheng couldn't protect brother Wang... The silver was also lost. I felt too ashamed to return, but I realized that I needed to report to the clan as soon as possible, so..."

Chu Zhongtian reached out a hand to forestall him. "Enough, there's no need to say any more. This isn't your fault." He turned to the servants. "Bring Yucheng away for proper treatment."

Chu Tiesheng and Hu Lijing followed in a hurry. This was their only son, after all.

"What should we do now?" Qin Wanru leaned over, her voice extremely grave.

Chu Zhongtian let out a long sigh. "When it rains it pours... I had originally planned to use this chance to ease the tensions with the Wang clan. However, it seems that we have overreached ourselves."

Chu Chuyan immediately ordered several people to head out to the city to investigate. She wanted to see if they could pick up any information.

Her beautiful brows remained knitted together. She knew that the chances of them bringing back anything were slim.

“Why is this Chen Xuan able to move around so easily in the city? With his reputation, he should be keeping a lower profile! Yet he doesn’t seem to be scared at all!” Chu Chuyan said in consternation.

Chu Zhongtian also wore a worry frown. “This guy is as slippery as an eel. We’ve sent out a large force against him several times, yet he’s managed to get away every single time, even when we were extremely confident of our success. I really don’t know how he is doing this.”

“Could the Shi clan be involved? He is brothers with Mei Chaofeng, and both Mei Chaofeng and the Shi clan fed him intelligence in the past. Could he be hiding out in the Plum Blossom Sect’s property?” Zu An roughly explained the relationship between Chen Xuan, Mei Chaofeng, and Shi Kun.

Everyone present was stunned. Qin Wanru felt her anger and impatience rise. “Why didn’t you tell us earlier?”

“None of you asked.” Zu An shrugged. In truth, he had been too busy recently, and forgot to bring it up.

His offhand comment was met with flat stares from Qin Wanru, Chu Zhongtian and Chu Chuyan.

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 233 Rage points!

Qin Wanru was just about to give it to him when a guard suddenly appeared. “Reporting! The Wang clan’s master has come with his men.”

“What?!” Chu Zhongtian was shocked. He immediately rushed to the gates.

Chu Chuyan followed in a hurry. However, she still hadn’t made a full recovery, and standing for too long left her slightly weak. As she began to follow her father, she felt lightheaded, and her body swayed unsteadily back and forth.

Zu An rushed to her side to support her. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Chu Chuyan shook her head to dismiss his concern. “Help me outside to see the situation.”

“Got it!”

Qin Wanru blinked rapidly at this scene. When did the two of them become so close?

Her eldest daughter had always been as cold as ice, pushing others far away, and disdained any physical contact with a man.

Her mind drifted to the treatment that her daughter had mentioned, and how she even had to take off her clothes for it...

Could her daughter have been taken advantage of by that fellow? That fellow that she just couldn’t bring herself to like? Just thinking about it made Qin Wanru feel a little weary.

Zu An supported Chu Chuyan as they made their way to the gates. He saw a group of people there. They didn’t have any weapons, but they bore wooden sticks, poles, pots, and other sorts of implements.

They probably understood that weapons wouldn't serve them in a conflict with the Chu clan's guards, and this sort of appearance might attract a bit more pity.

He had seen the man in the front before. It was the Wang clan's master, Wang Fu.

He was deep in conversation with Chu Zhongtian. However, when he noticed Zu An, anger immediately overcame him, and he charged straight at Zu An.

"The one surnamed Zu, return my son's life!"

You have successfully trolled Wang Fu for 999 Rage points!

Chapter 280 - Whale Gang Boss

Zu An was shocked. What the hell is wrong with this dude?

Chu Zhongtian reacted quickly, rushing to place himself between the two of them. "Brother Wang, there are many misunderstandings at play here."

"What misunderstandings? How would this disaster have befallen Wang Yuanlong if he hadn't invited him to that damned brothel today?!" Wang Fu roared in fury.

You have successfully trolled Wang Fu for 446 Rage points!

Zu An couldn't help but say, "It's not like brother Wang died. Aren't you jinxing things by saying such a thing now?"

Wang Fu almost exploded on the spot. "Damned brat, what did you say?!"

You have successfully trolled Wang Fu for 514 Rage points!

Qin Wanru felt an inexplicable happiness when she saw this situation. She was usually the one being infuriated by this brat. Now, there was someone who shared her suffering.

Chu Zhongtian tried his best to placate Wang Fu. "Brother Wang, let's have a proper talk inside. We'll end up as laughingstocks if we cause a out commotion here," he said with a bitter smile

"Hmph! You weren't even scared of becoming a laughingstock by taking in this sort of person as a drafted son-in-law. What is there for me to be scared of?!" Wang Fu pushed him away.

Chu Zhongtian and Qin Wanru exchanged silent looks.

Zu An was also struck speechless. Even if you hit someone, you shouldn't hit them in the face! Haven't you gone a little too far?

He was just about to retort, but Chu Chuyan immediately grabbed his arm to prevent him from doing anything rash.

Only then did she walk up to greet Wang Fu. "I pay my respects to uncle."

"So Chuyan was here." Even though Wang Fu hadn't treated Chu Zhongtian with any respect, his tone subconsciously softened when he saw Chu Chuyan.

Zu An scoffed inwardly. Pah, men!

"This matter cannot be laid at Ah Zu's feet. The idea to invite Yuanlong to the Immortal Abode was mine," said Chu Chuyan.

"Your idea?" Wang Fu was shocked. He really couldn't figure out why a cold and aloof girl like Chu Chuyan would be involved in this matter. Was she saying this just to shield her husband?

"Indeed. We wanted a way to express the Chu clan's goodwill without others finding out. I wanted to dissolve the crisis between us..." In a quiet voice, Chu Chuyan explained to him what had transpired.

Wang Fu's expression grew gloomy. "Even though your plan was good and rather low-profile, why did something happen to Yuanlong as soon as they separated? Was it just a performance put on by all of you?"

"Why does uncle think this way?" Chu Chuyan replied. "Even though two hundred thousand taels of silver doesn't seem like a small amount, it isn't considered a large sum for either of our clans. Would we really put on such a performance just to get back this bit of money? I'm sure uncle understands our desire to ease the tensions between our allied clans."

Wang Fu was shocked. "Could it be that Sang..."

Chu Chuyan shook her head. "I do not dare speak rashly. But your esteemed son should still be okay. Since Chen Xuan didn't kill him outright, but instead went through the efforts of kidnapping him, this tells us he has other schemes in mind. He wouldn't harm your son's life if that's the case."

"Chen Xuan, that ruthless and cold-blooded Great Bandit!" Even though Chu Chuyan's words were extremely logical, Wang Fu was still filled with endless worry. When he heard Chen Xuan's name, his limbs immediately went cold.

He suddenly glared at Zu An. "It's all your fault! I heard that Chen Xuan wanted to kill you. He surely ran into our Yuanlong while following you!"

Zu An was speechless. He really was being wronged!

Forget it. I won't argue with you since you're just concerned about your son.

Chu Zhongtian replied in his stead. "Brother Wang doesn't need to worry. Our Chu clan will definitely do everything we can to rescue Yuanlong."

"All right. For brother Chu's sake, I won't go too far today. However, pardon me for using such harsh words. If anything ends up happening to Yuanlong, me and your Chu clan will have unfinished business!" Wang Fu turned around with an angry huff and stormed off, his subordinates trailing behind him.

Qin Wanru quivered with anger as she watched them leave. "Absolutely preposterous! It seems like any random person dares to strut around our Chu clan now, almost as if they are the dukedom in Brightmoon City!"

Chu Zhongtian smiled bitterly. "There is no need to brood over this. You know just how grim our situation is as well. The Wang clan is one of our few allies, and we still need their help. Moreover, something happened to their clan's beloved son. Surely we can forgive him some loss of self-control."

Qin Wanru snorted. "You are always considerate to others, but when has anyone else been considerate to you?"

Chu Zhongtian's voice grew heavy. "I do not treat others well in hopes that they treat me the same way. I only seek a clear conscience."

Qin Wanru realized she had gone a little too far. She held his arm and said apologetically, "You really are a good person."

Zu An rolled his eyes from the side. Can you two oldies get a room? If you keep doing this, Chuyan and I will give you something to watch too.

When he turned to Chu Chuyan, however, he saw that she was frowning, clearly trying to figure a way out of this situation. "If we cannot successfully rescue Wang Yuanlong, the alliance between the Chu clan and the Wang clan is done for." She sighed. "If I had known this was going to happen, I wouldn't have done all of this. I should have just sent the silver directly to the Wang clan."

Zu An jumped in to console her. "How can you be blamed for this? No one can ever predict the future."

"I'm not in a great condition now, though. I don't have any ability to investigate Wang Yuanlong's whereabouts." Chu Chuyan bit her lip. These days, after undergoing Zu An's treatments, normal activities weren't a problem for her. However, if she used any ki, her injuries could worsen.

She had always been strong since she was young, and her current weakness made her feel extremely uncomfortable.

"Don't worry," Zu An said, "just leave it to me. I will definitely rescue Wang Yuanlong."

"How will you find him?" Chu Chuyan said nervously.

Zu An said, "We'll start with Plum Blossom Sect's properties in the city. I'm positive that Chen Xuan should be hiding out in one of them."

"All right, but be careful. Bring a few more guards along with you," Chu Chuyan said.

Zu An laughed loudly. "I definitely can't bear to have anything happen to me with such a pretty wife waiting for me at home!"

Chu Chuyan blushed. "Pah! Not even a single shred of decency."

Zu An left the Chu clan estate, heading straight for the academy to find Jiang Luofu. Since the other party was already making preparations to aid his takeover of the Plum Blossom Sect, she would have looked into the details. With her input, it would make it that much smoother to find Chen Xuan.

...

While Zu An hunted for Chen Xuan's whereabouts, Chen Xuan found himself on an island, located in the center of the lake that sat on the outskirts of the city.

He was currently surrounded by a large group of tough men wielding blades.

Chen Xuan stood at the very center, completely unfazed. "I came to meet with the boss of your gang. Is this how the Whale Gang treats their guests?"

"Disgraceful! Do you think our boss is someone you can meet with just because you want to?!"

"How did you even find out that our Whale Gang was here?"

"There are so many guards patrolling this place as well. How did you get all the way here?"

...

Chen Xuan laughed loudly when he heard their questions. "The authorities might not be able to find your Whale Gang, but how could I, Chen Xuan, have any trouble?"

"Chen Xuan?"

"Blackwind Stockade's Great Bandit!"

Chen Xuan was so infamous that his name was used to scare children at night.

These men, who had acted tough in the beginning, immediately grew uneasy when they learned his identity. All of them backed up a few steps.

Bracing himself, a daring troop leader spoke up. "Our Whale Gang has never interfered with your Blackwind Stockade. What did you come here for?"

Chen Xuan shrugged, his palms open. "Relax, I didn't come here today to kill. I wanted to discuss a potential business opportunity with your Whale Gang boss."

"Since Stockade Master Chen roams the underground world as well, you ought to know that our boss never receives guests," replied the troop leader.

Chen Xuan smiled. "I heard that the boss of the Whale Gang is extremely mysterious, and has never been seen in public before. Some say that the leader is a beautiful woman, while some say that it's a hunchbacked elder, yet others say that he is a tough and domineering man. I really am interested in seeing what your boss looks like."

"Don't tell me you're planning to get in through brute force?" The Whale Gang members' expressions grew worried, and they tightened their grip around the hilts of their blades.

"If I, Chen Xuan, wish to go somewhere, would you all be able to stop me?" Chen Xuan snorted arrogantly. He released a powerful, oppressive aura.

The Whale Gang members weren't his match at all. It immediately became hard for them to breathe, and they subconsciously backed away.

Only a few who still possessed some strength held on bitterly.

"Let him come in." At this moment, a soft and gentle voice suddenly came from a distance away.

The voice was clearly altered. It was hard to tell if it was a man or a woman.

The Whale gang members showed no surprise by this interruption. Instead, they respectfully moved to the side to open up a path.

Chen Xuan walked straight through with a smile.

He arrived in front of a house, and the two doors opened on their own.

Confident in his own strength, Chen Xuan felt no fear. He went in.

A figure sat behind a screen. "On the topic of maintaining mystery, Blackwind Stockade's Master Chen isn't inferior to me at all. Why have you suddenly decided to appear around the city?" It was the same voice as before.

"The reason I came to visit the gang boss is naturally to express my sincerity." Chen Xuan smiled and said, "I just never expected the illustrious boss of the Whale Gang to actually be a woman."

"Oh? What makes you so certain that I am a woman?" The one behind the screen said with genuine curiosity.

"I am someone with a special skill that makes me extremely sensitive to women. Even without looking, just a whiff of the surrounding air is enough for me to know that the gang boss is a woman, and quite the beautiful woman at that." Flames filled Chen Xuan's eyes. His plan had been just to conduct some business, but he had never expected this pleasant surprise.

Light laughter drifted out from behind the screen. The voice lost its deliberate alterations. Sure enough, it was the voice of a woman, delicate like that of an oriole, but also full of warmth, like enjoying a cup of tea on a rainy night.

"I didn't expect Stockade Master Chen to have such a miraculous ability. I won't treat my exposed identity as a loss." The woman laughed gently. "Stockade Master Chen has good luck. I'm not usually on the island. If not for some special circumstances that happened today, you might not have been able to meet with me."

Chen Xuan laughed loudly. "My luck has always been good."

"Anyone who can remain free and unfettered while under the constant attentions of Brightmoon Duke and the City Lord obviously has good luck," the woman sighed in admiration.

"The same could be said about you, my lady. Do we not share the same fate?" Chen Xuan was curious about how she looked. Her pleasant-sounding voice truly caressed one's heart.

If it was a different time, he would already have ripped the screen apart.

But the Whale Gang had done quite well for themselves these past few years, and not even he knew how much strength they had backing them. He dared not act too recklessly.

He pulled a chair over and sat down. He needed to better understand the situation first.

That woman clearly didn't have much interest in idle chatter. She immediately brought up the main matter at hand. "Why did the stockade leader insist on meeting with me today?"

Chen Xuan's tone grew serious. "I came here to offer you a business opportunity."

