

Immortal 291

Chapter 291: Warning

To be honest, even Qin Wanru herself regretted entering that room. The two of them had been doing... those things earlier. Would it even be appropriate for her to go in now?

Despite her misgivings, she braced herself and went in.

There still seemed to be a hint of love and tenderness in the air. Qin Wanru's heartbeat couldn't help but quicken.

However, when she saw her daughter lying silently on the bed, she still turned pale with fright. "Chuyan, what's wrong? Did that rascal say something to make you unhappy?"

Chu Chuyan opened her eyes, her face going completely red. "Mom, why did you come in?"

"Don't worry about why I'm here. How are you feeling?" Qin Wanru began examining her with her hands. She discovered that her body wasn't as cold as before—instead, it possessed slightly more ordinary warmth.

Stranger still, her body seemed to have become much more limp than before, as if all of her bones had melted.

"Not... not too bad..." Chu Chuyan replied, her face still red.

"Then why are you so weak? You can't even sit upright," said Qin Wanru in distress.

"It's nothing, I'm just a bit... a bit tired." Chu Chuyan's voice was extremely soft.

She was thankful that Zu An had helped her put on her clothes before he left. If not, she would be even more embarrassed right now.

"Too tired?" Qin Wanru was stunned. But she was an experienced person after all, and it didn't take her long to understand what was going on. She also began to blush.

They lapsed into a strange silence for a while.

Hesitantly, Qin Wanru spoke, worried for her daughter's safety. "Ah Zu said just now that... he needs to treat you a few more times before you are fully recovered. How do you feel about that?"

"Ah?!" Chu Chuyan cried out in alarm. She felt that her ki flow was already extremely smooth, although her body itself was still a little weak. However, she couldn't be certain. "May... be."

Either way, the two of them had already done this more than once. Once more wouldn't make any difference.

Besides... besides, the treatment process is still... still pretty enjoyable. She had never felt so good ever since she was little.

Qin Wanru noticed her daughter's shy expression. How could she not know what was going through her daughter's mind?

She never expected this prideful and cold daughter of hers to be subdued by that type of guy.

Sigh, even though I could go on all day about his faults, he is at least well qualified in this area...

"Mom, are you okay?" Chu Chuyan noticed her sudden blank expression, and nudged her out of curiosity.

"Huh? It's nothing." Qin Wanru snapped out of her daze, clearly still a little flustered. "Enough, enough, you should get some good rest. I'll make sure the others do not disturb you."

She hurriedly took her leave.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the estate, Zu An brought Yue Shan to see Chu Zhongtian.

Chu Zhongtian took the initiative to ask Zu An about his daughter's condition. When he learned that she was all right, he exhaled in relief.

Only when he was completely at ease did he ask Yue Shan, "Were you able to save young master Wang?"

"We were about to rescue him, but..." Yue Shan wanted to say something, but he hesitated.

"What's wrong?" Chu Zhongtian asked.

Yue Shan replied, "I learned from young master Wang that his resistance was broken by his captors' vicious methods. He told them everything about the Wang clan's caravans that transported the salt permits. I was worried that something major was about to happen, so I sent someone ahead to contact the Wang clan first. Unfortunately, I do not know how the Wang clan transports their salt permits, so I couldn't make any more specific arrangements. That is why I must ask Master Chu to discuss things with the Wang clan and make preparations."

"What?!" Chu Zhongtian got to his feet. The Wang clan delivered provisions to the border in exchange for large quantities of salt permits, which the Chu clan would then purchase off them.

Even though a portion of them was reserved for the Zheng clan, the Yuan clan, and other clans, the bulk of it belonged to their Chu clan.

If something happened to these salt permits, they would have no way of selling their salt. That would be a huge disaster!

He couldn't sit still any longer. He made haste to the Wang clan estate, with Yue Shan following closely behind him.

"Has young master Wang been injured? Was he crippled?"

"He has not. Despite the abuse that he's suffered, he should recover after some time."

"Thank goodness. We didn't let down brother Wang in the end. By the way, did you all catch Chen Xuan?"

"We didn't. Chen Xuan was not there. We wouldn't have been able to carry out this task so smoothly otherwise."

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Zu An watched those figures leave in silence, wondering why he had been left behind.

They were all in such a panic that they completely forgot about him.

Whatever, I already did what I had to.

Zu An stretched his body lazily. That process just now wasn't pure enjoyment for him. He still had to pay close attention to the changes in her body and guide the primordial ki towards the channels that needed repair.

Sigh, this really eats away at my life force...

He was physically tired as well. He just wanted to go back and sleep.

When he returned to his room, he jumped in fright at the mess. "What the heck? Was there a thief?"

An icy voice came from directly behind him. "Two women were fighting over you here. Did you not know about this?"

"Two women?"

Zu An was stunned. He couldn't figure out what was going on.

"Hmph, Pei clan's young miss and that Immortal Abode's Lady Qiu." Old Mi couldn't hold back a sigh.

"There are indeed outstanding talents in every generation... Those two are still so young, yet they already possess that level of cultivation. The younger generation will truly surpass us in time."

Zu An cursed silently. A battle between two beauties would have definitely been a stunning sight, yet all you were paying attention to were their cultivation levels? Are you even a man?

At the same time, he realized that Pei Mianman must've come looking for him today, and just happened to run into Qiu Honglei.

Sigh, it seems like having many women isn't a good thing after all! What a pity that I wasn't here when it happened... so many Rage points were wasted.

Old Mi suddenly appeared in front of him. He squinted at Zu An's face from up close.

Zu An jumped in fright and hastily took a step back. "Elder, what's wrong?"

I hope this old man doesn't swing that way man... Why am I getting scared from his look?

"I was checking to see just what kind of charm you have. Even though you look all right, you're not at a ridiculously high level. Why do so many girls like you?" Old Mi's wrinkled face was full of confusion.

"That young miss from the Pei clan and Lady Qiu have both seduced their fair share of men. Why would they care about you?"

"I'll get upset if elder talks to me this way! Isn't it because I am too charming?" Zu An said angrily.

“You’re too charming?” Old Mi sneered. “Where does this charm come from? From the fact that you are a drafted son-in-law? Or that your cultivation is ordinary? Or that you aren’t even a man?”

Zu An cursed inwardly. Aren’t you just a lonely old man without any female companionship? Don’t be jealous just because you see others having luck with the ladies.

Keeping his thoughts hidden, he smiled apologetically and said, “Elder is wise, after all. That young miss from the Pei clan merely wishes to obtain something from the Chu clan through me. And even though I don’t know what this Qiu Honglei’s objective is, I believe she is also scheming against the Chu clan. They obviously aren’t doing all of this because they like me.”

He had already deduced that this old man was up to no good, so he didn’t dare tell him the truth. He didn’t even dare tell him that he was already a man again.

Seems like I have to be careful even when I’m around my wife. I absolutely cannot let him know.

Fortunately, Chuyan was thin-skinned, and Qin Wanru wouldn’t go around yapping about this either. Otherwise, if this old man found out that he and Chuyan had consummated their marriage, he might just explode from anger.

“At least you are aware.” Old Mi snorted. “I’ve felt rather ill at ease recently. It feels like some great calamity is looming. You absolutely must take care of yourself.”

Zu An was stunned. Why the heck are you telling me to protect myself when you are expecting some big disaster?

Could it be that this guy really cherishes me like a nephew?

Old Mi revealed a terrifying smile, then turned around to leave.

Originally, he’d felt that having Pei Mianman and Qiu Honglei around would add too many variables. However, if these devastatingly beautiful women really did start some sort of relationship with Zu An, he would be the one benefitting from it in the future.

It had already been several hundred years, yet he had never had a taste of women. It seems like the heavens do have pity! Not only am I being compensated by having Chu Chuyan as my wife, I even have a few exceptional lovers.

Haha haha~

...

Zu An turned a few things over in his mind, then he fell asleep.

Something startled him awake in the middle of the night. He discovered that there was a sword pressed against his neck.

“Why is your reaction so much slower today?” That woman in the darkness scoffed in displeasure. In the faint moonlight, he saw her large chest rise and fall as she snorted.

“So it’s you, little Mianman~” Zu An laughed. This woman was always a delightful sight.

“Who else did you think it was? Were you thinking of Qiu Honglei?” Pei Mianman retracted her sword and frowned. “Don’t call me something that disgusting.”

Yeah, you’re right. I should’ve called you big Mianman.

“Right. I heard that you got into a fight with someone. Are you injured?” Zu An sat up, subconsciously about to examine her.

Pei Mianman’s face turned red. She backpedaled away from him and sat swiftly. “How could that bitch possibly injure me?”

As she said this, she subconsciously rubbed her chest. Even now, her final blow still hurt.

“Our heroine’s cultivation is outstanding after all! How can any random thief be your match...” Zu An praised her endlessly, a load of garbage coming out of his mouth.

Pei Mianman scoffed. “Hmph, I wonder how hurt that Qiu Honglei will be if she heard you call her a thief.”

Even though she’d left earlier, there was no way she would let the matter lie just like that. She had to at least figure out who that woman was.

“How can my relationship with her ever compare to my relationship with you? Of course I’ll stand by your side!” Zu An said with an innocent face.

“There’s no way I’ll believe a man’s lies! The two of you will definitely deceive me like the last time.” Despite her words, a hint of a smile returned to her face. “By the way, I came to warn you about another matter. You need to be careful of your estate’s gardener.”

Chapter 292: Even the Heavens Want the Chu Clan Eradicated

Zu An was alarmed. “Why?”

“I can’t put my finger on it either. I just have a feeling.” Pei Mianman frowned. “I always seem to sense his gaze in my direction whenever I leave your room.

“Once or twice might be a coincidence, but I feel like I’m being spied on every single time. That’s why there’s no way that this is a coincidence. There’s definitely something strange about that person.”

The sixth sense of a woman is indeed terrifying. She can even sense such a thing! Old Mi’s cultivation is many times higher than hers.

He was just about to praise her when a shudder ran through him. He gestured towards her. “Come over here.”

Pei Mianman’s face turned red. Instead of approaching him, she backed away. “What are you trying to do?”

Zu An smiled. “I have some sincere thoughts I wish to discuss with you,” he said.

Pei Mianman was startled. A million thoughts began to race through her mind. However, her body still ended up drifting closer to him for some reason.

"You're not close enough." Zu An said. He reached out to hold her hand, then pulled her into his embrace.

Pei Mianman was caught off guard. She ended up leaning against him, his lips awfully close to her ears. She felt ashamed and embarrassed. She was just about to react angrily, but stopped as he whispered, "Don't move. The walls have ears. That is why I can only talk to you like this."

Pei Mianman was a smart person as well. She immediately calmed down, remembering the elder she just spoke about.

Zu An said softly, "You have to be careful of him in the future. You are no match for him."

The warmth of his breath made Pei Mianman's entire body suddenly anxious. She was just about to straighten her body, but his words had left her momentarily stunned. She was just about to probe further, but Zu An seized her waist, pushing her straight into the bed.

Zu An moved closer, as if he was going to kiss her on the lips.

Of course, if one looked closely, there was just an inch separating their lips.

However, this was close enough for both of them to sense the other's aura.

Seeing that Zu An wasn't actually going to kiss her, the black flame flickering above Pei Mianman's fingertips faded away. She stared at him in a daze.

"He is watching outside. Don't make it obvious." Zu An transmitted via ki, softly and just beside her ear. Old Mi's cultivation was too high, and he didn't even dare transmit sound from a distance. He didn't want to be eavesdropped on by the old man.

Pei Mianman was alarmed. Her gaze flicked towards the window. Sure enough, there was a figure just outside the window. The other party most likely hadn't noticed the shift in the moonlight, which was why she could see the slightest hint of his figure through the window.

"So you knew about him." Pei Mianman now understood. She caught on quickly, immediately hooking her arm around his neck as if this was the most natural reaction between lovers.

Zu An was about to burst inside. I can't take this much longer! Do you know just how amazing your body is? Just grabbing me like this is enough to suffocate me!

Of course, he wasn't stupid enough to say it out loud. "Are you maybe overthinking things? Have you begun to suspect everyone, now that you're running to the room of your close friend's husband all the time?"

Pei Mianman also deliberately raised her voice when she noticed what was going on. "Maybe," she replied. "The Chu clan's security has gotten more and more strict recently. I guess I'm subconsciously beginning to suspect anyone I run into."

"Hahaha, that's part and parcel of sneaking around!" Zu An said.

Pei Mianman was speechless. Aren't you getting a bit too into this?

But a wife's close friend who keeps visiting her husband... This sounds pretty interesting...

The two of them continued chatting ambiguously like two sweethearts. Old Mi soon grew disinterested and left.

He was still extremely confused. This Zu An fellow clearly can't perform down there, so why do girls still like him so much?

In terms of cultivation, I am more than strong enough to be his master. But it seems like I'm far below him in this regard.

He idly wondered if he should consult Zu An about this someday, but immediately felt that it would be too shameful.

He dismissed the thought in the end. These women were all going to be his anyway, so he'd just enjoy them when the time came. There was completely no need to learn how to chase after girls.

With that thought, his mood improved instantly.

The two in the room chatted for a while, when Pei Mianman noticed that the figure by the window had disappeared. "That should be enough, right?" she said.

"Let's wait a little longer. His cultivation is too high. It's hard for us to notice his presence," Zu An replied.

Pei Mianman had a pensive look on her face. "Is this really what you're thinking, or do you just want to use this chance to take advantage of me?"

Zu An chuckled. "A bit of both, I guess."

This honestly feels pretty damn good though.

Pei Mianman stared at him. She hadn't expected him to admit to it so directly, and she was momentarily at a loss for what to say.

Zu An also knew that they couldn't continue like this for the rest of the night, so he pretended as though he had to use the restroom. Along the way, he checked to make sure that Old Mi had really left.

"He's finally gone." Zu An exhaled in relief. Being targeted by a ninth-ranked elder really was too much.

"How high is his cultivation?" fear still lingered in Pei Mianman's heart. If not for Zu An's warning, she wouldn't have sensed his presence at all.

This was the first time she'd felt such a feeling in her life.

"Very, very high." Zu An's expression grew serious when he recalled Mi Li's past evaluation of Old Mi. In truth, he could sense Old Mi not because his cultivation was high enough, but because of his Rage system.

He'd suddenly received some Rage points from Old Mi, and that was how he had realized that they were being eavesdropped on. That led him to act quickly to deal with the situation.

Old Mi was too confident in his own cultivation, and didn't think that he'd actually been discovered. That was why he didn't suspect their conversation as being insincere.

"Why would such a person follow you around?" Pei Mianman couldn't help her curiosity.

"I don't know the answer to that either. To be honest, all of my skills come from him, but he always exerts a mysterious pressure on me." Zu An found his situation really strange. He and Pei Mianman had a shaky alliance, and they were far from being as intimate as he and Chu Chuyan were, yet he'd ended up telling all this to Pei Mianman instead of Chu Chuyan.

"Why aren't you telling Brightmoon Duke to have the Chu clan look into things for you?" Pei Mianman clearly shared his suspicions.

Zu An shook his head. "It's useless."

"His cultivation is even higher than Brightmoon Duke's?" Pei Mianman was horrified. However, she soon realized that the pressure this individual exerted on her really was far greater than Chu Zhongtian.

Zu An chuckled, refusing to comment on this.

Pei Mianman's expression had grown dark. With such an expert hidden in the Chu estate, the situation in Brightmoon City suddenly became much more complicated.

"Just pretend like you don't know anything. Don't tell this to anyone else. After all, I don't want to lose a friend like you," Zu An said seriously.

Pei Mianman was moved by the obvious sincerity in his voice. "Okay," she replied just as seriously, nodding at him. "I guess I probably won't come as often anymore." The threat that this gardener posed really was too much.

Zu An nodded. "That's a good idea. Who knows if something out of our control might happen?" He sounded reluctant. "It's a pity that I won't be able to see you every night anymore."

Pei Mianman's heart skipped a beat when she heard the sincerity in his statement. It seemed to come from the bottom of his heart. With a snort, she said, "Your wife might just skin you alive if she hears you say this."

Zu An couldn't help but laugh. "I wonder if she'll still treat you as a close friend if she finds out you've been sneaking in to visit me every night!"

Pei Mianman's face turned red. The word he'd used—sneaking—really was quite fitting.

She rolled her eyes at him. Before leaving, she said, "I'll look into this gardener in your stead. You have to be careful."

Zu An frowned. He was just about to say something when Pei Mianman said, "Don't worry. I won't tell anyone else, nor will I invite any trouble."

Then, she winked at him before disappearing into the night with a smile.

Zu An lay down on his back, still in a daze. The image of her winking really made his heart rush!

Sigh, I really am acting like a total fuckboy here...

Nonsense! She came onto me first.

The two sides of his mind continued to argue against each other as he slowly drifted off into the land of dreams.

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Even though Zu An slept soundly, others in the city were fated to pull an all-nighter.

In the Wang clan's study, Chu Zhongtian stared at Wang Fu in shock. "Brother Wang, what do you mean, the salt permits were lost?"

Wang Fu wore a bitter smile. "It's exactly as it sounds. These salt permits were supposed to enter the city today, but the caravan that was carrying them was robbed by someone before they reached the city. It's all my unworthy son's fault for leaking out this information. Our path has always been kept strictly confidential. How could they have been stolen so easily?"

"We cannot blame your esteemed son for this matter." Chu Zhongtian knew what had happened to Wang Yuanlong, but he hadn't expected to still be a step behind. Fate really was tormenting them! The salt permits just happened to be en route today. Could the heavens themselves want my Chu clan eradicated?

Chapter 293: The Chu Clan's Secret

Chu Zhongtian wasn't willing to give up just like that. "Brother Wang, is there any way to get some more salt permits?" he asked.

Wang Fu shook his head and forced a smile. "It wouldn't have been an issue in the past, but brother Chu knows that we've already suffered serious losses from the plundering of our trade station by the foreign tribes. We were barely able to scrape together this batch of salt permits with what little grain we still had stored up. It is completely impossible to purchase another batch of them."

Chu Zhongtian sank back into his chair. He felt as if he had aged a decade or more. "What can we do to make sure we can sell our salt this year?"

Deep down, he already knew that nothing could be done. He only asked this for the sake of it.

Wang Fu clenched his teeth and said, "Brother Chu, I might have a way."

"What is it?" Chu Zhongtian asked hastily.

Wang Fu said, "I've already prevented any news pertaining to the theft of the salt permits from leaking out. I won't ever admit it no matter what, so I'll just pretend no salt permits were stolen. Let's use next year's salt permits first to ride out this storm. That should give us a way out."

The salt industry was massive. Sometimes, a single year's salt permits weren't enough to cover the demand. That was why the officials kept three years' worth of salt permits in reserve just in case.

However, using these salt permits didn't come without a price. Just the costs alone were extremely high.

Normal salt permits cost 1.5 taels of silver each, while future salt permits cost 2.1 taels of silver extra per permit, when used in advance. This was equivalent to the interest on a loan, and the court also used this to control the wider salt economy, preventing the salt merchants from dumping too much salt into the market at once.

"But the cost of using those salt permits will be much higher," said Chu Zhongtian with a frown. The costs of putting the salt on the market would be three or four times greater. That was way too expensive.

Wang Fu shook his head. "Brother Chu has misunderstood my intentions. What I propose is to pretend that the future salt permits were the ones that were stolen. This way, once things settle down next year, we can return to business-as-usual. Everything will be kept a secret, and this can help us out of our current desperate situation."

Chu Zhongtian was mortified. "We absolutely must not! We'll be gouging out a chunk from the royal court! If things blow up, this will become a huge crime!"

Wang Fu said, "With brother Chu's network in Brightmoon City and my Wang clan's many years of experience, there is no way that things could spiral out of control so easily. Moreover, using future salt permits is something practiced by all the clans. How many of them have even paid their full due in taxes?"

Chu Zhongtian's voice became grave. "This was only done for a small amount of salt last year, so everyone turned a blind eye and let it pass. This time, it would be for a whole year's worth of salt! It's way too dangerous. I absolutely cannot agree to this."

Wang Fu sighed. "Brother Chu, please forgive me for being so direct, but what else can we do?"

"As far as I know, the illicit salt trade has gotten more and more out of hand, and your Chu clan hasn't been able to sell a lot of your salt, correct?"

"Your clan couldn't even sell the salt when the price of each permit was 1.5 taels of silver. If the price of each permit rises to almost 4 taels of silver, it will only grow harder for you to sell your salt. Moreover, even if you did manage to sell it, how much would your Chu clan make? The Chu clan is so large, and your expenditures are correspondingly vast. Without the revenue from your salt business, you could quickly see yourself in the red. Is that not true?"

Chu Zhongtian had had enough. He stood up suddenly. "Our Chu clan has endured for hundreds of years. This loss is still something I can shoulder."

Even though they'd suffer greatly, at worst, they could still sell off some of their ancestral property.

Just as his anger was about to bubble over, Wang Fu threw himself at his feet and held onto his legs. "Brother Chu!" he cried. "Your Chu clan can bear this burden, but our Wang clan cannot! After having our trade station plundered, our Wang clan was already on the verge of collapse! If news that our salt permits were stolen gets out, then our Wang clan is finished! Brother Chu, in all our years of friendship, I've never begged you for anything. I'm really begging you now!"

“Brother Wang, please stand up! What are you doing?!” Chu Zhongtian hurriedly tried to get him to his feet. Out of all the great clans, these two were still the closest. After decades of dealings, Chu Zhongtian had come to treat this person as a friend.

“The Wang clan is about to collapse, what is the use in this old one keeping his dignity?” Wang Fu sat on the ground, refusing to get up.

Chu Zhongtian’s face was grave. “Let me think things over. There’s just too much at stake.”

When he heard Chu Zhongtian’s change in tone, Wang Fu immediately grew overjoyed. “Thank you so much, brother Chu! I cannot thank brother Chu enough! Whether or not we succeed will depend on the will of heaven!”

Chu Zhongtian returned to his own estate. When he brought this matter up with Qin Wanru, her face darkened immediately. “There’s no way we can do this! Dear, how can you be so confused as to agree to such a thing?”

Chu Zhongtian sighed. “I’m fully aware of the dangers behind such an endeavor. But Wang Fu’s words aren’t entirely without reason. If we really do pay the advance tax for every salt permit, the costs would be too high. At that price, none of the common folk would buy it.”

Qin Wanru cut in at once. “So what if no one buys it? Our Chu clan can still shoulder the burden of a single year of lost revenue. The royal court sent Sang Hong to keep an eye on us. If we really tried something and he became aware of it, it would certainly spell trouble for us!”

“The Chu clan’s situation isn’t as great as you make it sound,” Chu Zhongtian said. “We have suffered losses for several years in a row now, and it’s only recently that things have begun to take a slight turn for the better. Even so, we cannot afford to shoulder such a burden!”

“Actually, I’ve always wanted to ask you about this,” Qin Wanru said in response. “Even though we aren’t perfect at operating our businesses, the Chu clan still has large shares in the massive salt and iron industries. Just where did all the money from these businesses go? Why do we keep suffering losses year after year?”

“I didn’t plan to hide this from you. I guess it’s because you’ve had so much else on your mind that you’ve never asked about it.” Chu Zhongtian paused. “You should know about the Salt Inspection Department, right?”

“Of course,” Qin Wanru replied.

Chu Zhongtian proceeded to tell her about the entire affair.

Because of the indecent profits on offer in the salt industry, the Salt Inspection Department had been created by the court, and was put in charge of inspecting the production, transport, and smuggling of salt.

The Linchuan Commandery branch of the Salt Inspection Department oversaw their operations in Brightmoon City. The positions of salt commissioner in this department were extremely lucrative positions that countless officials longed for.

However, because the Chu clan had been in charge of the salt trade in Brightmoon City for so many years, all those who wanted these positions had to be vetted and approved by the Chu clan.

To a certain degree, these salt commissioners were either members of the Chu clan themselves, or individuals close to the Chu clan.

However, the royal court was rife with politics. Few officials were upright, and most were involved with currying favor or greedily pursuing selfish but mutually beneficial interests with other members of the court.

Every single salt commissioner, their assistants, and even the lower-level officials under them wanted a slice of the pie.

The Chu clan's masters could only turn a blind eye as the corruption grew. Firstly, these officials were individuals close to the Chu clan to begin with. Secondly, there were many unwritten rules that governed life as an official of the royal court. This was the case for the Salt Inspection Department, as with all other departments.

Salt commissioners were often promoted to the central authorities or transferred out to serve as great local officials, forming a huge web throughout the royal court. Touching a single issue could cause a ripple effect that drew attention to everything else.

If the Chu clan dared to speak out, they could end up offending an extremely terrifying power.

As this rampant corruption festered over a long period of time, the amount siphoned off by the Salt Inspection Department reached an astronomical figure.

In the past, the Chu clan could still conceal it through clever accounting. However, when it fell to Chu Zhongtian's generation to lead, this number had already grown to the point where it could no longer be hidden.

Qin Wanru's face grew pale as she heard his account. "So you're saying that all of the money the Chu clan has made these past few years has been used to fill in the hole made by hundreds of years of greedy salt commissioners?"

Chu Zhongtian wore a bitter smile. "That's correct."

"Why?!" Qin Wanru was furious. "Why does our Chu clan have to compensate for the greed of these salt commissioners?"

"How do you think our Chu clan has managed to occupy Brightmoon City's lucrative salt and iron businesses for so long?" Chu Zhongtian countered gravely. "Could such a thing be possible purely through the fruits of our ancestors' efforts? Or was it because we've relied on the protection offered by all of those officials?"

"There was no need to worry about it before. But now that the emperor seems inclined to make a move against our Chu clan, we have to be more careful, and so we tried to fill in some of the debt created by these salt commissioners. We have to at least be able to cover it in our accounting, so that we can survive the royal court's inspections."

Chu Zhongtian paused for a moment before continuing. "This is why I was so confident that we could remain neutral despite the pressure from both the emperor and King Qi's faction. It's because we have countless backers behind us in the royal court! They surely do not wish for something to happen to the Chu clan. If it did, not a single one of them will be able to get away!"

Qin Wanru was suddenly shaken. "You handed Chuyan an account book in an extremely serious manner before. Back then, you said that it was an account book that recorded our business partners and dealings. With what you just told me, I gather that it was probably proof of the crimes committed by those many generations of salt commissioners."

Chu Zhongtian nodded. "Indeed. As long as this account book isn't lost, our Chu clan will survive, whether we're threatened by the emperor or by King Qi!"

Chapter 294: Going for a Stroll Around the Estate

Qin Wanru couldn't contain her anxiousness. "This is just dancing on a tightrope! A single mishap and we'll be done for!"

"We've no other choice. Unless we completely give up on our Chu clan, we can only steel ourselves and carry on." Chu Zhongtian looked out at the night scene outside the Chu clan estate, his voice growing heavy. "Also, over the many generations, history has proven that, as long as we keep resisting, we still hold destiny in our own two hands. If we truly give up ahead of time, not only will we be unable to preserve the foundation of our Chu clan, everyone who relies on the Chu clan for their livelihood will be finished. That is why we have to persist."

Qin Wanru patted her husband's shoulder. Her heart broke when she saw the wisps of white hair around her husband's temples. Her husband's cultivation was already extremely high, and he was in his prime. However, toiling away under the huge pressure facing the Chu clan was making his hair turn prematurely gray.

They were truly fortunate to have Chuyan help him out with many matters. Deep in her heart, she hoped that her oldest daughter wouldn't walk the same path as her father.

She hoped that Zu An could help Chuyan shoulder some of the burden.

Unfortunately, as soon as she thought of Zu An, that image immediately appeared in her mind. Her cheeks immediately grew hot.

She inwardly spat in disgust, throwing those thoughts out of her head. To her husband, she said, "Despite all that, it's still too risky to help the Wang clan this time. Wouldn't this be gifting Sang Hong a reason to drive us out, a reason he has been longing for all this while?"

Chu Zhongtian wore a worried expression. "We have no choice but to help them... The Wang clan has been our Chu clan's ally for many years. Too many things have happened to them this year. If we still don't help them out, their clan might really disappear."

"In Brightmoon City, the Yuan and Zheng clans do not get along with us, so we've always relied on our relationship with the Wang clan. Things will become much more difficult for us in the future if we let them collapse right now.

"On top of that, if we stand quietly by and watch our ally fall, who else would be willing to cooperate with us in the future? Wouldn't that be the same as pushing more people to Sang Hong's side?"

Qin Wanru nodded. "I am aware of these things as well. However, misappropriating future salt permits is too dangerous. If even the slightest rumor got out, it could spell disaster."

Chu Zhongtian held his wife's ice-cold hand. He could sense her concern. "Don't worry. Most of the salt commissioners are our own people. There shouldn't be any issues."

The salt commissioners always got along well with the Chu clan. Wang Fu knew this, which was why he had proposed this scheme.

"I hope this is the case." Qin Wanru sighed deeply. Even though her husband's hand was warm, her heart still felt completely cold.

...

The next morning, Zu An felt completely refreshed. After taking a shower, he noticed there were quite a few servants running around, which drew his curiosity.

When he saw that Cheng Shouping was also wrapped up in the commotion, he pulled him over. "What are you guys doing?"

"Of course we're going to see Lady Qiu!" Cheng Shouping replied excitedly. "Everyone is talking about how beautiful she looks while combing her hair by the window!"

It wasn't only male servants that were streaming across, there were a few maids as well. After all, none of these people would ever have a chance to go to the Immortal Abode in their lifetime. Qiu Honglei's reputation was just too great, and all of them were dying to see for themselves just how beautiful the courtesan queen from the Immortal Abode could be.

"Perfect, let's head over together then." Zu An thought about how this girl came all the way here on her own, providing him with intelligence and affection. Even though he knew that she had other objectives, it would be a bit too heartless if he didn't show any response.

"Young master, what are you in such a rush for?" Cheng Shouping couldn't help but mumble. "She's already yours, anyway. You get to see her every single day."

Zu An gave him an annoyed look. "What? Are you scared that I'll go too slowly and hold you back?"

Cheng Shouping's fawning smile appeared instantly. "How could this humble one dare? Right this way, young master!"

By the time the two of them arrived at Qiu Honglei's small residence, there was already a ring of people outside. The audible swallowing and whispers of admiration fully reflected their sincere admiration for Qiu Honglei's charm.

“God damn, she’s pretty.”

“Is it because she smiles more? I feel like she’s even prettier than the first miss.”

“How could there be such a beautiful woman in this world? Look at how pretty her red lips are! On the other hand, our kid’s mouth exists solely for eating.”

“Sigh, that’s why we can only ever hope to be servant girls...”

“Sister Snow might have been able to give her a run for her money, but she’s not even around anymore.”

...

“Young master, this way! This is a good spot.” Cheng Shouping had darted into the crowd and back out again like a rabbit. He quickly found the best viewing spot, and beckoned the young master over excitedly.

“Idiot!” Zu An had a look of disdain on his face. He strutted forward, pushing aside everyone in his way.

Cheng Shouping finally got it. Considering the young master’s relationship with Lady Qiu, there was clearly no need for him to admire her secretly from a distance.

Sigh, the young master is so cool!

But why do I suddenly feel like crying?

Zu An walked straight through the throng of people, ruffling the feathers of the ones he shoved aside.

“Who is being so arrogant?!”

“Oops! It’s the young master... Haha...”

“What young master? Who knows if he even gets along that well with our first miss.”

...

Zu An wasn’t affected at all by the whispers of the crowd. He’d already established much higher standards for himself. Why would he bother lowering himself to arguing with these fellows?

“Sigh, the young master really is daring! He’s come out in the open to court Lady Qiu’s favor. Doesn’t he know what kind of person Lady Qiu is? Why would she give him the time of day?”

Even though many people knew about Qiu Honglei’s arrival at the Chu estate the night before, none of them were clear on the details of what had happened.

The consensus in the Chu estate was that she had been invited to give a performance, either by the first miss, or by the Master and Madam. No one believed that it could be anything else.

As the crowd continued to castigate him, Qiu Honglei finally caught sight of him. She lifted her skirts and ran over to him, a big smile across her face.

The disdainful whispers immediately came to a screeching halt. This sight was just too shocking!

The famous Qiu Honglei of Brightmoon City was running towards Zu An like a girlfriend in love!

What the heck?

Damn it all!

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

"Ah Zu, you're here!" Qiu Honglei stopped in front of Zu An, her smile radiant and beautiful. Even though she'd fought against Pei Mianman the night before, her face showed no signs of fatigue. Her skin was almost glowing.

"I should have visited you last night, but it was already late, and I was worried that you wouldn't have opened your door for me," Zu An said with a laugh.

Qiu Honglei's large eyes were fixed on him. She blinked. "I wouldn't give any other man any attention if they came to me in the middle of the night, but I will always welcome a visit from Ah Zu!"

Zu An stared at her flawless face, feeling slightly flustered. He knew full well that her words weren't reflective of her true feelings, yet her sincere expression still tugged firmly at his heartstrings.

Thankfully, this absentmindedness lasted but a moment. He quickly snapped out of his daze and circled his arm around her waist. "Haha! Since you've come all the way here, let's introduce ourselves to everyone."

Qiu Honglei's entire body went rigid as she felt his arm slither around her waist. She hesitated for just an instant, then decided not to resist. Instead, she said with a smile, "What if your wife sees us and gets jealous? She seemed so angry last night. Is the first miss okay?"

If something really did happen to Chu Chuyan, that would only be even more beneficial to my plans.

Of course, I don't want her to die immediately. One or two years more would be perfect. Once she helped Zu An gain a stable footing in the Chu clan, her death would only justify further authority for Zu An.

"Don't worry, she'll live," Zu An said with a chuckle. It was as if he had read her mind.

While she was still stunned, he pulled her over in front of the gathered crowd. "Let's give everyone a bit of an introduction. This is Qiu Honglei of the Immortal Abode. Pretty, isn't she?"

Hearts shattered one after another as the onlookers saw his arm wrapped tightly around Qiu Honglei's waist, and her not offering the slightest resistance.

This guy is doing this on purpose! He ran all the way here just to show off in front of us!

You have successfully trolled Chu estate's servants for 99... 99... 99...

Qiu Honglei was somewhat surprised by his behavior. She didn't understand why he was doing this at all. Maybe he's just venting a little after being mistreated for so long.

She relaxed slightly after reaching this conclusion. She greeted the crowd with a smile. "Hello everyone, I am Qiu Honglei."

Even though her beguiling smile and charming tone were just for show, they had long been trained to perfection in the Immortal Abode. How could these servants possess any resistance towards her charm?

One by one, they felt their souls leave their bodies.

“Ah Zu, shouldn’t we meet with the Master and Madam?” Qiu Honglei asked him quietly. She clearly had little interest in these ordinary servants.

“There’s no rush.” Zu An chuckled. He pulled her back in front to face the crowd. How could he pass up such a great chance to farm Rage points? “By the way Honglei, I haven’t yet introduced you to the handsome men and pretty girls in our estate! This is our estate’s... sorry, what was your name again?”

You have successfully trolled servant A for 666 Rage points!

The crowd were collectively struck dumb. Even you don’t know who we are! Why the heck are you trying to introduce us to Lady Qiu?!

Aren’t you just trying to show her off in front of us?

You have successfully trolled the servants for 99... 99... 99...

Zu An beamed with joy. In such a short amount of time, he had already banked up so many Rage points.

Having a few close female friends around me really is a good way to rake in Rage points! Why am I such a genius?

Qiu Honglei was stunned as well. She didn’t know why this person was doing such a thing. Wasn’t this something only a petty person would do? A small seed of disdain grew within her.

Forget it. I’ll endure this for the moment, for the sake of the sect’s great undertaking.

At this time, a maid hurried over with a message. “Lady Qiu, the first miss invites you to dine with her.”

Qiu Honglei smiled to cover her inner shock. “I was just about to seek an audience with the first miss myself.” Chu Chuyan had gotten so angry yesterday that she suffered a serious injury. It even seemed as though her life could be in critical danger. However, she’s somehow already recovered after just a single night?

Whatever. I’ll use this opportunity to gather more information from her.

“So, my wife is inviting us for breakfast!” Zu An said jovially. “I’ll tag along, then.”

He didn’t know Qiu Honglei’s objective, and Chu Chuyan was still seriously injured. He really didn’t feel at ease leaving the two of them alone.

The maid grew troubled. “The first miss didn’t say anything about inviting the young master... She only told me to invite Lady Qiu.”

Quite a few of the other servants were elated by his apparent predicament.

Hmph, act cocky all you want. Did you forget that you’re nothing more than a drafted son-in-law?

Look at you, embarrassing yourself in front of Lady Qiu!

Chapter 295: I Have Always Been a Fair Person

Those he'd pissed off earlier were overjoyed. They were absolutely ecstatic when they saw him embarrass himself in front of Lady Qiu.

Who would have expected Zu An not to care at all? "My wife offered an invitation to Lady Qiu, but she didn't forbid me from joining her, did she?" he countered.

That maid grew uncomfortable. "She didn't, but..."

Zu An cut her right off. "It's all good, then. We'll head over together. I don't want her bullying our Honglei."

The maid and all the other servants were left speechless.

This damned logic demon! No one could find a suitable way to refute him.

The maid, still evidently confused, led the two of them off to meet Chu Chuyan. Eager whispers broke out among the ones left behind.

"Did I hear him wrongly? Did he just say that he was worried that the first miss would bully Lady Qiu? The first miss is such a good person—why would she bully Lady Qiu?"

"Haven't you heard? The young master plans to take Lady Qiu as a concubine."

"What? Didn't he just move in with us not too long ago? Can he even take a concubine? And even if he could, how could he secure someone like Lady Qiu? Where the heck did you hear something so ridiculous?"

"Just ask his attendant."

...

All eyes turned to Cheng Shouping, who was cheering and screaming for Zu An.

"Cheng Shouping, is what they are saying true?"

Cheng Shouping stuck out his chest. "Of course! Lady Qiu is even the one paying for her own release from the Immortal Abode!" he proclaimed, as though he was the one who had done something glorious and worthy of praise.

"No freaking way!"

"That makes no sense at all!"

"Maybe it is true. After all, Lady Qiu previously sent a personal invitation to the young master to meet with her at the Immortal Abode."

"Is there anything special about him at all, though?"

Cheng Shouping didn't hold back his adulation. "Our clan's young master is suave and confident, distinguished and elegant! His charm is top-notch! Why do you find it strange that Lady Qiu likes the

young master? Forget about Lady Qiu, even Lady Spring and Lady Summer will prostrate themselves before the young master! Don't use your own shoddy standards to evaluate our young master, none of you can even compare... wait, why are you all rubbing your fists?"[1]

"You shithead! Just because we don't dare to beat up the young master doesn't mean that we won't dare to beat you up! Why are you acting all cocky?!"

These servants were already fuming because of Zu An, yet Cheng Shouping continued to sing his praises without end, further stoking the fires of their rage. Finally, their patience reached its limits, and they fell on him with a flurry of fists and feet.

Cheng Shouping wanted to cry, yet no tears came out. The young master is the one who reaps the benefits of all this. Why am I always the one getting beaten up?

...

"Achoo!"

Zu An rubbed his nose vigorously.

"What's wrong? Did you catch a cold?" Qiu Honglei asked curiously.

Zu An giggled in reply. "I don't think so. It's probably because someone has suddenly thought of my handsome face."

Qiu Honglei smiled. "Ah Zu is so humorous."

The two of them chatted casually, which drew the ire of the maid who was leading the way. They're just a pair of cheaters!

When they finally arrived at Chu Chuyan's residence, Qiu Honglei took her time to enter. She looked at the placard on this courtyard, reading slowly out loud, "'Unvoiced Residence'... The ambience of this place is so unique, and it also has such a beautiful name. Big sis Chu truly is a poetic and refined individual. My heart feels much more at peace just reading these few words alone."

Zu An was stunned. He had never paid much attention to what this place was called, even after visiting several times. Every time he saw it, he forgot about it straightaway. He really was the uncultured one here.

"Lady Qiu has praised me in error. Your Cloud Courtyard is extremely famous as well. It's a pity that I've never had the fortune of visiting it." said a clear, cold voice. Chu Chuyan's sweet, fair, and graceful figure was already standing at the entrance. Clearly, she had heard them approaching even before they had arrived.

Qiu Honglei's expression grew strange. Chu Chuyan doesn't show any signs of the sickness or weakness from yesterday! Instead, her complexion is rosy, and her skin is even glowing! She doesn't seem at all as cold as the rumors make her out to be!

Despite her bewilderment, her lips reacted quickly. "I've always wanted to invite big sis as a guest. Unfortunately, the Immortal Abode is a dirty place. I didn't want to tarnish big sis' reputation."

“Lady Qiu’s words are too somber. I truly admire how the lady could remain unsullied after so many years in such a place.” Chu Chuyan said as she welcomed her in.

Zu An was stunned. What the heck is going on? Wasn’t this supposed to degenerate into a hellish battlefield? Why were the two of them already chatting like sisters?

Qiu Honglei shared his confusion. Chu Chuyan had clearly been fuming yesterday. Why was she able to chat with her in such a composed manner right now? Just what had happened to her overnight?

The two girls spend the rest of the time chatting idly about various topics. The only thing they didn’t talk about were things related to Zu An.

Even though Qiu Honglei constantly addressed her as ‘big sis’, Chu Chuyan didn’t show much reaction. She didn’t object to this form of address, but she didn’t explicitly approve of it either. She continued to politely call her opposite number ‘Lady Qiu’.

Zu An tried to cut in several times, but neither Chu Chuyan or Qiu Honglei gave him much attention. Each of them were completely focused on the other—how could they be bothered with him right now?

Zu An was unhappy. Something’s seriously wrong here! His plans to rake in a mountain of Rage points had fallen through.

After a few more moments of small talk, Chu Chuyan finally brought up her main issue. “Does Lady Qiu really intend to wed yourself to Zu An?”

Qiu Honglei had been waiting for this moment. “Of course,” she said with a smile.

Chu Chuyan’s expression was unreadable. “You will not refuse, even if you had to become part of the Chu clan?” she continued.

Qiu Honglei sighed. “Since Ah Zu doesn’t wish to leave big sis, I can only follow him wherever he chooses to go. To be honest, I feel quite apprehensive as well. That is why I hope that big sis will take pity on me. Big sis has a reputation of being noble and magnanimous, so I do not believe you will make things difficult for me.”

Chu Chuyan shook her head slightly. “Rumors don’t always represent facts. There is a limit to how generous a woman’s heart can be, especially when it comes to her own husband.”

Qiu Honglei’s expression grew downcast. However, she snapped out of it quickly. “I’ve heard that the shared affection between big sis and Ah Zu was merely ordinary. It seems like everyone else has been gravely mistaken.”

Zu An pounced on this opportunity. He scooted over to Chu Chuyan’s side and draped an arm around her. “Of course! Our affection for each other is off the charts! Isn’t that right, honey?”

Chu Chuyan immediately grew embarrassed. She instinctively wanted to push him away, but the events of the previous night appeared in her mind, and her entire body went limp.

Noticing the way Zu An held her, and the hint of shyness in her expression, Qiu Honglei’s confident expression faltered. Her plans were founded solely on the premise that Zu An wasn’t highly regarded in

the Chu clan. As he lay floundering, she would swoop in during his hour of need, and kick off a chain of events that would help him rise up from the mire.

However, now that she had seen the two of them like this, it was clear that the reality was far removed from her own information.

Qiu Honglei's expression grew ugly. Zu An patted his own thigh, inviting her to sit with him. He said nonchalantly, "I've always been a fair person. I promise to share myself equally between you sisters in the future!"

Qiu Honglei was bowled over, and Chu Chuyan recoiled, astounded at what she had just heard.

Just as the two were about to flip out, someone interrupted them to deliver a message. "First miss, Master wanted me to inform you that there was a huge merchant protest in front of the City Lord's Estate. It seems to have something to do with that Zheng clan butler we captured."

Chapter 296: The 'Gigolo' Strategy

"A merchant protest?" Chu Chuyan frowned. A myriad of possibilities filled her mind.

Qiu Honglei smiled. "It seems like miss Chu is very busy today. I will take my leave for now, so as not to disturb you further."

Chu Chuyan gave her a strange look. She had keenly sensed the change in the way she addressed her. Why did this girl suddenly stop calling me 'big sis'? "That won't be an issue at all. By the way, I wonder if Lady Qiu has any specific requests for when we take you into the household?"

"Let's take our time over this decision. The Immortal Abode has taken care of me for so many years. after all, and I'm sure they'll be reluctant to let me go immediately. I fear that it may be a while before I'm able to leave." Qiu Honglei's thoughts moved like lightning. Now that Zu An's status in the Chu clan was already rather high, and his relationship with Chu Chuyan was more than amicable, she had to reconsider all of her plans.

Even though Chu Chuyan found her sudden transformation puzzling, she had no desire to bring her into the estate anyway. "We'll go along with Lady Qiu's wishes, then."

Qiu Honglei stood up and bowed. As she reached the doorway, she suddenly turned around. "Oh. By the way, miss Chu, I assume that I'll be allowed to return to the Immortal Abode now?"

The Chu clan had kept her in the estate the night before in order to keep Chu Chuyan's condition a secret.

Now that Chu Chuyan was completely fine again, this was clearly no longer necessary.

Chu Chuyan clearly understood what her father's intentions were. "Of course!" she said with a smile.

Qiu Honglei nodded in acknowledgement. Her beautiful silhouette gradually disappeared into the distance.

Zu An blinked a few times. What just happened?

Why didn't she say anything to me before leaving?

"Honey, are women all this fickle?" Zu An said, clearly depressed.

Chu Chuyan snorted dismissively. "Who knows? Maybe you did something to anger her earlier."

Despite her words, she was extremely happy inside. Qiu Honglei was too pretty, after all, and she had felt tremendous pressure in the presence of such a powerful woman.

However, she quickly sorted out her emotions. She had to take care of the main matter at hand. "Ah Zu, come with me."

"Okay~" Zu An followed her, wondering how he had managed to offend Qiu Honglei. Even though he knew that she'd been pretending all along, for her to suddenly give up like this... how could he not feel frustrated?

Sigh. Women are despicable!

Chu Chuyan didn't head straight for the merchant's protest after leaving the Chu Estate. Instead, she made her way to the Zheng clan.

Having been involved in the business for so many years, she understood that, in order to solve a problem, one had to find the root. This protest was clearly the result of the Zheng clan's tricks.

The two of them arrived at the Zheng clan. Chu Chuyan requested a meeting with Clan Master Zheng Yutang, but she was informed that he wasn't present.

"If they clearly refuse to meet with us, what else can we do?" Seeing that the Zheng Clan had given them the cold shoulder, Zu An grew slightly anxious.

Chu Chuyan wasn't surprised at all. "That is why I brought you with me," she said.

"Me?" Zu An was stunned. He didn't understand what she meant.

Chu Chuyan looked at Zheng clan's entrance. "Go over and ask to meet with the Zheng clan's young miss," she said, her red lips moving quickly. "You have done her a great favor before, and she's even sought you out several times. I believe she harbors a fair amount of gratitude towards you, so she should be willing to meet with you if you ask for her."

Zu An's face immediately became gloomy. "What the heck is this? Are you sending me out like some gigolo?"

Chu Chuyan snorted. "Even I am not scared that I would be losing anything. What is there for you scared of? Just go!"

Zu An was baffled as he walked up to the Zheng clan's gates. He couldn't understand why Chu Chuyan thought she'd be the one on the losing end.

The gatekeepers of the Zheng clan looked at each other in dismay when they discovered why he had come. However, they knew that this young master never messed around when it came to such things, and relayed the message.

A while later, someone came out of the estate and addressed him. "Young master, our young miss welcomes you."

Zu An was inwardly pleased with Zheng Dan. At least he hadn't embarrassed himself by coming here.

He hurriedly turned around to invite Chu Chuyan in with him, but she shook her head.

He was just about to try to persuade her when Chu Chuyan transmitted through ki, "The Zheng clan has no intention of meeting with me. My presence would only cause them worry. You should go in alone. When you meet her, ask her about these things..."

Zu An committed her words to memory, then followed the servant inside.

This was actually the first time he'd visited the Zheng clan estate. He looked around. At first glance, the residences seemed just as luxurious as those in the Chu clan, if not more so. However, upon closer inspection, he realized that the Chu clan estate had a mysterious aura that the Zheng clan estate lacked.

This was probably the difference between an upstart clan and one that was well-established over many generations.

He passed through several courtyards, and another maid took over from his guide to lead him the rest of the way.

As they walked on further, a faint zither music drifted along the wind.

Zu An sighed with praise. "Who is playing the zither? They're not bad at all!"

"Of course it's our clan's young miss! Besides our young miss, who else could have this level of skill?" That maid said, her expression proud.

"Zheng Dan?" Her traditionally-beautiful face appeared in his mind. Truly, the zither suited her well.

The zither music slowly grew louder and more distinct. In a few moments, he was brought into an elegant and refined residence. Learning from his previous lesson, his eyes instinctively darted to the plaque above.

Zhuluo Residence![1]

"Young miss, I've brought young master Zu." That maid bowed in the direction of the residence.

"You may leave us." A voice, gentle as a flowing mountain stream, came from within the residence. Zheng Dan was leisurely playing the zither by the window.

"Understood!" The maid bowed and withdrew quietly.

Zu An couldn't contain a laugh. "You seem to care quite a bit about your privacy. Not even a maid dares to get too close," he said.

Zheng Dan smiled. "I merely do not like being disturbed when I'm playing the zither. That's why she was a bit more careful."

Zu An sighed. "Haven't I come at a bad time, then?"

"You're different." Zheng Dan revealed a sweet smile. "Ah Zu, please come inside."

Zu An sighed to himself. Why did all the women he bump into seem to have Oscar worthy acting skills?

"Commander Sang might not be too happy if he hears you say such a thing," Zu An said casually as he walked in.

The music of the zither gradually came to a halt. Zheng Dan's slender fingers rested on the zither, her eyes calmly looking into his. "Are you going to tell him?"

"Of course not." Zu An's heart skipped a beat. This girl is really trying to seduce me!

"That's good, then." Zheng Dan smiled. She stood and gestured for him to take a seat. At the same time, she poured a cup of tea for him.

Zu An looked at her from up close. She was dressed in a blue and white dress, and every single movement she made was graceful and elegant. Even her action of pouring tea was a sight in itself.

"I am surprised Chu First Miss is willing to send you in," Zheng Dan said suddenly.

Zu An didn't deny it. "Miss Zheng is exceptionally intelligent."

Zheng Dan favored him with a smile. "Isn't she afraid that I'll eat you right up?"

Zu An laughed and said, "I have no idea if she is scared, but I will be the first one to give my approval."

The perfect amount of red colored Zheng Dan's cheeks. "Since you approve, why don't you join our Zheng clan instead? Our clan surely won't treat you as poorly as the Chu clan does."

Zu An shook his head. "I wouldn't dare to, unless I was drafted into the Zheng clan as a son-in-law."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," Zheng Dan agreed straight away.

"If I am not mistaken, aren't you engaged to Commander Sang Hong?" If I were any other guy, I might have already been completely bewitched by this woman.

Zheng Dan smiled. "It's just an engagement. We haven't officially gotten married yet. There is still time. Besides, even if I really did get married to someone else besides you, I would definitely want my child to be yours."

Chapter 297: A Tool

Even Zu An—who knew all about being shameless—was completely thrown off. Wasn't this woman being way too aggressive?

Zheng Dan suddenly smiled. "I was just joking, of course. Did Ah Zu think I was being serious?"

Zu An sighed. "I really did think you were serious... Look, my heart's all in tatters now."

"I don't see a trace of heartbrokenness on your face, though." Zheng Dan re-evaluated her understanding of this man. Everyone thought he was some inexperienced virgin. However, from the

several interactions she'd had with him so far, that hardly seemed true. He was more like a war-hardened veteran when it came to this!

"That's because I'm actually pretty introverted, and I don't show much emotions on the surface." Zu An pointed to his chest. "If you don't believe me, come and press your ear against my chest. You're sure to hear the sounds of my heart shattering."

Zheng Dan scoffed inwardly. There was no way she would do such a thing! Sensing that Zu An had slowly gained control of the flow of the conversation, she hurriedly changed the topic. "Why has Ah Zu come looking for me today?"

Zu An sighed in his heart. Such a pity. "I believe the young miss is well aware of my purpose in coming here today," he said. "If this merchants' protest gets out of hand, I believe that the outcome won't be favorable for anyone."

Zheng Dan smiled and shook her head. "I do not understand what you are saying. I have only heard some rumors regarding these merchants protesting, and I fail to see how it has anything to do with our clan. Does the Chu clan peddle in false accusations?"

Zu An was unfazed. "Dandan, the two of us are already so close. Let's not treat each other like strangers. How about this, I'll be straight with you. I'll have your butler released shortly. In return, do me a favor and help calm those protesting merchants."

A satisfied smile teased the corners of Zheng Dan's lips. "Every citizen of Brightmoon City has a responsibility to ensure the safety of Brightmoon City. As one of the four great clans, our Zheng clan naturally takes this responsibility seriously."

Zu An exhaled in relief. "I'm glad to hear that."

Zheng Dan fluttered her eyelashes at him. "I have to make this clear though—I am doing this as a personal favor to you, Ah Zu. You owe me a big favor now."

Zu An chuckled and sidled up to her. "Debts of gratitude can never be fully repaid. How about I off you my body instead?"

Zheng Dan's heart skipped a beat, and she hastily took a few steps away from him. "You're so annoying," she spat, her face completely red.

"I'll return the favor the next time I get a chance to," Zu An said with a laugh. He waved a hand in farewell and left, grinning ear to ear.

Zheng Dan gently bit her lips as she watched his departing figure. For some reason, she didn't feel the slightest disgust at his naughty antics. Instead, she found them refreshing, and they were something that she looked forward to.

"Sigh, I've really gone crazy..." Zheng Dan muttered to herself, covering her burning cheeks.

Zu An suddenly stopped in his tracks and turned around. "Dandan, do you know who is the Whale Gang's boss?" he asked.

Zheng Dan shuddered. "How would I know? Why would you ask this?" she said hastily.

“Nothing, just checking. I’ve heard that this fellow is exceedingly mysterious, and no one even knows their gender. I thought that Dandan might know something, since you have access to so much information,” Zu An said with an innocent smile on his face.

Zheng Dan recovered her composure and said gently, “I must disappoint Ah Zu. I really do not know anything about this. I don’t think there are many in Brightmoon City who know either.”

“I’m quite curious about that gang boss too. I hope I can meet this boss one day,” said Zu An.

A strange smile suddenly appeared on Zheng Dan’s beautiful face. “I believe the two of you will meet in the future.”

Zu An nodded. “I think so too.”

Zheng Dan’s brows furrowed with suspicion as she watched Zu An disappear into the distance. Does this fellow know something? How could he possibly know, though?

As Zu An walked out of the main entrance, Chu Chuyan hurried over to him. “So? How did it go?”

Zu An shook his head, a grave expression on his face. “Zheng Dan did not admit to their involvement with the merchants’ protests. She claims her hands are tied as well. Unless...”

“Unless what?” Chu Chuyan enquired further.

“Unless I leave the Chu clan and become the Zheng clan’s young master.” Zu An said in a deadly earnest manner.

Chu Chuyan’s face grew cold. “You agreed?”

“That’s why I came out to ask you for your opinion,” Zu An said, chuckling slightly.

Chu Chuyan narrowed her eyes, a dangerous glint appearing within them. “Do you feel good about yourself? That so many girls like you?”

Zu An’s expression cleared up immediately “Absolutely not!” he protested in a panic. “No matter how many beauties there are out there, I will only choose you alone!”

However, as soon as Chu Chuyan’s expression loosened slightly, she heard him continue on, “You clearly said before that you didn’t mind if I chased after other girls, though.”

Chu Chuyan was left speechless.

This guy really loves to annoy people!

“Let’s go. We’ll try to think of another way.” Chu Chuyan turned around to leave.

Zu An sidled up to her. “You know... I don’t really mind sacrificing myself... Haha... It’s all for the sake of the Chu clan after all.”

“Hmph! It’s probably just because you think that Zheng Dan is pretty.” Chu Chuyan grunted resentfully. “I refuse to believe that there is no other way!”

“You’ve only just begun to recover! Please don’t get too worked up!” Zu An panicked when he saw how angry she was starting to become. “Zheng Dan has already agreed that the Zheng clan will contain their subordinates as long as we release butler Hou Yun.”

Chu Chuyan suddenly turned around to look at him.

“What’s the matter? Are you that surprised?” Zu An asked with a smile.

“You tricked me!” She thought about how sulky she had become after hearing what he’d said. Annoyed, she immediately chased him down and began to smack him.

“Wait! Please, be gentle!”

Chu Chuyan’s face blushed when she heard his screaming. This was exactly how she’d been pleading with him last night. She lost all the will to continue beating him.

Worried that she might start beating him again at any moment, Zu An hurriedly said, “Honey, I believe that there’s a huge connection between the Zheng clan and the illicit salt trade.”

Chu Chuyan rolled her eyes. “Do I need you to tell me this? She showed up to block your path during your investigation, and we even caught the Zheng clan’s butler on the pier. Even a blind man can tell that they have a connection to the illicit salt. The only thing missing is proof.”

She was deeply worried. The salt smugglers alone were already a headache to deal with. Having the Zheng clan backing them—not to mention that the Zheng and Sang clans were engaged—made rooting out the illicit salt business seem an impossible task.

She was in charge of many of the Chu clan’s businesses, and was fully aware of the effects of the illicit salt trade. The Chu clan’s revenues were in steep decline. If such a situation continued, the Chu clan might not be able to finance their massive debt much longer.

Zu An interrupted her thoughts. “Zheng Dan should know who the Whale Gang’s boss is!”

“How are you so certain?” Chu Chuyan asked curiously.

“I deliberately tried to test her, and her reaction was a little strange...” Zu An recounted what had happened earlier.

Chu Chuyan’s eyes brightened. “It seems like there is still hope in dealing with the illicit salt trade. From today on, try to find a way to get closer to Zheng Dan. I... I won’t mind even if... even if you have to employ some of your masculinity.”

Chapter 298: Are You Okay?

Zu An immediately jumped in shock. “Even if you don’t mind, I do! Do I look like someone who would sell my body like that?”

Chu Chuyan’s face turned slightly red. She also felt like she was going a little too far by asking her husband to do such a thing “Sorry... I’ve been slightly stressed over the Chu clan’s matters recently, so I blurted that out without thinking. Please don’t take those words to heart.”

Zu An waved his hand. "If things are that hard for you, then your husband needs to help share the burden! I'll do whatever I can to get any information from Zheng Dan."

"Hold on a minute. I don't think we should proceed with this plan." Chu Chuyan suddenly recalled what happened when she had him approach Qiu Honglei the last time. A few days after she had sent him to meet her, this Qiu Honglei had appeared screaming and crying, going on and on about how she absolutely had to be married to Zu An. Was the same thing going to happen a second time?

Zu An held her hand. "As long as it can help you, what is my own dignity worth?" he said seriously.

Chu Chuyan's heart softened, and her voice also grew extremely warm. "Ah Zu, I've let you down."

Only when Chu Chuyan returned home did she feel like something was amiss. Why did she feel as though something wasn't quite right?

By then, Zu An had already been dragged off to the academy by Chu Huanzhao.

Chu Huanzhao scuttled over to Zu An on their way to the academy and poked him with her whip. "Just what is going on between you and that Qiu Honglei?"

Zu An's eyes darted to the Wailing Whip. "I'll tell you after you put away the Wailing Whip."

"You're no fun." Chu Huanzhao pouted. She put away the whip, then she looked at Zu An.

Only then did Zu An say, "There is absolutely nothing going on between the two of us."

"Who do you think you're trying to fool?!" Chu Huanzhao sneered. "That girl has already pursued you all the way to our doorstep! I've even heard that she said she wouldn't marry anyone but you!"

"Really? I guess that makes sense, though. I'm just too charming, after all... Don't worry, there will be more girls crying and begging to be mine in the future, so you'll get used to it." Zu An said nonchalantly.

Cheng Shouping's ears pricked up when he heard this. The young master is so badass!

I'll recognize the young master as my big bro wherever he goes in the future, even if he is no longer the Chu clan's young master!

When he thought of this, the hurt from his previous beatings suddenly stopped troubling him.

Chu Huanzhao blushed when she heard this. "Stupid brother-in-law, you don't feel any shame."

Zu An laughed while Chu Huanzhao threw tantrums along the way. They quickly arrived at the academy.

After attending several classes, Zu An returned to his staff residence for a quick rest.

With his current cultivation and knowledge, the lectures he attended in the Yellow class now lacked much meaning.

Moreover, because he was also a teacher in the academy, his colleagues turned a blind eye when he skipped classes.

Should I have a chat with the gorgeous principal and ask her to transfer me to Sky class? Zu An was hesitant to do so. That would draw too much attention to him, especially since his aptitude was still

publicly known to be poor. It wouldn't be easy to convince everyone else that such a transfer would be justified.

Even if Jiang Luofu used her authority as the principal, he would probably have to have his aptitude tested again. Wouldn't his transcendent-level aptitude be exposed then?

He also understood just what the transcendent-level aptitude meant after his experience treating Chu Chuyan. Many people would come looking for him once this information was exposed.

He would be perfectly okay if they were all pretty girls. However, if some ugly men came seeking his services, he'd rather die than offer it to them.

There was Old Mi, who was always asking him to pay attention to the Wei clan's situation. If he left Wei Suo's side, Old Mi would definitely grow suspicious.

Sigh, it seems like this issue of transferring to another class is hopeless.

However, staying in the Yellow class is just a waste of time!

As this conflict played out within him, there came a knock from outside.

"Hm?" Zu An looked at the time. Weren't there classes currently going on? Who could this be?

Was it Shang Liuyu?

He jumped up happily and rushed towards the entrance.

Zu An suddenly remembered something. I forgot to get that seashell back from Qiu Honglei. He always forgot about this whenever he met with that woman.

He was just wondering how he was going to explain things to the other party when he noticed that a girl with bright eyes and a kind demeanor was standing at his doorstep. She possessed a beauty that was very much on par with Shang Liuyu.

"Aren't you going to welcome me in?" This young lady said with a smile.

"Of course you're welcome. Shouldn't you be in class right now, though?" Zu An was slightly confused. This girl was Zheng Dan, whom he had just met this morning.

Zheng Dan walked straight in. "Aren't you supposed to be in class too?"

"But I'm a teacher..." Zu An closed the door behind him, his voice slowly losing its confidence.

"If teachers can skip class, why can't students as well?" Zheng Dan blinked at him, her appearance charming and lovely.

"Of course you can. However, I've always thought of you as an extremely obedient person. I didn't think it was possible for you to do something like skip classes." Zu An heard from many students that Zheng Dan was the epitome of a well-bred lady from a prestigious clan. Every single movement she made was full of elegance, without a single flaw.

“Being a good girl for too long starts to get tedious, and I crave for something stimulating once in a while. I believe Ah Zu understands this well.” Zheng Dan looked at him questioningly. Her moist, pink lips twitched in a hint of a smile.

Zu An’s heart skipped a beat. The last time, Zheng Dan had tried to seduce him in this very room. The two of them had almost set a wildfire ablaze back then.

Why did this woman come here today? There’s no way she’s here just to fool around.

“In that case, then let’s do some stimulating things together.” Zu An smiled and moved closer to her.

Hmph! You think I’m scared? It’s not as if I’ll come out of this the loser!

I’ve even got my wife’s permission!

“Sure~” Zheng Dan flashed a charming smile, as if silently inviting him in.

Zu An was just about to touch her when Zheng Dan said, “Teacher Zu, this student has been practicing a set of palm techniques, but I’m far from proficient at it. I wanted to ask the teacher to give me some pointers.”

A shiver ran down Zu An’s entire body when he heard her call him ‘teacher’. There’s no way this woman has watched any student-teacher romance dramas, is there?

“I’m not even a cultivation teacher. Why don’t you look for Teacher Bai instead?”

Zheng Dan grunted. “I can’t tell if that fellow wants to be a guy or girl. I’ll never want to be taught by someone like him.”

“But the Zheng clan should have many teachers, right? Why don’t you seek out one of them?” Zu An couldn’t help but ask.

“They see me as their young miss. How could they possibly dare to hit me for real? Besides, they are all men, so it’s not appropriate for us to engage in any practical training.” A bashful look appeared on Zheng Dan’s face.

Zu An grew depressed. “Am I not a man too?”

Zheng Dan’s red lips parted slightly. There was a slight pause before she said, “You’re different.”

Holy shit... if I wasn’t already used to the different plots of movies and dramas, I would be dancing in the palm of her hand right now.

Zu An deliberately put on a troubled look. “You know that I am a Yellow class student. How could I possibly be a match for someone from the Sky class?”

“Hmph! Who are you trying to fool? You beat Yuan Wenlong in the Clans Tournament, and you defeated Shi Kun in the dungeon. How many others can boast of such a level of cultivation?” Zheng Dan stamped her foot and pouted playfully. “Is it because you don’t want to teach me?”

Zu An sighed. “I really don’t know what I can teach you...”

Almost all of his own skills had been obtained through cheats. He really didn't have much that could be taught to others.

Zheng Dan didn't seem to mind at all. "It's okay. You can just spar with me freely."

"How could I be that shameless? Don't blame me if you want to cry from the pain later~" Zu An cracked his knuckles and snickered.

Before he even finished his sentence, the entire world was flipped upside down. He had been thrown into the ground.

Zheng Dan bent down, an innocent look on her face. "Ah! Sorry, I must have used too much strength just now. Ah Zu, are you okay?"

Chapter 299: Playing With Fire

"No! Of course I'm not okay!"

Zu An angrily crawled to his feet. Being flung to the ground so easily by this normally weak and delicate-looking girl was just too shameful.

"I wasn't ready just now. Again!"

Zheng Dan reached her hands out to support him. A sweet smile appeared on her face. "Sure!"

Zu An had to admit that this woman deserved her spot in the Top Ten of the Sweetheart Ranking. Her face and figure were both top-notch.

Of course, everyone else in the top ten were also exceptional beauties.

Only that brat Huanzhao seems to fall a little short.

However, she was still rather young. Given a few more years, she'd probably blossom into a great beauty as well, just like her older sister.

"Ah Zu, are you ready?" There was a big smile on Zheng Dan's face.

"I'm ready." Zu An didn't allow himself to act carelessly again. Ki covered his entire body, tensing it like a compressed spring.

Despite this, he was flipped upside down again. His body fell heavily to the ground.

"Ow... my back..."

What the heck is up with this girl today? Why is she suddenly so fierce?

The most irritating part of all of this was that her smile was only growing sweeter!

Zheng Dai helped him up to his feet again. "Sorry, I should have gone a bit easier on you," she said with an apologetic smile.

Zu An stared at her silently.

Was this woman doing this on purpose?

“Again!”

Zu An still wasn’t convinced. He assumed a ready stance again.

Surprisingly, Zheng Dan refused him. She shook her head and said, “I think we should stop. All of your strength has been invested into your movement and sword techniques, and so you lack training in your close combat skills. I forgot about this earlier. I truly am sorry.”

Even though she was apologizing, a triumphant look twinkled in the corners of her eyes. Everything that happened today had been done on purpose!

The Sang clan had ordered her to investigate the mysterious expert backing Zu An. She had almost been exposed the last time she tried to pry into his secrets, so she had no choice but to take a more careful approach.

She finally thought of a way to do so.

Her goal today was precisely to humiliate Zu An. She didn’t think any man could accept such shame.

He’d definitely want a chance to redeem himself.

She’d seen firsthand his prowess at swordplay, and didn’t dare to challenge him to a duel using swordplay, in case she slipped up. However, the gap between their skill levels at hand-to-hand combat was just too vast!

In order to be able to beat her, Zu An might ask the hidden expert backing him for advice. As long as that expert passed on a method to him, she could use it to deduce that expert’s background.

Moreover, even if she couldn’t figure out who that expert was, she would be certain that he at least had someone backing him.

Zu An was stunned. He seemed to have heard very similar words two days ago.

Back then, Pei Mianman had given him a method to protect himself if he ever encountered Chen Xuan while unarmed.

That technique she had taught him back then was none other than the Entangling Feathersilk Art!

Sigh, too many things have been going on recently. I almost forgot about this.

Zu An carefully recalled the technique, then calmed his nerves. “Don’t worry. It will definitely be different this time.”

Zheng Dan snickered inside. All men are the same! They just can’t let go of their pride.

She had fully expected Zu An’s words. Zheng Dan smiled and reached out her hand. “All right, let’s go again.”

As soon as she said that, her hand wrapped around his arm like a snake. Having prepared her stance, she planned to throw him again.

Out of the blue, his hand flowed gracefully like water, and he gently freed himself from her grasp, while turning the tables on her and grabbing her wrist.

Zheng Dan was alarmed. She twisted her wrist, relying on her flexibility to pull her hand away. “What is this...”

Zu An didn’t give her a single moment to catch her breath. Before she could even finish her sentence, he seized the opportunity to continue his offensive.

Zheng Dan realized that his technique was exceptionally exquisite, containing several unexpected moves. She immediately gathered her focus. She couldn’t afford any distractions at all!

In the blink of an eye, the two of them exchanged over ten moves.

Zheng Dan was completely bewildered. Even though she rarely engaged in actual fights, she had yet to meet someone who could match her skill in this area. She had always been able to subdue her opponent in just a few moves.

However, this Zu An employed a really strange set of techniques that seemed well on par with hers. She almost lost her center of gravity in more than a few instances.

If Zu An had started with this technique, she wouldn’t have found herself in such a difficult situation. She would have gone all out from the start.

However, having managed to easily throw Zu An a couple of times, she had been convinced that he had almost no experience in unarmed combat, and let down her guard.

Unexpectedly, this guy had pulled out such a strange technique. Caught off guard, she lost the initiative.

Seizing the initiative was extremely important in hand-to-hand combat.

The one who gained the initiative from the start would always have the initiative.

Now that she had lost the initiative, it became extremely hard to turn things around.

Wave after wave of his attacks crashed down on her. He didn’t give her a single window of opportunity, and it was all she could do just to counter his moves.

Zu An’s Entangling Feathersilk Art had started off slightly unpolished. However, the longer the fight went on, the smoother and easier it was to execute.

After close to a hundred moves, Zu An finally fashioned an opening, and twisted Zheng Dan’s arm behind her back.

Zheng Dan didn’t have the courage to pop her own arm out of its socket, like Zu An had done in his fight against Pei Mianman. Her face grew horrified, and she kicked out backwards, her foot lashing out like a tail.

There was no way Zu An would give her the chance. He grabbed her leg and shoved her forward.

Zheng Dan finally lost her center of gravity while in mid-air, and she found herself pressed up against the wall in front of her.

Zu An locked her body firmly in place with his, not letting her move an inch. He leaned in close to her ear and said triumphantly, "So? Do you admit defeat?"

"I don't! You only seized the advantage through a sneak attack!" Zheng Dan said angrily while biting her lips.

If he hadn't tricked her at the start, she wouldn't have been captured, no matter how strong his technique was.

"You were clearly the one who made the first move. How can you blame me for launching a sneak attack?" Zu An said with a smile.

"You're shameless! Why didn't you use this technique from the beginning? You just had to pretend like you didn't know anything, which caused me to drop my guard!" Zheng Dan struggled, but all of her key joints were restricted. She couldn't move at all.

That was, unless she used elemental ki.

However, using her elemental ki in such a place would easily draw unwanted attention, and would only make things even more troublesome.

She decided to give up on her struggling, and use this chance to see if she could learn anything from him now.

"It's my fault for having a natural soft spot for girls. I was worried about hurting you, so I didn't go too hard on you at first. How was I supposed to know that you would go all out from the start?" Zu An could still feel his back complaining. Those throws of hers really had been fierce!

Zheng Dan bit her lip. "What is this unarmed technique of yours called? It seems pretty formidable. Can you teach it to me?"

If she could obtain the name of this technique, then the Sang clan could easily look into it.

Pei Mianman's warning was fresh in Zu An's mind. "Sorry, no can do," he said with a smile.

"Our relationship has already grown so close, and yet you still can't teach it to me? Are you in a tight spot because you need to keep this a secret?" Zheng Dan probed tentatively.

Zu An's eyes narrowed. This woman really is up to something. She's still trying to gather intelligence on the experts backing me.

If he hadn't been on guard right from the start, he might have just spilled everything out to her.

"You really are a cunning person. You're even hiding a sword inside your clothes! Are you secretly plotting against someone?" Zheng Dan snickered.

"Sword?" Zu An was stunned. He lowered his head to take a look, and his expression grew bizarre.

Zheng Dan felt a shudder run through her entire body. She too had realized what was actually going on. Her entire face flushed a bright red.

Feeling her terrifically supple body, Zu An had to admit that this woman really was top-notch.

“Get off me!” Even Zheng Dan’s ears had gone completely red.

Even though she looked like she was angry, Zu An didn’t receive any Rage points.

This woman is still putting on an act!

Not only did he not let go, he instead pressed up against her even harder. She felt his warm breath right next to her ear. “But I don’t want to let go,” he breathed. “Wasn’t this how I examined your leg the last time?”

As he said this, she felt a hand caress her thigh.

Chapter 300: Best Friends

Zheng Dan felt a shudder run through her when she sensed the heat coming from his hand, and her expression went through a myriad of transformations. She opened her mouth several times as if to say something—and yet, for some reason, nothing came out.

To be honest, Zu An couldn’t understand why she wasn’t resisting him either.

Even if this is supposed to be a honey trap, aren’t you taking it a little too far?

Well, I mean... if you insist!

Zu An decided that he wouldn’t hold back anymore. His hand reached straight into her skirt.

Tears were about to flow out of Zheng Dan’s eyes as she felt her body being invaded by another man.

However, she didn’t resist. Not even she knew why. She knew that if she were to fight back, the man behind her wouldn’t be able to do anything.

And yet, this novel experience was something she seemed to crave from the very depths of her soul.

She had been brought up in a strict household, and had always performed extremely well. She had been obedient when she was little, and now that she was older, she was the perfect example of a graceful lady. Her speech and movements were flawless.

Now that she was older, a marriage had also been arranged for her. Her fiancé was handsome and confident, and he even came from an outstanding clan. Surely, many young ladies dreamed of being with him.

Even though she never voiced any objections to this marriage, she just couldn’t bring herself to feel happy about it.

Was she dissatisfied with this fiancé?

It probably wasn’t the case. After all, even though her fiancé was not the smartest and was slightly hot-headed, he was still outstanding enough in other areas.

It was a blessing for the Zheng clan to be able to find such a qualified fiancé.

She just didn’t like this situation.

She didn't like living a life that was completely decided by others. She felt like she hadn't lived even a single day just for herself.

Only when she met Zu An—all because of the task she was entrusted with—did she suddenly feel something different.

The thrilling feeling of dancing on the edge of morality and etiquette made her heart skip.

This was a feeling she hadn't felt in more than ten years.

Even though her gentle smile was ever-present, she felt like she was merely going through the motions every single day.

She didn't have anything to look forward to.

However, after she met Zu An, she would wake up every day filled with expectation and enthusiasm.

She felt as though she were many years younger. Even though she wasn't even that old to begin with, living a life where everything had been meticulously planned out for her had made her heart age more quickly.

Zu An was different. He was different from any man she had ever met before.

He was a scoundrel, despicable, shameless...

It was as if every single negative adjective in the world could be used to describe him.

Everything that she'd been brought up to believe screamed at her that she should loathe this sort of man. However, all of this was turned completely on its head when she met Zu An.

He seemed to her to be more frank and sincere. He was free, at ease. He wasn't like all those hypocritical men around her.

Zu An's entire being seemed to exude a mesmerizing vitality.

She couldn't even describe the feeling she had. It was almost as if this man had a vigorous flame burning within him, and by being close to him, every fiber of her own being somehow came alive.

That was why she just accepted some of his disrespectful actions silently.

This would have been completely unimaginable before. She would never have let any man touch even the corner of her dress; she didn't even allow her fiancé to hold her hand!

And yet, she let this fellow treat her like this every time they met.

She even began to wonder if she was a masochist. The more he humiliated her, the more she looked forward to their next meeting.

Seeing that Zu An was truly going to take the next step, she hurriedly reached out a hand to stop him. "You can't do that. I cannot let my purity be sullied before I get married."

She wasn't an ordinary person after all, and her reason won out in the end. She clearly understood that, if the Sang clan found out she was no longer pure, the two clans would surely go to war. The

consequences of that would be too great. No matter how daring she was, she would never truly dare to go that far.

Zu An blinked at her, dumbfounded. What the heck is this woman trying to do?

Everything else is okay, but this final step isn't?

I have no idea what is happening anymore.

A knock came from the front door.

Zheng Dan seemed to have suddenly snapped out of her daze. She pushed him off and quickly straightened out her clothes. Clutching at her face, she rushed out.

Her legs gave way as soon as she took her first step, and she almost fell to the ground.

Her heart was pounding, and her entire body felt weak. If she hadn't been pressed against the wall all this time, she would have already slid down the wall.

That was why she stumbled immediately as she tried to run away.

Zheng Dan turned around and shot Zu An a resentful look. Only then did she open the door and run out.

"Ah Zu, Ah Zu~"

Shang Liuyu was knocking on the door. When the door opened, she thought that it was Zu An. She never expected a woman to leap out.

"Hm? Who are you?"

Shang Liuyu was bewildered. That woman didn't seem to have heard her at all. She didn't even turn around once before vanishing into the distance.

Only then did Zu An make his appearance. "Teacher Shang! Please come in!"

Shang Liuyu peered in the direction Zheng Dan had disappeared off to, a strange look on her face. "Who was that?"

Zu An laughed and said, "Just a student who had come to ask me for help on some arithmetic problems. Sigh. How can a warmhearted person like me disappoint such earnest and eager students?"

An ambiguous look appeared on Shang Liuyu's face. "If I'm not mistaken, that girl was Zheng Dan!"

Zu An stared at her silently for a while.

His expression became gloomy. "Sis, if you already figured out who she was, why did you even bother asking?"

Shang Liuyu's laugh contained a hint of embarrassment. "I couldn't recognize her at first, since she was covering her face. But I am quite sensitive to people's scents. It took me a while to recognize that this scent was Zheng Dan's."

If Zheng Dan had known that this person could recognize her from her smell, she wouldn't have run off in such a sorry state. There would have been no point in covering her face.

Shang Liuyu grew serious. She hesitated slightly before saying, “Ah Zu, this is probably not something I should bring up, but... as a friend, I feel like it’s my duty to warn you. I believe Zheng Dan is engaged, and so the two of you should be mindful of certain boundaries.”

Zu An was thoroughly embarrassed. “Big sis Shang, the two of us are only friends.”

Not even he was convinced by his own words.

Shang Liuyu smiled sweetly. “If the two of you really are just normal friends, then that’s fine. I do like to let my mouth run, sometimes.”

Zu An also found this situation slightly awkward. After all, this woman really was looking out for his good. He had no good reply, so he asked instead, “What did big sis need from me today?”

“My goodness, I almost forgot the main matter at hand.” Shang Liuyu slapped her forehead. Her adorable manner could drive any man crazy. “Principal Jiang sent me over to assist you in the takeover of Plum Blossom Sect’s property. If you aren’t busy right now, we can get going.”

“The gorgeous principal sent you?” Zu An was slightly shocked.

Shang Liuyu snorted. “Why would you ask that? Am I not trustworthy in your eyes?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Zu An explained in a panic. “It’s just that, in my mind, big sis Shang has always been the textbook example of bright and pure. I just never expected the principal to send you to handle such a task.”

Shang Liuyu’s bright mood clouded over slightly. “I didn’t want to come either... But I couldn’t refuse after Luofu begged me.”

“Luofu?” Zu An was a little slow on the uptake.

Shang Liuyu explained, “I’m actually really close to Principal Jiang—we could even be considered best friends. She has such a chilly demeanor and doesn’t have many true friends that she can rely on. I’m one of the only ones she could turn to for help with this affair.”

Best friend... Zu An was momentarily stunned. He couldn’t help but think of Pei Mianman and Chu Chuyan. It took him a while to snap out of his daze. But... but...

Shang Liuyu was bemused by his silence. “Are you worried that I might be in danger?” she said with a smile.

Zu An laughed awkwardly, but didn’t say anything. Out of all of the academy’s teachers, Shang Liuyu was known for her beauty, and not for her cultivation.

Shang Liuyu read his unspoken anxiety. “You don’t have to worry. Such a small matter will be easy enough to handle.”

Zu An laughed. “Of course! With big sis Shang at my side, who can stand in our way?”

With Mei Chaofeng already dead, he himself was more than enough to deal with those minions. He wouldn’t even need Shang Liuyu’s help during this cleanup.

Shang Liuyu could roughly tell what he was thinking about from his expression. She merely smiled without correcting him.

“Let’s head out, then.” Being interrupted earlier had left Zu An slightly annoyed. However, his resentment had instantly vanished once he saw that it was Shang Liuyu.

Shang Liuyu shook her head. “Wait, we need to bring one more person with us.”