

Immortal 31

Chapter 31: The Woman in the Gazebo

Zu An considered simply turning around and leaving the academy, but Cheng Shouping was eyeing him, and his lips were too loose to be trusted. If he were to run right in front of Cheng Shouping's eyes, it was guaranteed that everyone in the Chu clan would hear of it before the day was up.

Since he had no place to go other than the Chu clan estate, he could only swallow his pride.

Ahh, the life of a lady-moocher isn't easy either! I guess I'll enter the academy first, then sneak away when no one is around.

Zu An grabbed the school bag which Cheng Shouping had prepared for him. To think that someone as old like me will still be carrying a school bag to school. This is so awkward!

With an awful look on his face, Zu An passed through the entryway and found himself standing before a quiet street. Lush trees grew along its sides, providing natural shelter to the pedestrians.

Zu An looked around and noticed several beautiful women sporting youthful ponytails walking around the area. Their short skirts fluttered in the light breeze, revealing glimpses of their fair thighs.

Wow, the students in this world dress a lot more openly than I thought. Maybe going to school isn't that bad after all...

Another massive gate towered further along the street, and a guard was stationed there, verifying the identities of the students. This was likely to be the official gate that led to the academy proper.

Zu An gave his surroundings a quick scan before darting off onto a pathway to the side that led away from the area.

You want me to go to school? Impossible! There's no way in hell I'm going to school again!

Zu An swiftly made his way along the path, which was amply sheltered by the surrounding trees. It seemed the academy had gone overboard with foresting the academy grounds. He saw tall trees and flowers everywhere. After taking a few turns, he realized that he was lost.

By the time he finally left the premises of the Brightmoon Academy, he could hardly recognize his surroundings.

"Where is this?" It had barely been two days since Zu An arrived in this world, and he hadn't had time to familiarize himself with the sprawling Brightmoon City. Try as he might, he couldn't place where he was.

"Given how famous the Yu clan is, I guess I should be able to find her residence by grabbing a passerby and asking him for directions," Zu An muttered to himself. The only thing occupying his mind was completing the task assigned by Ji Dengtu so that he could regain his manhood. What was the point of cultivation and whatever else when his equipment was malfunctioning?

Zu An wandered the area, but to his consternation, there was not a single person to be found.

Boom!!

A streak of lightning flashed across the sky, followed by the rumble of thunder from afar. It began to drizzle lightly.

The drizzle wasn't much of a concern to Zu An, but the lightning unnerved him. A lightning strike had brought him to this world, but he wasn't naive enough to believe that being struck a second time would transport him back to his own world. It was more likely that he would just drop dead.

Boom!!

The rumbling of thunder reached a crescendo. Spotting a gazebo not too far away, Zu An ran to take shelter.

Safely in the gazebo, he was surprised to discover that it was already occupied. A woman in a simple dress sat on a stool in the gazebo, leaning lazily against one of the gazebo's pillars. She gazed through the rain into the distance, one hand propping up her chin.

Her forefinger was hooked around a green wine gourd, which she twirled lightly. The movement was so slight, and it seemed that the gourd would fall at any moment, but it did not.

Something else drew Zu An's attention. The woman's shoes were placed neatly on the ground, and her beautifully-shaped feet were curled up naturally on the chair, slightly visible under the hem of her dress. They seemed made of the finest white jade, and the tops of her feet were smoother than silk.

Zu An admitted that he had an obsession with a woman's face, chest, hips, and legs. He wasn't particularly concerned with how the rest of her looked. However, he was starting to understand why some people had a thing for feet.

"Have you seen enough yet?" The woman hadn't bothered to turn around, but she knew exactly what was happening behind her.

"Not yet," Zu An replied reflexively, only to regret it right away. He really should kick this habit of letting his mouth run. He kept forgetting that he wasn't on the internet anymore, where he was protected by a veil of anonymity. People could literally beat him up here!

While his cultivation had grown significantly yesterday, and he now possessed strength rivaling twenty men, he had an inexplicable feeling that the woman sitting before him was not someone he could deal with.

Clearly, the woman had not expected such a straightforward response. She turned around to study the shameless man that had barged into the gazebo. Satisfied, she turned her attention back to the rain.

"Continue watching then."

Zu An was floored by her response. He had seen all sorts of bizarre individuals on the internet, but he had not expected such nonchalance. On top of that, in the moment that her head was turned towards him, he'd been captivated by her gorgeous features. However, her clear eyes were slightly diminished, their distant look tinged with melancholy.

She sat unmoving, her back resting against the pillar, and watched the rain before her. An occasional breeze blew droplets of rain into the gazebo, slowly soaking her, but she remained unfazed. Her quiet breathing could be heard, even amidst the pattering rain.

Zu An drank in her captivating profile, but her air of melancholy was contagious. His heart slowly grew as heavy as the atmosphere around him.

His gaze swept outward to the rain blanketing the city. An unfamiliar tune filled the air around him, taking his breath away. For a moment, he saw a waterfall flowing in reverse, returning upward; the seeds of a dandelion flower drifted off into the distance, filling the sky with a multitude of tiny umbrellas; the sun rose from the west and set in the east; the ten years he had spent working himself to the bone in the kitchen during his years in school...

"You're crying?"

An elegant voice caressed him out of his reverie, and Zu An realized that he was tearing up. The woman sitting opposite him stared at him curiously.

"I miss my home," Zu An replied, wiping the tears off his face. He had been so overwhelmed by both the excitement and horror of having transmigrated into a foreign world that he hadn't had any time to think about his home. The momentary flashback made him remember his parents in the other world, and he couldn't bear to imagine how anguished they must have been to learn of his death.

The woman's expression flickered. She seemed surprised that he'd understood her music.

Zu An noticed the instrument in the woman's hands. It was shaped like a seashell. "You were playing that earlier?"

"Mm," the woman nodded in reply.

"Could I borrow it for a moment?" Zu An asked.

"You know how to play music?" The woman had not expected that.

Zu An smiled in self-deprecation. "I'm a jack-of-all-trades when it comes to useless skills that can't be used to earn a living."

The woman chuckled and tossed him the instrument. Zu An turned it around in his hands, examining it. While this seashell-like instrument had a unique appearance, the principles behind how it functioned were easy enough to figure out. Just as he was about to try out some notes, he noticed a light lipstick imprint on the mouthpiece. He hesitated, then turned to the woman and asked, "May I?"

The woman smiled and nodded.

Zu An brought the instrument to his lips to test it out. It took him just a few moments to figure out all the notes that it could play. It bore a striking resemblance to the ocarina in his previous life.

The woman's melody had made him nostalgic for his home, so he subconsciously played Scenery of Hometown[1]. He had worked hard to learn it during his university years, just so that he could pick up girls. Only later did he realize with regret that no matter how well he could play the ocarina, it was still no match for a Ferrari.

Memories from his previous life flashed across his eyes, feeling more like half-remembered dreams. Was it Zhou Zhuang who dreamt of becoming a butterfly, or a butterfly that dreamt of becoming Zhou Zhuang?[2]

The melody wound slowly to its end, leaving the two of them in a deep reminiscence, with only the sound of rain between them.

The woman seated opposite him reached up to wipe the corner of her eyes. Zu An broke the silence. "You're crying too."

The woman sighed softly. "I saw vast fields, the setting sun, and farewells, all carried within your melody. What's the name of the tune?"

"Scenery of Hometown," Zu An replied. "What about yours?"

"The Silent Sea." The woman picked up her gourd and took a sip of wine. "Do you want some?"

Zu An hesitated. "I don't have a cup." For some reason, he harbored no perverted thoughts toward the woman sitting before him. He wasn't feeling like his usual self.

The woman tossed him the gourd. "It's not as if I mind. Why are you so restrained?"

The woman's carefree attitude seemed to clue Zu An in to how stiffly he was behaving. Tilting his head backwards, he lifted the gourd and took a huge mouthful. As soon as the wine flowed into his mouth, he felt a surge of heat engulf his body, burning him up.

The sensation caused him to choke, and he began coughing violently. His face flushed red. "What wine is this? It's so strong!" It was even more potent than the vodka he had once drunk in his previous life.

"It's called 'Burning Sky'. The high alcoholic content is hard for most people to bear. It's due to my special constitution that I often drink this wine to warm my body," the woman replied. She took her gourd back and sipped lightly. A slight blush graced her snowy cheeks. She really seemed to enjoy the alcohol.

"My name is Zu An. May I know your name?" Zu An asked.

The woman shook her head lightly and smiled. "Life is a series of transient fates. If we're going to part in the end, we might as well not get to know one another."

Zu An frowned petulantly. "But I already told you my name."

"You were the one who told me on your own accord. I didn't ask for it."

"I feel like I just got taken advantage of," Zu An grumbled in displeasure.

The woman burst into laughter. "You drank my wine. It doesn't seem to me like you're at any disadvantage."

"I guess so." Zu An noticed that the rain was slowly coming to a halt, so he rose to his feet. "If fate brings us together once more, will you tell me your name?"

"I doubt that we'll be able to meet again." The woman shook her head. She shot a glance at the school bag he was carrying, and her face adopted a bizarre expression. "You're a student of Brightmoon Academy?"

Zu An's heart skipped a beat. A truant student would never admit to his own truancy. He eyed the woman warily. "If you aren't going to answer my question, why should I answer yours?"

The woman pointed to the bag he was carrying. "I can tell even if you don't say a thing. You're carrying a backpack that only the students of Brightmoon Academy have. It should be lesson time now; what are you doing here?"

"I've spent more than twenty years studying from my days in kindergarten all the way until university. I don't ever want to go to school again!" Zu An replied in frustration.

Kindergarten? University? The woman's eyes flickered in confusion, but she left her questions unspoken. I am also keeping many things to myself, so what right do I have to question him?

"Thanks for your wine. I'll be heading off." Zu An was still thinking of looking for Yu Yanluo. This concerned his lifetime of happiness! It had to take precedence over everything else.

"Sure. It looks like we might just meet one another again in the near future." A playful smile touched the woman's lips.

Zu An eyed her impassively. Like I'd trust you. Isn't the use of enigmatic words to hook the interest of men an intrinsic trait of beautiful women?

Barely a moment after Zu An left the gazebo, he noticed a black-clothed man walking along the pavement. The man glanced casually at him as he walked by. He'd taken a mere handful of steps before he backtracked quickly and called out, "Zu An?"

"Who are you?" Zu An frowned at the man in black. He had a long scar stretching from his nose all the way to his right cheek. A plum blossom insignia was visible near his neckline. Zu An's heart skipped a beat. Plum Blossom Twelve had borne a similar tattoo.

Chapter 32: The Easiest Way to Earn Money

The man sneered coldly. "You sure are forgetful! I am Plum Blossom Thirteen! I even went gambling with you once. Have you forgotten me so quickly?"

"Plum Blossom Thirteen!" Plum Blossom Twelve had named him the strongest amongst Mei Chaofeng's thirteen godsons, having reached the third rank in his cultivation.

Zu An was exasperated. Why must all the enemies I encounter be stronger than me? At the same time, he marveled at how the previous owner of this body was so talented at diving headfirst into danger. To think that he'd actually gone gambling with people like this!

"Where's Twelve?" Plum Blossom Thirteen asked.

"What Twelve? Why are you asking me?" Zu An feigned ignorance. He was surprised at how quickly Plum Blossom Thirteen had come for him.

"Stop pretending. Someone saw you leaving the city together with him, and now he's nowhere to be found!" Plum Blossom Thirteen said with a chill in his voice.

"Ah, I remember now! You're referring to Plum Blossom Twelve!" Zu An clapped his hands together as if he'd hit upon something. "Shortly after we left the city, we bumped into a person who went by the surname Tan. He took off after that Tan guy, and we parted ways. I've no idea what happened to him afterward."

"A person who went by the surname of Tan... Could it be that traitor, Tan Wei?" Plum Blossom Thirteen demanded.

Zu An said, "It seems like you have an idea of what happened. Great! Since we've cleared the air, I'll be taking my leave now." If he were facing a beautiful female assassin, he might have considered chatting a little longer. However, he wasn't interested in the company of a fierce-looking man with a scar on his face.

"Wait a moment!" Plum Blossom Thirteen reached out to grab Zu An's shoulder.

The assassin's crushing grip showed Zu An that Plum Blossom Thirteen's strength far exceeded his. He suppressed the urge to attack him. "What else do you need from me?"

Plum Blossom Thirteen dipped a hand into his robe and withdrew a piece of paper. "Isn't it about time you repaid the debt you owe me?"

"Huh? What debt?" Zu An was dumbfounded.

"You aren't thinking of shirking your debt, are you? It's written out clearly on paper, and you marked it with your fingerprint, too!" Plum Blossom Thirteen wore a dangerous smirk.

Zu An leaned in to take a closer look. The document stated that he owed Plum Blossom Thirteen a thousand silver taels, and it was marked at the bottom with a red fingerprint. Memories began to surface in his mind.

Apparently, he had visited a gambling den together with Plum Blossom Thirteen, and had ended up losing all of his money. Desperate to recoup his losses, he'd borrowed more from Plum Blossom Thirteen, only to end up losing yet another thousand silver taels.

Shit! This fellow really is a useless trash. It's no wonder why everyone looks down on him, so much so that even a maid dares to lecture him to his face!

Zu An was disappointed by the previous owner of his body. His existence had really been a complete waste of space in this world. A thousand silver taels was equal to 1,800,000 RMB!

"You said that you'd repay me once you returned to the Chu Estate. So where's my money?" Plum Blossom Thirteen stretched out his empty palm towards Zu An. "If you don't have money, I'll follow the terms of the contract and sever your hands."

"I'm the young master of the Chu clan! You dare raise your hand against me?" Zu An found the courage to stand up for himself. Even though he had earned a bit of money from Ji Xiaoxi and Plum Blossom Twelve, he wasn't even close to having a thousand silver taels to his name.

Besides, even if he had the money, he wasn't willing to waste it on repaying the debt of some useless rascal! Why should he use his hard-earned money to repay the debt owed by another man? Not to mention, he had the Chu clan backing him up!

"If you really owe him money, my honest advice would be to return his money to him. Vows and contracts hold great power in this world, and anyone who dares to violate them will suffer heavenly retribution. Even the Brightmoon Duke wouldn't be able to protect you if you go against your promise," a cold voice drifted over from the gazebo.

"Oh? There's actually such a beautiful woman hiding here?" Plum Blossom Thirteen's eyes filled with wonder upon seeing the woman in the gazebo.

"Are you thinking of flirting with me?" The woman tilted her head slightly, her tone one of idle curiosity.

Plum Blossom Thirteen laughed heartily. "So what if I..." He trailed off as he saw the green wine gourd dangling from her fingers, twirling lazily. Something seemed to come to his mind, and he laughed awkwardly. "Miss, you're misunderstanding me. Our Plum Blossom Sect is an upright sect. There's no way I would do something like that."

This deepened Zu An's curiosity over the woman's identity. She had to be a formidable figure if even the arrogant Plum Blossom Thirteen didn't dare to provoke her. He made use of this opportunity to snatch the promissory note from Plum Blossom Thirteen. He needed a closer look.

"Are you thinking of ripping up this promissory note? It's no use. I have spare copies with me. It won't change a thing at all," Plum Blossom Thirteen scoffed coldly.

Zu An paid him no heed. He scanned the terms of the agreement, and his eyes lit up. "According to this contract, the loan is only due in three days. There's still time, so why are you in such a rush? Don't worry, I'll repay your money in three days' time!"

Plum Blossom Thirteen frowned. He didn't want to let Zu An off the hook so easily, but the woman in the gazebo... He decided to go along with Zu An. "Fine. If you can't return my money in three days, not even the Jade Emperor will be able to save you!"

He snatched the promissory note back from Zu An's hands before taking his leave. He headed for their sect's headquarters. He had to inform the sect master about what he had seen today so that he could take the necessary precautions.

As he left, Zu An looked over to the woman in the gazebo. "He seems to be quite afraid of you."

The woman in the gazebo smiled at him. "He's not afraid of me; he just doesn't want to make trouble for his sect. I must say, I am quite curious as to how you're going to raise a thousand silver taels within three days."

Zu An returned to the gazebo and put on a mischievous smile. "If you're willing to lend it to me, I can chase after him and return him his money right away."

The woman was stunned for a moment. She observed in a low voice, "You really are thick-skinned."

Zu An sighed. "What else can I do? Honest men are disadvantaged no matter which world you are in. Having thick skin goes a long way."

The woman shook her head and took another sip of wine. "I don't know you well, so why should I lend you my money? Besides, I don't have that much either."

Zu An had anticipated her response, and chuckled cheekily. "On the account that we once shared a gourd of wine together, why don't you tell me what the most lucrative sectors in the city are? I'll try my luck with those."

The woman put down her wine gourd and studied him again. "You're quite an interesting person. The two most lucrative sectors in Brightmoon City are salt and metal. Most people in this world are ordinary mortals; they need to eat, and they farm. Life in this world revolves around those two things.

"Besides those, there are also the Yu clan's ki stones. Ki stones are a highly profitable business. They are rare and valuable, and the demand for them far surpasses the supply.

"Of course, I have only highlighted the commercial avenues that the city has to offer. If you're sufficiently strong as a cultivator, there are far more means for you to earn money."

Zu An rolled his eyes. "If I were strong enough, I wouldn't have been threatened by those scoundrels from the Plum Blossom Sect."

"Then it can't be helped then." The woman laughed casually.

"Actually, there's a far easier and more convenient way to earn a lot of money at once."

"Oh? What is it?" The woman's interest was piqued.

"I once heard of a theory from a handsome guy. He said that there were countless women in this world, but a man's energy is limited. If we men use our limited energy to flirt with every woman we come across, we're just wasting our energy for nothing. So, he decided to devote his energy solely towards flirting with rich women. Now that I think about it, his words make a lot of sense. I should learn from his example," Zu An's tone was dead serious.

"What a refreshing way of describing a mooch. You really are one-of-a-kind," the woman replied snidely.

"Miss, won't you consider me? A suave, considerate, and ravishing man like myself would be perfect for you." Zu An marketed himself flamboyantly.

"Aren't you already the young master of the Chu clan? And yet, you still want to flirt with me?" The woman spat on the floor. "Scumbag."

Zu An was shell-shocked. "You know me?"

"Not at the start. But it wasn't hard for me to guess after hearing the conversation between you and Plum Blossom Thirteen," the woman pointed out with a smile. "The news is all around town. The princess of Brightmoon City, the First Miss of the Chu clan, has just gotten married, and her spouse isn't any distinguished young master, but a useless piece of trash.

"To be honest, I was curious as to why someone as outstanding as Chu Chuyan would choose a person like you for her husband. However, now that I've met you in person, I think I know why."

Zu An puffed out his chest. "Because I'm good-looking?"

"No, it's because you're shameless." The woman stretched, her body drawing a beautiful arc. "I've been out for a while, so I should be heading back now. If fate permits, we'll meet again."

She turned and left, heading toward the bamboo forest behind the gazebo.

Her departing silhouette looked a little forlorn. Despite her occasional smiles and chuckles, a cloud of sorrow hung around her that refused to dissipate.

"I wonder what's weighing down her mood." Zu An slipped into deep thought, then shook himself. Hm? Why am I so intense all of a sudden?

Zu An quickly reined in his thoughts and headed off in search of Yu Yanluo.

Meanwhile, Plum Blossom Thirteen sprinted all the way to the headquarters of the Plum Blossom Sect, located in the southern district of the city. He headed straight for the sect master's study room.

BAM!

"Bad news, sect master..." As soon as he barged in, he heard a shriek of horror. A naked woman darted to one side, scrambling to find something to cover her body.

"If you can't give me an appropriate explanation for this, report to the Enforcement Hall and submit yourself to twenty lashes." A one-eyed man sat behind a formidable desk. He grabbed the hair of the panicking woman and pressed her down beneath it.

"Wuuuuu..."

The room was silent save for the indistinct mumbling of the woman.

Plum Blossom Thirteen swallowed hard. Tan Wei's wife sure has fair skin. He banished the thought and regained his focus. "I just met Zu An."

Needless to say, the one-eyed man was the sect master of the Plum Blossom Sect, Mei Chaofeng.

"Who is Zu An?" Mei Chaofeng leaned against the back of his chair as a hint of pleasure rippled across his face.

"It's the man whom you ordered Twelve to eliminate a while ago," Plum Blossom Thirteen replied hurriedly.

"Ah, the young master of the Chu Clan?" Mei Chaofeng's body straightened, a hint of rage coloring his lone eye.

Cough cough... The woman beneath the table dry-heaved.

Mei Chaofeng glanced under his desk before returning his focus to Plum Blossom Thirteen. "Twelve messed things up the last time, so I gave him another chance to make up for his mistakes. What's wrong? Did he fail his mission again?"

Plum Blossom Thirteen replied, "I heard from our brothers in the sect that they spotted Twelve leaving the city together with Zu An. I thought the matter settled. Yet, Zu An has appeared in the city again, even though Twelve hasn't returned."

"What's going on?" Mei Chaofeng frowned, sensing something amiss.

"I asked him about it. He said that the two of them bumped into Tan Wei not too long after leaving the city. Twelve chased after Tan Wei, and they parted ways."

"Wuuuuu~" Hearing the name 'Tan Wei', the woman under the table struggled anxiously, trying to rise to her feet. Mei Chaofeng held her down firmly.

Plum Blossom Thirteen's throat went dry. "Godfather, is it possible for Twelve to have been..."

"Impossible!" Mei Chaofeng dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "Be it in terms of cultivation level or wits, Tan Wei is far from being a match for Twelve. There's no way he'd pose a threat to Twelve."

"Report!" A sect member appeared in the doorway to the study. "We have found Tan Wei's corpse outside the city."

Chapter 33: Hong Yuan

Mei Chaofeng laughed heartily upon hearing the news. "What did I tell you earlier? There's no way Tan Wei could have been Twelve's match."

His arrogant laughter could not cover the muffled weeping coming from beneath the table. Without hesitation, he slapped the woman who was there. "What are you crying for? Now that Tan Wei is dead, you'll be mine from now on. I guarantee you that you'll have a much better life than before!"

Plum Blossom Thirteen swallowed. I think it's better if I marry an ugly wife in the future, just to be safe. If I really want to have pretty ladies, I can find them on the streets.

"Report!" Another flustered sect member presented himself at the entrance of the study room. "Sect master, we have found traces of Lord Twelve's clothes in the vicinity of the Wolf Valley. It's stained with blood."

"What?!" Mei Chaofeng rose to his feet and slammed his palm on the table in agitation.

Plum Blossom Thirteen subconsciously averted his eyes. The sight before him was simply a little too disturbing.

Mei Chaofeng pulled up his pants and walked briskly to the doorway. He snatched the tattered and bloodied fabric from the hands of the sect member and examined it closely. He could just about make out the word 'Twelve' embroidered on it. "It really belongs to Twelve!"

"The culprit must be Zu An! I'll kill him right now!" Plum Blossom Thirteen bellowed in rage. He grabbed his dagger and moved to rush out of the room.

“Nonsense! No matter how weak and useless that fellow is, he’s still the son-in-law of the Chu clan in name. Are you so anxious to throw away your life by killing him in the city?” Mei Chaofeng glared at Plum Blossom Thirteen coldly. “Besides, how could Twelve possibly get done in by that piece of trash?”

At these words, Plum Blossom Thirteen regained his composure. No matter how little the Chu clan thought of this son-in-law of theirs, if he were to execute Zu An publicly, they would still exact vengeance in order to uphold the reputation and honor of the Chu clan.

And the Chu clan’s vengeance wouldn’t just stop at Plum Blossom Thirteen. It would fall upon the entire Plum Blossom Sect as well.

That was the reason why Plum Blossom Twelve had initially lured Zu An out to the suburbs and tied him onto a tree to be struck by lightning. It had been a perfect plan. Who could have expected Zu An would be lucky enough to survive that ordeal?

A sudden thought struck Plum Blossom Thirteen. “Godfather, could it be possible that Zu An has been feigning weakness all this while? It doesn’t make sense why the First Miss of the Chu clan would be interested in useless trash like him otherwise.”

Mei Chaofeng brushed it aside with a wave of his hand. “Impossible. I have insider information that confirms he is utter trash through and through. As for why the First Miss of the Chu clan chose him as her husband, the reasoning is complicated and can’t be explained concisely.”

“If he wasn’t the culprit, that leaves only one last possibility,” Plum Blossom Thirteen said in a low voice.

“Where in the world did you catch the bad habit of halting your sentences halfway? Hurry up and spit out whatever you want to say!” Mei Chaofeng hollered impatiently.

Plum Blossom Thirteen continued hurriedly, “I think that Zu An might have powerful experts by his side, guarding him. For him to survive the lightning strike a few days ago, and then to overcome Twelve’s second assassination attempt is too much of a coincidence. There must be an expert helping him from the shadows!”

“An expert helping him?” Mei Chaofeng frowned. “That’s impossible. You should have seen the intelligence on that pathetic piece of trash. There’s no way he could be acquainted with any experts.”

“But earlier today, I saw him together with someone in the academy...” Plum Blossom Thirteen leaned closer to Mei Chaofeng and told him about the woman he had encountered in the gazebo earlier on.

“You did well. While Shang Liuyu isn’t known for her cultivation, she has the academy backing her. That woman is also an enigmatic one, so it’s best not to cross her if possible.” Mei Chaofeng pondered for a moment before shaking his head. “However, based on her personality, it’s unlikely that she would get involved in such a matter.”

“If his protector isn’t from the academy, could it be that the Chu clan has assigned a guard to protect him?” Plum Blossom Thirteen asked.

“It’s a waste of resources to protect useless trash.” Mei Chaofeng snorted dismissively. “But that cannot be ruled out. It’s possible The Chu clan assigned someone to protect him in secret. I’ll need to consult

the client about this. Before I do, we have to make sure to proceed carefully. We need to kill him using our wits, not brute force.”

Plum Blossom Thirteen’s lips curved in a sinister smile as he took out the promissory note. “I thought that this was useless, but it seems this could play a crucial role in our mission. I’ve already issued him an ultimatum. If he doesn’t fork out the money within three days, even the Jade Emperor won’t be able to stop us from chopping off his hands!”

Mei Chaofeng’s mood lifted instantly. “As expected of someone I’ve groomed with my own hands. You did well! The Chu clan has strict rules that forbid any of their clan members from gambling. I reckon that Chu Zhongtian wouldn’t stand up for that useless son-in-law for a matter like this!”

Oblivious to all of the scheming occurring behind his back, Zu An finally arrived at the Yu clan’s villa, having asked a few passers-by for directions.

In terms of scale and magnificence, it paled slightly in comparison to the Chu Estate. However, it possessed a serene and peaceful air that the Chu Estate lacked.

“Is Second Master Jian in?” Zu An enquired as he approached the guards by the entrance.

He had done his research. Yu Yanluo’s husband, the Cloudmidst Duke, went by the surname of ‘Jian’. Naturally, the brother-in-law who had entered the valley to fetch Yu Yanluo also bore the ‘Jian’ surname.

“Who are you?” The guard eyed Zu An warily.

Zu An tossed a piece of silver over. It was part of what he’d looted from Plum Blossom Twelve earlier.

The guard’s expression softened upon receiving the silver piece, and he favored Zu An with a slight smile. He leaned in closer and replied, “The Second Old Master is out at the moment. He isn’t in the villa.”

Zu An sighed in relief. It was clear to him that there was internal strife within the Yu clan, and Second Master Jian appeared to be on bad terms with Yu Yanluo. What if his act of saving Yu Yanluo had actually foiled Second Master Jian’s plan? If so, he could be walking right into a trap.

It was paramount to know if Second Master Jian was in, and Zu An was relieved to learn that he was not. To the guard, he said, “I wish to meet your Madam.”

The guard was amused. “There are plenty of men in the world who wish to meet our Madam. I’m afraid that this bit of money isn’t enough.”

Instead of wasting his words on the guard, Zu An took out the jade token he had obtained from Yu Yanluo. “Do you recognize this? I am a friend of your Madam. Relay my presence to her, and I’m certain that she’ll meet me.”

Seeing the huge ‘Yu’ word inscribed on the jade token, the guard’s eyes widened in astonishment. “My apologies for failing to recognize an esteemed guest! Milord, how should I address you?”

Zu An let impatience creep into his tone. “Don’t bother with unimportant matters. Hurry up and report my presence!” He was not foolish enough to leave behind any information that Second Master Jian could use to look into his identity.

“Unfortunately, our Madam has gone to the neighboring commandery to handle some affairs,” the guard replied bitterly.

That was unexpected. Zu An tried to hide his dismay. “When will she return?”

“She will be gone for ten to fifteen days,” the guard replied.

Zu An turned and left. What a waste of my time. He was vexed to hear that Yu Yanluo was not around. Was she hiding from him to avoid paying his compensation?

Before he’d taken more than a few steps, Zu An abruptly turned back around. Returning to the guard at the villa entrance, he demanded with an outstretched hand, “Return me my silver piece!”

The guard looked as if he had eaten a fly. How can there be such a stingy person in the world? How dare you take back money that you have already given out! Had it been anyone else, the guard would have surely paid him no heed. However, this man was likely Madam’s friend, so the guard dared not offend him. There was nothing to do but give the silver piece back, however unwillingly.

You have successfully trolled a guard for 66 Rage points!

So few Rage points... It’s no wonder why you don’t even deserve a name! For someone who had once collected over 20,000 Rage points, collecting such pocket change was almost beneath him. Almost.

After leaving the Yu clan villa, Zu An spent some time strolling around Brightmoon City to familiarize himself with the surroundings. Good decisions could only be made with a good understanding of the context, and he knew that his knowledge of his surroundings was too limited.

He spent half a day in careful observation as he meandered through the streets and alleys. His efforts helped him gain a rough understanding of the layout of Brightmoon City and the locations of several major facilities. At the very least, he wasn’t utterly ignorant anymore.

The sun dipped below the horizon, prompting Zu An to return to the Chu Estate.

A brief moment questioning the servants revealed that Chu Chuyan had yet to return, and it didn’t seem like she would be returning anytime soon. This left him feeling a little distressed.

He had planned to borrow some money from her to tide him through this crisis. After all, she had been forthcoming in lending him three hundred silver taels back at the ancestral hall.

Don’t I feel embarrassed asking money from a woman? Absolutely not! A lady-moocher should have some self-awareness of his own position. Since I’ve suffered so much scorn and disdain by becoming the drafted son-in-law of the Chu clan, it’s only natural that I should enjoy the privileges that come with it!

In truth, Zu An had always been envious of the male lions he’d seen on the National Geographic Channel, lounging about on the grasslands of the African Continent. Other than fighting one another from time to time, they barely needed to do anything at all. They could count on their huge harem of lionesses to hunt for them while they idled in their dens.

All right, I've made up my mind. I can't just be content with mooching off the Chu clan; I need to be more ambitious than that. I shall become the Moochlord of this world!

However, when Zu An thought about that disappointing little brother of his below, tears of bitterness began flowing down his cheeks.

"Why are you crying?" an old voice came from behind him.

Zu An jolted in shock. He whipped around and saw Old Mi standing by the doorway. "Are you a ghost? Do you not make a sound when you walk?"

Ignoring Zu An's questions, Old Mi posed one of his own. "Have you just returned from the academy?"

"Yeah." Zu An replied. I'm not really lying. I did go to the academy earlier in the day. It's just that I left right away.

"Did you meet Wei Hongde?" Hunched over in the doorway, Old Mi stared levelly at Zu An, waiting patiently for a response.

"It was my first time there today. I couldn't find him."

Old Mi nodded in response before reminding him, "You need to hurry up."

"Got it!" Zu An's cheeks colored slightly in embarrassment. He reminded himself to look into that fellow so that he could at least be accountable to Old Mi for this.

"All right. You should get some rest." Old Mi turned and left the room.

A fiery red figure whirled into the room. "Oi, Zu An! Why didn't I see you in the academy today?"

Needless to say, it was the Second Miss of the Chu clan, Chu Huanzhao.

Hearing those words, Old Mi spun around and eyed Zu An intently.

"Where did your manners go? You should be calling me brother-in-law instead!" Zu An's heart skipped a beat, but he put on a brave face and glared back at Chu Huanzhao.

You have successfully trolled Chu Huanzhao for 24 Rage points!

Chu Huanzhao was about to blow her top, but she suddenly remembered the bet they'd had with one another that night. She had no choice but to reluctantly obey him. "B-brother-in-law, why didn't I see you in the academy today?"

Noticing Old Mi's intent look, Zu An laughed sheepishly. "The academy is so big. It's not surprising that you couldn't find me."

Chu Huanzhao shook her head. "That's not right. I searched all of the first grade classes, but I couldn't find you. There's no way you were assigned to the higher grades having just joined the academy, right?"

You have successfully trolled Mi Lianying for 99 Rage points!

From the sharp glare that Old Mi was directing towards him, it was clear that he had figured out the truth. Zu An sensed a beating on the way. As the tension grew, yet another figure barged into the room.

"Damn you, Zu An! We were kind enough to send you to the academy to get an education, but you actually dared to play truant!"

Chapter 34: Infiltration

The voice carried loudly into the room even before its owner came into view. It was none other than the matriarch of the Chu clan, Qin Wanru! As soon as she stepped into the room, she skewered Zu An with a furious glare.

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 478 Rage points!

Zu An's heart nearly leaped out of his chest in fright. How did she know that I played truant so quickly? He spied Cheng Shouping hiding meekly behind her, and blood rushed to his head in anger.

This bastard! He sure knows how to tell on others!

"I don't want to go to the academy." Faced with Qin Wanru's murderous glare, Zu An could only buck up his courage and speak up for himself. If he wanted any rights in the Chu clan, he would have to fight for them... even if it seemed an impossible battle.

"That's not up to you to decide!" Qin Wanru bellowed. Her expression was enough to curdle his blood. "You had better be there tomorrow. I'll make sure someone is there to watch you. If you dare to pull something like this again, don't blame me for getting nasty!"

With a sharp exhale, Qin Wanru stormed out of the room. Furiously unwilling to let this transgression slide so easily, she turned back around and ordered, "Go to the Reflection Room and copy out our Chu clan's family rules a hundred times. I'll check on it, so you had better make sure that you don't miss out even a single word!"

"Family rules?" Zu An's face immediately darkened. He never thought that the common scene that was played out in countless historical dramas in his previous life would happen to him too!

Cheng Shouping giggled secretly, rejoicing over Zu An's bad luck. His actions did not escape Qin Wanru, and she turned on him with a frosty stare. "You have failed in your duties by allowing your master to play truant, yet you don't seem embarrassed by your actions at all! Since that's the case, I shall have you copy the family rules together with him!"

Cheng Shouping felt his jaw drop.

This was a total miscarriage of justice! He was merely an innocent bystander here!

Chu Huanzhao stuck out her tongue at Zu An and ran over to her mother's side. She pulled her mother's arm and said, "Mother, I reckon that my brother-in-law is just having difficulties trying to adapt to the academy. Give it a few days. I'm sure he'll do better."

"What did you call him?" Qin Wanru's frown emerged once more.

"B-brother-in-law..." Chu Huanzhao's face reddened. She was embarrassed because it was unseemly for her to have lost a bet against Zu An.

"How can this useless fellow be worthy of being your brother-in-law? You aren't to call him like that anymore, is that clear?" Qin Wanru glared at her daughter. She was reaching her boiling point, and yet her daughter still found ways to vex her even more.

"Orh~" Chu Huanzhao pulled a face at Zu An, as if to say it wasn't her decision not to uphold their contract. Her mother's edict meant she had no choice but to go against the terms of their bet.

Qin Wanru pulled her daughter out of the room behind her. "Come with me. Make sure not to hang out with people like that in the future. You'll only be led astray."

Watching Madam Chu depart, Zu An simply couldn't understand why that tigress allowed Chu Chuyan to bring him into the Chu clan, given her deep displeasure with him. Judging by her ferocity, it was no wonder why Chu Zhongtian had never taken in any concubines over the years. He sympathized with his father-in-law for having to spend his life with such a fierce creature.

At the same time, he wondered if Ji Dengtu had a masochistic streak in him. What in the world drove his interest in such a woman?

Old Mi's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. "If you continue playing truant tomorrow, I'll break your legs." After saying his piece, he left the room too.

Zu An was terrified by Old Mi's pronouncement. The angry undercurrents permeating his tone left Zu An in no doubt that he would carry out his threat.

Once everyone was gone, Cheng Shouping burst out, "That old man must be out of his mind! How dare a mere gardener threaten our young master? Young master, you need not worry. I'll report this matter to Madam right away and have her teach Old Mi a lesson!"

Just as Cheng Shouping was about to make his escape, Zu An grabbed him by his collar and dragged him back into the room. "Looks like you're quite accustomed to making little reports to my mother-in-law, huh?"

Cheng Shouping fell to his knees and hugged Zu An's thighs. "Young master, you wrong me! I didn't see you coming out of the academy even after everyone else had been released, so I feared you were in danger. Thus, I ran all the way back to the Chu Estate to inform Madam, so that she could mount a rescue. My loyalty to you is like the unceasing flow of a river; the stars and the moon above can vouch for that!"

Zu An sneered. "So I should be thanking you for this, huh?"

Cheng Shouping immediately put on a fawning smile. "How can this humble one be worthy of young master's gratitude? I'll be satisfied as long as you're willing to quell your anger."

"Given your bootlicking skills, you should never have ended up in such a pitiful plight. Did you do something to offend my mother-in-law?" Zu An remembered how Madam Chu had ordered Cheng Shouping to copy the family rules as well. There seemed to be more to this story.

"Of course not! How could this humble one dare to offend Madam?" Cheng Shouping shook his head vehemently. "Back then, when I heard Madam telling Master that she was going to bring in some

concubines for him, I immediately went around to find suitable women as candidates for the Madam. Given my loyalty, how could I possibly offend her?"

Zu An saw the truth immediately. Qin Wanru wasn't being serious, but you actually brought women back for her to choose. You should be glad that she didn't have her servants beat you to death on the spot!

"Young master, let's hurry to the Reflection Room to copy the family rules. Otherwise, Madam is going to punish us for disobeying her orders again," Cheng Shouping said bitterly.

"What are you in such a hurry for? It's merely the family rules. How long could it possibly take?" Zu An remembered how his teacher had punished him by making him copy down the classroom rules in his younger days. How difficult could it be to copy a couple of rules? With his writing speed, it would be a walk in the park!

If I have a computer here with me, I can easily copy it a thousand times even... Oh, wait a moment, there isn't any difference between copying it once and copying it a thousand times on the computer. I nearly forgot about the Ctrl-C and Ctrl-V functions.

I wonder if my keyboard will have similar functions in the future too.

While Zu An thought little of the punishment, he eventually caved in to Cheng Shouping's incessant pleading. With a deep sigh, he made his way toward the Reflection Room. After all, since Madam Chu was punishing him, the least he could do was to appear repentant.

The Reflection Room was a place where punishment was meted out to members of the Chu clan who had erred. They functioned like isolation cells in the prisons in his previous life, but looked much more welcoming.

"This room doesn't look as bad as I thought," Zu An murmured.

"Young master, let's get to work quickly. We won't be getting any sleep tonight otherwise," Cheng Shouping said tearfully.

"Isn't it just copying a hundred times? What's so hard about that?" Zu An rolled his eyes. This fellow really is a country bumpkin. In Zu An's previous world, there were books that contained ten million words or more!

"Where are the family rules?" Zu An looked through the bookshelves, but found nothing that related to them.

"It's all there." Cheng Shouping pointed to the wall. He looks so calm. He must be unaware of how huge a punishment this is.

Zu An turned his head to take a look. "Holy shit!"

A huge stone tablet stood against the wall, stretching from floor to ceiling. It was inscribed with many small characters. At a glance, it had to contain several thousand words.

What the hell! Why does the Chu clan need so many family rules? Are they just trying to make life difficult for the younger generations?

With a face verging on tears, Cheng Shouping passed paper and a brush to Zu An. “Young master, let’s start now.”

Zu An’s eyes darted around as his mind worked. Finally, he turned to face Cheng Shouping. “Little Pingping, did you not declare your loyalty to me earlier?”

Cheng Shouping immediately puffed out his chest. “Of course! My loyalty to young master is unwavering, nothing can—”

Zu An spoke over him. “You don’t need to say it out loud. You can prove your loyalty to me through your actions instead.”

He pushed the paper and the brush back toward Cheng Shouping, and patted his shoulder. “I’ll be counting on you.”

Cheng Shouping’s quizzical expression quickly turned to horror as the meaning of what Zu An said dawned on him. Looking at the stone tablet that was completely covered in words, he whined, “Young master, this won’t do. I can’t possibly copy all of it by myself!”

“A man should never say that something is beyond his capabilities,” Zu An encouraged him. “Trust me, you can definitely do it.”

Cheng Shouping looked ready to bawl his eyes out. Zu An had to find something better to motivate him with. He quickly racked his brains, and an idea came to mind. “As long as you copy the family rules in my stead, I’ll create an opportunity for you to interact with Snow alone in the future.”

“Is young master serious about this?” Cheng Shouping’s eyes lit up.

Zu An nodded vigorously. “Of course! Just think about it. There are times when I would need some privacy together with my wife. Naturally, you’ll be left alone with Snow.”

Cheng Shouping was moved with emotion. Sniffing his snot back up his nostrils, he grabbed Zu An’s hand tightly. “Young master, you really are the best to me!”

Zu An pulled his hand back quickly, his lip twisting in disgust. “Let’s not get touchy here. All right, do your best then! I’m heading out for a walk.”

Bringing up Snow reminded Zu An of Chu Chuyan’s current absence. Since Snow was her personal maidservant, it was likely that she would be away as well. This was a golden opportunity to search her room. Hopefully he could find something pointing to the identity of the individuals who were out for his life.

Even though he was looked down upon in the Chu Estate, he was still the young master of the Chu clan. No one would dare to block his way.

He arrived at the courtyard outside Chu Chuyan’s residence. Thankfully she valued a peaceful environment, and Snow was the only one waiting on her. This made it easier for him to sneak into her room.

He walked up to the door and tried to push it open, but it wouldn’t budge. Just as he had expected, the room was locked.

“Who is she guarding against?” Zu An muttered. He would not let this minor obstacle stop him.

He scanned his surroundings. Sure that no one was around, he whipped out a black cloth and concealed his face. He couldn’t afford to be caught sneaking into his wife’s room—that would be too embarrassing!

He circled around the residence and found a window that faced a secluded area of the compound. He took out a dagger, slipped it through a crack in the window, and pushed the latch open.

“Heh, it doesn’t take a genius to figure this out.” Zu An smiled gleefully. The nifty tricks he’d seen in the historical dramas from his previous life really came in handy.

He pushed the window open and leaped in. The intoxicating fragrance of his wife immediately filled his lungs. Her scent was especially pleasant. It was just a pity that he couldn’t touch her.

He was familiar with the layout of the place, having been here once before. He searched the study room quickly, but found nothing noteworthy, so he swiftly moved on to her bedroom.

He started off by searching around the bed. In the dramas he’d watched, there were usually secret knobs that triggered secret compartments in the bed.

Unfortunately, his examination did not reveal any secret compartments. He did, however, uncover a book hidden beneath a pillow. The title of the book was [Sweet Pampered Wife: Dominating Sword Immortal’s Ninety-Nine Days of Searching For Love].

He remembered seeing Chu Chuyan secretly reading the book back in the carriage. Out of curiosity, he leafed through it. Its contents were strikingly similar to those female romance web novels in his previous life.

While flipping through the book, his eyes fell on an elegantly hand-written note in the margins of one of the pages. ‘Love arises from nowhere, and it grows deeper and deeper...’

Zu An’s mouth hung open. He hadn’t expected that frosty-faced wife of his to have such a... such a youthful side to her.

“Tsk tsksk~” Zu An quickly and carefully replaced the book in its original position, and sighed in relief. If that woman were to find out that he had looked through this, she would surely skin him alive.

Chapter 35: Why are Your Pectoral Muscles so Big?

After searching the bed, Zu An turned his attention to the drawers along the side of the room. He opened one, and found that they were filled with beautiful dresses. Each dress was made with an incredibly smooth and comfortable material, and each was delicately embroidered.

He moved on to the second drawer—dresses. The third drawer—still dresses...

All the eight drawers were filled with all sorts of beautiful clothes, leaving Zu An slack-jawed. Women sure have a lot of clothes.

The ninth drawer was different, but its contents made Zu An's face redden. He was looking at a stack of neatly-folded undergarments.

Zu An glanced furtively around the room before taking one out and stuffing it into his robe. She has so many of them anyway. She probably wouldn't know if one of them went missing.

These words failed to ease the disappointment he felt towards himself for his actions.

He had such a beautiful wife, but he was unable to touch her. In the end, he had to resort to stealing her undergarments. To make things worse, he realized that the current condition his body was in prevented him from using the undergarments as he intended.

"Damn it!" Zu An swore as he prepared to put the undergarment back into the drawer. A sudden thought struck him. Wait a moment, can't I just pass this to Ji Dengtu to complete my task? I reckon that he won't be able to tell who it belongs to anyway!

This thought made him uncomfortable. This was still his wife's undergarment, even if the two of them were related only in name. It didn't take a genius to figure out just what that perverted middle-aged man was going to do with it.

"Forget it! I'll just buy a new set of undergarments from a random shop and give it to him," Zu An muttered under his breath. Unfortunately, he realized none of those four women whom Ji Dengtu mentioned were ordinary people. If he were to buy a low-quality one off the streets, the divine physician would surely see through his deception in an instant.

"I'll just use Snow's then!" Zu An recalled how Snow, despite being a maidservant, was fairly well-dressed. In fact, most people who saw her without knowing who she was would probably mistake her as a young miss of a distinguished clan.

That lass tried to kill me anyway. I don't feel any guilt using her undergarments to accomplish my task.

His mind made up, Zu An hastened to the adjacent room, which belonged to Snow. Immediately, he started sifting through her belongings. Snow's room was extremely clean. Earlier on, he'd been able to find romance novels hidden in Chu Chuyan's room. However, when it came to Snow's room, there was nothing in it that hinted at her interests or preferences, other than a handful of melon seeds scattered around.

"Is the lass really that innocent, or is she simply that good at concealing her true nature?" Zu An wondered. He had hoped to gather some information from her personal possessions, but they held no tangible clues to help him decipher her character.

A sudden, slight noise from outside the room made him jump in fright.

Could it be that Chu Chuyan has decided to return early? This won't do. I can't let her find out that I have snuck in here, especially not with this incriminating evidence on me. Otherwise, I won't be able to wash my reputation clean even if I were to leap into the Yellow River!

Noticing some screens at the back of the room, Zu An scrambled behind them and held his breath. Through the slight crack between the screens, he was still able to observe part of the room.

A black-clothed figure slipped in and began rummaging around Chu Chuyan's room.

"A woman?" Even though the face of the black-clothed figure was concealed, the relatively smaller physique and alluring silhouette hinted strongly that it was a woman.

A closer look ruled out any possibility that the figure was a man. It was impossible for any man to have such large pectoral muscles, no matter how hard he trained them.

The woman took her time to comb through the room, but seemingly came up empty-handed. She stood in the middle of the room and muttered to herself, "It isn't here either? Where could she be hiding it then?"

"Hm?" Zu An was alarmed. The woman's voice was astonishingly familiar. It belonged to the close friend of Chu Chuyan, whom he had met back at the ancestral hall—Pei Mianman.

"Who's there?!" The woman's head whipped around, her gaze focused in his direction.

Zu An's sudden surprise at the woman's unexpected identity had caused his emotions to fluctuate and had raised his heartbeat, which caught the woman's attention.

Before he had even considered escaping, the screens burst into pieces, and he saw the woman flying toward him, her palm out in front and ready to strike.

In any other situation, Zu An would surely have complimented her on how fair and smooth her hand was. At the moment, though, he was far from being in the mood to do so. Goosebumps had risen all over his body, and every single cell in his body was screaming at him that he was in great danger.

He threw out a fist in an attempt to fend off the attack, but as soon their hands connected, he was thrown backwards in a spray of blood.

Despite possessing the strength of twenty grown men, Zu An's power paled in comparison to that wielded by the fair-handed maiden.

Sensing the other party's killing intent, Zu An dropped all thoughts of caution. He started to shout, "Help..."

Since the woman had snuck into Chu Chuyan's room in the middle of the night dressed completely in black, she was surely trying to avoid detection. There had to be plenty of experts in the duke's estate who could deal with her. All he had to do was to catch their attention!

Before his cry could leave his throat, the woman had closed the distance. She seemed to strike him lightly on the chest with her palm, but the impact made him feel as if he had been knocked over by a train. His breath left him in a gentle wheeze.

The woman sneered coldly as Zu An's body slumped weakly to the ground. A mere second-rank cultivator actually dared to exchange blows with me.

Knowing that her strike had surely killed him, she squatted down and tried to take off the cloth covering his face to reveal his identity.

Zu An's eyes shot open. While the woman was caught off guard, he wrapped himself around her body, employing the rear naked choke technique taught in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

It went without saying that a truly qualified keyboard warrior needed to have basic knowledge in all fields, in order to make his words sound logical. He'd seen plenty of videos explaining the technique on the internet in his previous life. Unfortunately, he'd lacked the physical capability to put what he knew in theory into practice. However, now that he was stronger than ever, he was confident that he could employ such techniques even more smoothly than any UFC champion!

He knew very well that this woman's cultivation was far higher than his, and her earlier movements had been too fast for him to follow. If he allowed her time and space, he had no hope of survival. His only chance at victory was to try to turn it into a physical brawl. By exploiting the physical differences between a man and a woman, he might just be able to make a comeback.

The previous strike from the woman could have very well ended his life, had he not decisively taken out the Heiress Ball of Delights in time. He hoped that the item—based on its description—would keep him alive, even if it was by the thinnest thread.

Having the item also renewed his courage and gave him the will to fight back.

Pei Mianman hadn't expected such a twist to the situation. She used her elbow to strike his body again and again, hoping that he would loosen his grip. Despite her repeated blows, his viselike grip remained firm.

The man had wrapped his body around her tightly. His legs wound around hers and forced them wide open, and her breasts were being molded into all sorts of shapes under the pressure of his elbows.

She had never been taken advantage of by a man all her life, and certainly had never been placed in such a humiliating position. There was no way she could possibly take this lying down!

You have successfully trolled Pei Mianman for 999 Rage points!

She stopped holding back, and tried to apply her killing moves on him.

To her dismay, however, he had pinned her down in an extremely bizarre position, which made it difficult for her to land any effective blows on him. She attempted to leverage her flexibility to escape from his grip.

She could barely contain her anger. She swore to herself that, if she could break free from this fellow's grip, she would grind every last bit of his bones to dust!

You have successfully trolled Pei Mianman for 999 Rage points!

Zu An couldn't spare any attention to check on his Rage points. He was completely focused on holding the woman down. He knew that, if she were to break free, it would spell disaster for him.

Strangely, it seemed his strength had grown considerably greater since he'd first clashed with her. From their earlier exchanges, it was apparent that she was much stronger than him. Given that, it should have been very difficult for him to hold her down. Yet, even though he was in a difficult position, his rear naked choke was still keeping her locked in place.

Pei Mianman had also noticed this anomaly. No matter how she struggled and fought back, the other party simply wouldn't let her go. In fact, it felt like his grip was growing stronger with each blow she landed on him.

As it turned out, Old Mi had neglected to inform Zu An that the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra had another effect other than allowing the practitioner to raise their cultivation level by suffering damage. It also increased the stats of the practitioner in proportion to the severity of their injuries. The closer the practitioner was to death, the greater their fighting prowess would be.

Under normal circumstances, a human would grow weaker the more injuries they sustained, resulting in a drastic reduction in their stats. On top of that, being on the verge of death was an extremely dangerous position. A single strike would result in an instant knock-out. For these reasons, the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra's enhancement in strength wasn't as powerful as it sounded in theory.

However, Zu An had the Heiress Ball of Delights, which allowed him to remain in a near-death state without the risk of dying. It also negated the adverse effects brought about by his injuries. This combination maximized the potential of the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra's effects.

The two continued their tussle, rolling across the ground in a tangle of limbs. Eventually, Zu An managed to gain the upper hand and turn the tables on the woman. He pinned her firmly to the ground, rendering her immobile.

Pei Mianman found it more and more difficult to breathe, as her neck was slowly crushed by the man's grip. She tried her best to claw at his hand, but to no avail. It was as if she was fighting with a monster who knew nothing of pain or death.

She sensed her life slowly slipping away. Unwilling to meekly meet her demise, a vicious glint flashed across her eyes, and a spark of black flame formed inconspicuously on the tip of her finger.

She had not dared to use her elemental ability out of fear that the fluctuations in the elements would alarm the experts of the Chu clan. Once her identity was revealed, all of the hard work she had put in during this period of time would have gone to waste.

But all of that was pointless in the face of imminent death.

Just as she was about to make her move, the man whispered in her ear, "Pei Mianman, I think we can cooperate with one another."

In truth, Zu An could have summoned the Poisonous Prick and easily ended her life. However, his mind was filled with the image of her in the ancestral hall—her ravishing figure, her soul-stealing peach-blossom eyes, and the unfathomable smile that lingered on her comely face—and he found himself reluctant to make a move.

It was indeed true that the world was biased towards those who were good-looking.

Zu An knew himself as a simple man true to his desires, and he found nothing wrong with that.

Pei Mianman was shocked to hear those words. The man had seen through her identity! On top of that, the voice sounded oddly familiar. "Who in the world are you?"

She sensed the other party loosening his grip on her neck. After a moment of hesitation, she dispelled the black flame she had summoned.

"You nearly caused my death in the ancestral hall back then. Have you forgotten about me so quickly?" Zu An scoffed.

Pei Mianman's eyes widened. "Ah, you're Chu Chuyan's useless husband, that... Ah. What's your name again?"

Zu An rolled his eyes, hard.

Chapter 36: Exchange

Clearly, this woman had never taken him seriously before! As the good-for-nothing son-in-law of the Chu clan, she didn't think that his name was worth remembering. She only knew him as the 'useless husband of my close friend'.

Of course, that was to be expected. The gulf between the two of them was as great as the distance between the clouds in the sky and the dirt on the ground. No wonder she couldn't be bothered to remember his name.

"My name is Zu An. Get it deep inside your head!" Zu An snapped angrily. Just because it was understandable didn't mean he would accept it meekly! To think that he had assumed his dashing appearance and eloquent speech had left this beautiful woman with a lasting impression of him!

"Yes yes, I remember it now," Pei Mianman replied through gritted teeth. After the intense physical brawl they had, it was hard for her to forget. "What are you doing here?"

"Isn't that the question I should be asking you?" Zu An harrumphed.

Pei Mianman's complexion darkened. "You said that we can cooperate with one another. I would like to hear what thoughts you have in mind." She flicked her finger lightly, and a spark of flame began dancing on her fingertip.

"You are here in search of something, right?" Zu An asked.

"Indeed." Pei Mianman knew that he must have seen her earlier actions, so it would be meaningless to deny it now.

"Judging from your expression, I'd say that you haven't found what you're looking for yet. I can help you," Zu An said.

Had Zu An said this in the past, she would have laughed her head off and dismissed his offer immediately. However, he had managed to overcome her in the physical brawl earlier. It would be foolish of her to continue viewing him lightly. "What do you want?"

Zu An replied, "Since you're Chu Chuyan's close friend, you should know of my awkward position in the Chu clan. The two of us are only a couple in name. I want you to help me gain recognition as the real son-in-law of the Chu clan. In return, I'll help you find what you need."

Pei Mianman stared at him in stunned silence, then burst into laughter. "I didn't expect you to be serious about chasing her. But then again, Chu Chuyan is indeed a gorgeous beauty. Even a woman like me isn't immune to her charms. Very well, it's a deal then!"

"You agreed to it so easily?" Zu An was surprised by how candid her acceptance was, and began doubting her sincerity.

"Are you worried that I'd renege on this agreement once you release me?" Pei Mianman scoffed coldly. She raised her hand up before him. "If I hadn't been moved by your offer, you would have been reduced to ashes by now."

Only then did Zu An notice the black flame flickering on her fingertip, and he almost jumped in shock. This woman was a fifth rank expert! No wonder he'd almost lost his life to her!

Pei Mianman observed coldly, "Was it very exhilarating for you to take advantage of your wife's close friend? Hurry up and let go!"

As her finger drew closer to him, Zu An hurriedly released her and backed away into a corner.

Pei Mianman quickly smoothed out her messy clothes, which were now cloaked in layers of dusty fingerprints. Just thinking about the physical contact they'd had with one another brought cold anger to her eyes, and she wondered if she should just kill him anyway.

Noticing the menacing look on her face, Zu An quickly changed the topic. "What are you looking for?"

Pei Mianman hesitated for a moment. "An accounting book."

"What accounting book?" Zu An was a little surprised. He didn't think that a mere book of accounts warranted so much effort.

She chuckled softly, but didn't answer his question. "I'll tell you more once you gain some standing in the Chu clan." Her first thought was not to honor the alliance between them. However, she'd infiltrated the Chu clan twice so far, and both times, she'd failed to turn up even a single clue. Perhaps having this man as an insider wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Of course, this man had to be qualified first before he could participate in her plans.

A thought came to her, and she narrowed her eyes at him. "You haven't told me what you're doing here in the middle of the night."

Zu An laughed awkwardly. "Would you believe me if I tell you that I'm just here for a stroll?"

Pei Mianman rolled her eyes. As she did so, she spied a silk cloth peeking out from under Zu An's robe. "Hm? What's this?"

Zu An tried to stop her, but she was too fast. The item he'd tried so hard to hide was snatched away in an instant.

Pei Mianman looked at the female undergarment in her hand and shook uncontrollably with laughter. "You snuck here in the middle of the night just to steal your wife's undergarment? I have never felt more disdain for anyone in my entire life!"

Zu An felt his face heat up. He rushed forward and clawed the undergarment back into his arms. "It's none of your business!"

Pei Mianman gaze grew more bizarre. "As expected of the man who climbed into his sister-in-law's bed on his wedding night. I never expected you to be this brazen, but it seems there's no limit to your shamelessness."

From what she'd said, Pei Mianman wasn't the one who tossed him into Chu Huanzhao's bed. If so, who else could be the culprit?

Zu An went along with Pei Mianman's remark. "Forget sisters-in-law. I find the close friends of my wife much more appealing."

Pei Mianman maintained her usual graceful smile, but a dangerously sharp glint flashed across her eyes. "There are plenty of men who have flirted with me over the years, it did not end well for any of them. If you aren't afraid, you can give it a try too."

Zu An shook his head. "Forget it then. I had a taste earlier, anyway."

"What did you say?" Pei Mianman's face darkened.

You have successfully trolled Pei Mianman for 256 Rage points!

"Nothing much. Anyway, we should leave quickly, especially after the commotion we created. We wouldn't want to alarm the others from the Chu clan." Zu An glanced at Pei Mianman in disappointment. Despite her open and flirtatious appearance, she wasn't the type who could take a joke.

"That makes sense," Pei Mianman nodded in agreement. "Let's part ways. However, if I were to hear any rumors about tonight floating around, know that I wouldn't hesitate to cut out your tongue."

Zu An immediately covered his mouth. "Don't worry, the only ones who will know about what transpired here are you and me."

Pei Mianman sniffed coldly. "You better forget everything that happened today."

She leaped out of the window, then turned around. Under the moonlight, her figure looked more entrancing than ever. "Speaking of which, what kind of skill did you use earlier? Why did your strength suddenly surge?"

Zu An had found that equally confusing. "I don't know either. Perhaps it's a manifestation of my potential in the midst of a crisis."

"If you aren't willing to tell me, so be it. Keep your secrets." Pei Mianman scoffed. Her beautiful silhouette vanished into the night.

Zu An smiled bitterly to himself. He really had no idea how it happened, but this wasn't the best time to brood. Afraid that someone would come to check on the commotion, he dashed back to his room.

Once he was in the safe confines of his room, he took out a bottle and swallowed the pill inside.

He had learned from his previous lesson, and had no intention of allowing history to repeat itself. The effects of the Heiress Ball of Delights were time-limited, and once the effects wore off, the sudden onslaught of pain and frailty could be unbearable enough to kill him outright.

This bottle of pills wasn't the Faith in Brother Spring he had drawn from the Keyboard. It was the recovery medicine he'd obtained from Ji Dengtu before heading off to the Wolf Valley.

Could he be scamming me, though? The possibility worried Zu An. In the end, he supposed the man was still a divine physician, and he wouldn't be underhanded enough to tamper with his own medicine. Besides, as the father of someone as pure and kind as Ji Xiaoxi, surely he couldn't be that evil of a person?

Zu An felt that he was flirting with disaster, but after swallowing the medicine, he could feel a surge of warmth suffusing his body, gently repairing his wounds.

This put Zu An's heart at ease. He had to admit that Ji Dengtu's medicine was indeed formidable. While it didn't provide instantaneous healing like Faith in Brother Spring, it was still as effective at bringing a person back to peak condition. The effects were just more gradual.

As expected of the medicine from a divine physician!

He'd quaffed the pill just in time. The effects of the Heiress Ball of Delights had begun to wear off, and Zu An began to feel aching pain all over his body.

"This really is an incredible item." Ignoring the pain, Zu An stared at the Heiress Ball of Delights in his hand. If not for this item, he would have lost his life earlier on.

He hadn't been too impressed when he'd used it to deal with the Wailing Whip. After all, he had only experienced its pain immunity effect back then. This was the first time he was testing out its ridiculous immunity-from-death effect, and it was really as overpowered as it sounded.

It was no exaggeration to say that he would have died ten times over in the fight with Pei Mianman, had it not been for the Heiress Ball of Delights. Just thinking about how he spent one use of it on a mere bet filled him with self-reproach. What a huge waste that had been! He only had one use of it left, and who knew how long it would take before he drew an item like this again?

Zu An suddenly remembered the requirement for the activation of this item. The other party must be a woman richer than him in order for the item to take effect. He felt intensely relieved that Yu Yanluo had been absent from her villa today. If he had received the 10,000 gold taels from her, it would have drastically reduced the number of women in the world who were richer than him. It would be difficult to rely on the Ball of Delights in that case.

It looks like I shouldn't claim my compensation for the time being.

Zu An felt severely conflicted. Was he actually doomed to living the life of a pauper?

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 3 rage points! ... 3... 3...

Zu An was stunned. Had he somehow offended Madame Chu again? She seemed to get angry far too often. Could this be an effect of the hormonal imbalances caused by premature menopause?

In a room inside the duke's estate, Chu Zhongtian poured a cup of tea for his wife. "I heard that you punished Zu An by making him copy the family rules a hundred times. Isn't that a bit too much?"

Qin Wanru scoffed in anger. "That fellow will never become anything great if we don't push him hard! Do you know what he did today? He actually played truant! No, that's not right. I received news from the academy that he didn't even step through the gates of the academy! Isn't this ridiculous?"

Chu Zhongtian nodded in agreement. "That fellow has indeed gone overboard. However, you need to take his circumstances into consideration too. He is someone with low self-esteem, and having to marry into our Chu clan must have placed great pressure on his shoulders. I heard that many in the estate look down on him. If you punish him so harshly, wouldn't you just breed ill-will in him? That could really cause great disturbances in the family in the future."

Qin Wanru glared at her husband. "It's all your fault! Chuyan wouldn't have had to choose such an inept man as her husband otherwise. I can't do much for her as her mother, but the least I can do is to help her keep her husband in line. Even if Zu An has no talent for cultivation, it isn't a bad idea for him to study hard and learn some management skills, so that he could take on some responsibilities in the future. At the very least, people won't make our Chuyan out to be a laughingstock."

"Wanru, does this mean that you have accepted him as Chuyan's husband?" Chu Zhongtian couldn't help asking.

"Pui!" Qin Wanru spat out coldly. "If you had just given me your approval, I'd have driven that fellow out of our clan in a heartbeat."

Chapter 37: Grandgale

Chu Zhongtian sighed bitterly. "Wanru, you know our daughter's personality. Once she has chosen a person, no matter how incapable he is, she won't change her mind anymore. Do you want her to remarry?"

Qin Wanru shared her husband's feelings of helplessness. "Even if Chuyan never mentioned why she chose that useless piece of trash, how could we as parents not know her reasoning? She's afraid that if we bring in someone who's too strong-willed and capable, he might covet the businesses of our Chu clan. That would put her in a spot between her husband and us. She's doing it for our sake. As her mother, part of my duty is to think on her behalf. At the very least, I should groom Zu An to be a decent human being."

Chu Zhongtian nodded as he grasped her intentions. "Ah, so that's the reason why you're so strict on him."

"Of course!" Qin Wanru rolled her eyes. "Why else would I order him to copy our family rules? Do you think that just anyone is worthy of copying our Chu clan's family rules? I am doing this to let him know that I already think of him as a member of our Chu clan, and I'm encouraging him to turn over a new leaf and work harder in the future."

"But I heard that you ordered Cheng Shouping to do it together with him. Do you view him to be a member of the Chu clan too?" Chu Zhongtian asked.

"Pui! I just can't stand that skunk!" Rage boiled up inside her as she thought of Cheng Shouping and his fawning smile. How dare he bring those wretches before her and urge her to pick out concubines for her

husband! “Besides, a hundred copies is too much. If I don’t get someone to help Zu An, he won’t be able to finish it even if he worked through the night.”

“I didn’t think that my wife would be so considerate!” Chu Zhongtian burst into laughter. After he regained his composure, he continued, “However, Zu An doesn’t seem to be a bright child. Given his wits, I doubt that he’ll be able to appreciate the deeper intentions behind your actions.”

Qin Wanru was silent.

This possibility seemed plausible... No, it was definitely the case. How else could that fellow have become such a renowned wastrel in the city, if not for an otherworldly level of stupidity?

“Should I play the good man here? I’ll head over there and tip him off,” Chu Zhongtian offered.

Qin Wanru thought about it for a moment before nodding. “Bring some snacks over too so that it doesn’t appear too abrupt.”

“Alright.” Chu Zhongtian smiled. The entire world said that he had married a shrew. They laughed at him for being just a slave to his wife. However, he knew very well that his wife possessed a sharp mouth but a soft heart. She was much better than those who put on a tender front but schemed in the shadows.

He ordered his servant to prepare several boxes of desserts, then made his way over to the Reflection Room. Through a window, he saw a silhouette diligently copying down the family rules. He nodded in approval as he muttered to himself, “At least he’s hardworking.”

Chu Zhongtian pushed the door open and entered the room. “You must be exhausted by now. Take a short break. Your mother-in-law told me to bring some...” He trailed off, his smile freezing on his face. There was only one person in the room—Cheng Shouping. Zu An was nowhere to be seen.

Cheng Shouping rushed over immediately, and hugged Chu Zhongtian’s thighs in agitation. With tears streaming down his face, he cried out, “Master, I knew that you wouldn’t have forgotten about me! The years I spent diligently serving you have not gone to waste. To think that you would deliver food to me personally in the middle of the night. I am moved to tears!”

Chu Zhongtian resisted the urge to kick Cheng Shouping away. With forced composure, he inquired, “Where’s your young master?”

As if reminded of a tragic event, Cheng Shouping’s wailing intensified. “Young master came by earlier, but when he saw how many words there were in the family rules, he ordered me to copy it by myself. Old master, my hands are already on the verge of falling off!”

Since Zu An wasn’t here anyway, Cheng Shouping found no reason to hold back.

“That scoundrel! How dare he!” Even the usually kind and patient Chu Zhongtian was infuriated by Zu An’s audacity, especially considering how much thought his wife had put into this. How could that brat snub his wife’s goodwill? The more he thought about it, the more he couldn’t stand it.

He stormed out to settle the score with Zu An. He’d barely taken a few steps when he sensed Cheng Shouping following him. He turned on the boy with a frown. “Why are you following me?”

"I... I'll bring you to young master's side!" Cheng Shouping was impressed by his own wits. To think that he managed to find such a perfect excuse on the spot. Not only would he be able to avoid his current punishment, he could also earn some brownie points with Master Chu. What magnificent intelligence he possessed!

Chu Zhongtian snorted dismissively. "There's no need for that, I'll make my own way. You can continue copying the family rules." This was the bastard who spread the news that he'd been grabbed by the ear by his wife, turning him into the laughingstock of the whole city. He couldn't help but feel a surge of rage every time he saw Cheng Shouping.

Cheng Shouping widened his eyes in disbelief.

Master, do you not dote on me anymore? Master, what did I do so wrong? Master...

He returned to the room and saw that Chu Zhongtian had left the box of snacks behind. He almost cried in relief. It looks like Master still cares about me.

Zu An's injuries were still only half-healed. As he lay in bed recuperating, a notification popped up.

You have successfully trolled Chu Zhongtian for 283 Rage points!

Huh? It's my father-in-law this time around? What in the world could have happened to cause even a kind man like him to lose his temper?

As Zu An turned the question over in his mind, a figure barged into his room, clearly incensed. "You brat! You're indeed here!"

"Father-in-law." Zu An struggled to rise from his bed and failed. "Pardon me. I'm injured at the moment, so I can't get up to greet you properly..."

The way Zu An addressed him made Chu Zhongtian's eyelid twitch uncontrollably. For some reason, he felt incredibly uncomfortable hearing Zu An call him 'father-in-law'. His attention was pulled away by the rest of Zu An's words. He exclaimed in astonishment, "You're injured?"

"Yes, father-in-law." Zu An looked at Chu Zhongtian indignantly.

Chu Zhongtian rushed forward to examine him. "You're severely injured! How did this happen?"

You're lucky that Ji Dengtu's medicine has already healed half of my injuries. My earlier state would have surely scared you to death! Zu An kept these thoughts to himself. Instead, he replied, "I'm not sure either. I was taking a stroll in the estate when a black-clothed man suddenly leaped out and attacked me. Thankfully the commotion alerted some nearby guards. If not, I would have already lost my life."

Zu An's words were only partially true. It just so happened that there was someone in the estate who was out for his life, and it would be good to have Chu Zhongtian investigate the matter. Rooting out those who were targeting him would be a tremendous weight off his shoulders.

His initial thought was to pin the blame on Plum Blossom Thirteen, and use the Chu clan to eliminate the Plum Blossom Sect. It would have been a good idea, if not for Cheng Shouping's warning that the Chu clan was extremely opposed to any of its clan members gambling.

A distant relative of the Chu clan had once lost money, and the lender had knocked on the gates of the Chu clan to demand repayment. In a moment of rage, Chu Zhongtian had the legs of that distant relative crushed as a stern warning to the rest of the clan members.

Since Plum Blossom Thirteen still possessed his promissory note, Zu An had no choice but to put away that idea.

“Something like that actually happened?” A tight frown formed on Chu Zhongtian’s face as possibilities quickly flashed across his mind. “Don’t worry, I’ll tighten the security around the estate to prevent further such incidents.”

“Thank you, father-in-law!” Zu An said in gratitude.

Chu Zhongtian nodded in response. He ordered his attendant to summon the estate’s physician, and assured Zu An once more, “Don’t worry, your injuries aren’t fatal. You’ll recover soon. I’ll investigate this matter. For now, don’t trouble yourself, and get some rest.”

“But I haven’t finished copying the family rules yet. I need to get back to the Reflection Room to work...” Zu An struggled to rise to his feet, putting on the act of a diligent student.

The guards flanking Chu Zhongtian scoffed silently in disdain. Who do you think you are putting on an act for? Do you think that we don’t know what kind of person you are?

However, Chu Zhongtian had no doubts about Zu An’s intentions. “Don’t worry, you can leave it all to Cheng Shouping.” With that, he quickly left the room. In truth, he harbored his own suspicions that someone was after Zu An’s life, and this incident was further proof. He would have to discuss this matter thoroughly with his wife to come up with a countermeasure.

Zu An could only offer his almost-earnest sympathy to Cheng Shouping. Friend, I’ll be counting on you.

Shortly after Chu Zhongtian left, someone brought a physician to him. The physician prepared a prescription for him then proceeded to bandage his body.

In truth, there was no need for all this hassle. Ji Dengtu’s medicine was extremely effective, and it only needed time to work in order to get him back to full health. However, it would be difficult for Zu An to explain all this, so he left the physician to his work.

It was some time before everyone finally left his room, giving Zu An the privacy to inspect his own physical condition.

He had been too severely injured earlier to properly examine himself. Now that he could take a look, he realized that all nine formations on his skin had been fully filled. As they glowed, a new set of nine formations appeared in his muscles all over his body.

What’s going on? Weren’t there only six formations filled up before?

Zu An could hardly believe it. He rubbed his eyes forcefully before taking another look. He truly wasn’t hallucinating.

Could it be due to the battle I had with Pei Mianman?

After all, I did suffer quite a bit of damage from her. Her strikes had shattered most of my ribs. If not for the Heiress Ball of Delights, my injuries would have been enough to kill me ten times over.

Even though he knew that the effects of the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra allowed him to raise his cultivation faster the more injuries he sustained, he never expected such drastic results.

Based on his previous calculations, filling the seventh formation would have taken thirteen Ki Fruits. He would have needed twenty-one for the eighth formation, and thirty-four for the ninth formation. That added up to a total of sixty-eight Ki Fruits!

Converted into Rage points, even if he obtained one Ki Fruit for every ten tries at the lottery, he would still require 68,000 Rage points.

Comparing these two methods, it was indeed far more efficient for him to raise his cultivation by getting beaten up than to rely on his Rage points.

Maybe I should try harder to get myself beaten up in the future?

He was definitely not a masochist, but the rewards were really tempting.

This excitement was short-lived, and he dismissed the idea. He'd only managed to make such huge gains because of the effects of the Heiress Ball of Delights. If not for that magical item, he would have died many times over.

He could only use the Heiress Ball of Delights once more, and he couldn't afford to squander it. Without this trump card, not only would future encounters be extremely painful, but there was also a risk that a moment of carelessness would lead to his death. He doubted that he would be lucky enough to survive such beatings each and every time.

All things considered, it was best for him to rely primarily on Ki Fruits. Despite being a slower method, it was at least safer and steadier.

Zu An took a closer look, and he realized that some additional lines had formed among the nine formations on his skin, connecting them with one another. Together, they formed an imprint of a strange, massive bird.

The bird looked as if it was about to flap its wings and soar into the sky. It had a snowy body and a crimson tail. Yellow spots that resembled small eyes dotted its body.

What was more eye-catching, though, was its head. It seemed to be a cross between a tiger and a demon, but did not closely resemble either. It had a ferocious and terrifying appearance that induced goosebumps.

"What is this?" Zu An was perplexed. He noticed something that could be a seal at the bottom right corner of the bird imprint. There was a word on the seal: Grandgale.

Chapter 38: The Nine Hatchlings of a Phoenix

Grandgale. Is this the mythical beast from ancient Chinese legend?

As someone whose battlefield was the internet forums, it was imperative for Zu An to be well-versed in the 'Classic of Mountain and Seas' and other such mythical legends. This massive and bizarre bird imprint did seem to match the descriptions of the mythical beast, Grandgale, depicted in these books.

According to the legends, the Phoenix had nine hatchlings, similar to how the Dragon had nine sons. The first was Peacock, the second was Garuda, the third was Fire Phoenix, the fourth was Golden Phoenix, the fifth was Blue Luan, the sixth was Ice Phoenix, the seventh was Hundredwarble, the eighth was Blue Mallard, and the ninth was Grandgale!

You're asking me why I remember all of this clearly? There's a long and tearful story to it! Back in the modern world, I had applied for a position in the gaming department in NetEase. The written examination had all sorts of bizarre questions. Compared to the nine sons of the Dragon, whose names contain so many convoluted characters, the nine hatchlings of the Phoenix are far easier to remember!

That being said, there existed many different interpretations of the nine hatchlings of the phoenix. He only remembered one of those versions.

It struck Zu An that the cultivation technique he was practicing was none other than the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra. For Grandgale's imprint to appear after he reached the peak of the second rank was unlikely to be a coincidence.

It was likely that a new phoenix hatchling imprint would emerge every time he reached the peak of a rank. However, what were these phoenix hatchling imprints for? It couldn't be just for scaring others, could it?

Having done some experimentation, he'd deduced that outsiders couldn't see the formations on his body. It was unlikely that anyone could see the imprint of the phoenix hatchling either. Scaring others with it seemed out of the question.

An idea seized him, and he began channeling his ki into Grandgale's imprint. Once it was completely suffused with ki, Grandgale's ferocious eyes suddenly lit up, and the avatar of Grandgale materialized before his eyes.

Zu An's heart beat faster. It was working!

But what can this avatar do though? Is it like a pet of some sort?

He thought for a moment, then ordered Grandgale to ram itself into the wall to test out its might. The avatar flapped its massive wings, whipping up a huge gale which blew the tables and chairs aside and threw the room into disarray.

Zu An's eyes widened in anticipation as he waited for Grandgale to make its move. However, before he knew what was happening, a sudden burst of force pushed his body straight forward, slamming him face-first into the wall in front of him.

BAM!

Behold, a human painting!

Zu An slowly slid down the wall, leaving behind a distinctly human silhouette on the snowy-white walls. Two trails of blood dribbled down from near the top of the silhouette—left there by his shattered nose.

Holy shit!

Despite his annoyance, Zu An felt excitement bubbling out of him. It turned out that Grandgale's ability was instantaneous movement! If he used it well, it would be an invaluable tool for launching assaults against his opponents or fleeing from powerful enemies.

I wonder what the maximum distance I can travel with this skill. Without even wiping away the blood from his nose, Zu An began channeling his ki into Grandgale's imprint, attempting to summon it once more.

Instantly his head spun, and he lost his concentration. Apparently, his ki had been depleted.

The skill Grandgale granted him consumed a large amount of ki, and at his current level, he could only afford to activate it once a day. Perhaps, when his cultivation level rose and his ki capacity increased, he would be able to use it more often.

With a deep sigh, Zu An slowly climbed back into his bed and lay down. He noticed that his encounter with the wall had granted him a substantial amount of golden specks in the first formation in his muscles.

From what he recalled of Ji Xiaoxi's explanations, reaching the third rank would allow a cultivator to release their ki externally, to create armor and barriers to fend against attacks. Despite only being at the first step, there was no doubt that he was a full-fledged third rank cultivator now.

Excited to test out his newly-gained ability, he tried his best to squeeze out whatever ki he had left in his body. Straining, he managed to form a barrier in front of him. It was smaller than the size of a palm, and it dissipated immediately as there was no ki left to sustain it.

Nevertheless, Zu An was over the moon. Theoretically, he was as strong as 88 adult men now, which would make him a slightly weaker version of Superman from the comics of his previous life. Even if he couldn't beat the top tier heroes in the Marvel Universe like Hulk and Ironman, he should at least be able to beat the pushovers, Black Widow and Hawkeye, with ease.

This, together with Poisonous Prick and Grandgale, would be his key to surviving in the Chu Estate. No matter who was after him, at least he now had a fighting chance.

His short burst of happiness was followed by the onset of pain. With nothing else to distract him, the bruises he'd sustained flared up in agony. Zu An hissed through gritted teeth. "Argh, crashing against a wall sure is painful!"

His old wounds had been close to healing, but his experiment with Grandgale had caused several new injuries. Not daring to mess around anymore, he lay quietly in bed and waited patiently for Ji Dengtu's recovery medicine to work its wonders. Unknowingly, he fell asleep.

The next morning, Zu An woke up feeling frail even after a night's rest. It felt like he'd only recovered from about half of the wounds he'd sustained from the fight with Pei Mianman. This left him slightly dissatisfied. It looked like he had overestimated Ji Dengtu by equating the effectiveness of his recovery medicine with that of Faith in Brother Spring.

If others were to learn of these thoughts, he would have been chased around town by an angry, cleaver-wielding mob. Innumerable cultivators would have fallen to their knees in the hopes of obtaining this Hundredflower Impermanence Pill. To dismiss it as an inferior medicine was truly unforgivable!

It suddenly hit Zu An that he had forgotten to draw the lottery. Too many things had happened last night, and it had slipped his mind. So, he took out the Keyboard and checked his Rage points. He'd been left with 69 points previously, but after earning a fair bit from the Chu Zhongtian, Qin Wanru, and Pei Mianman, he now had 3,273.

He frowned unhappily. He'd definitely gone easy on Pei Mianman the previous night, since he'd only managed to obtain such a small amount from her. Then again, no man would be able to bring themselves to treat such a top-notch beauty too harshly.

He started to miss Plum Blossom Twelve and the bunch from the Blackwind Stockade. He reminisced about the good memories that he'd created with them.

Heaven, please bestow me with an antagonist whom I can antagonize!

Whoosh!

The door flew open, and in barged a suave young man, his perfect hair combed neatly in place. He walked up to the bedside and gazed loftily down upon Zu An. "How much have your injuries recovered? Are you able to go to the academy today?"

You have successfully trolled Hong Xingying for 299 Rage points!

"I'm more or less alright, I guess," Zu An replied subconsciously. "No, wait a moment. Who are you?"

"That's good." The young man turned and walked out without bothering to answer. He froze for a moment as he caught sight of the human-shaped imprint on the wall in his peripheral vision, but quickly regained his composure and left the room with his chest puffed out and his head high.

Zu An was still a little dazed. It was just a moment ago that I made a wish, and I was instantly sent an antagonist to antagonize? Surely my prayers can't be that effective! Who is that fellow though? And why is he contributing so many Rage points even though it's the first time we're meeting one another?

"Young master~" It was then that an accusing voice sounded by the doorway. Cheng Shouping appeared by the doorway wearing two heavy eyebags.

Zu An jolted in shock. "What's wrong with you? Did a vixen suck out your yang essence?"

Cheng Shouping tottered over weakly. "Young master, how can you say such a thing? I spent the entire night copying the family rules a hundred times, all by myself! I didn't even sleep a wink!"

Zu An smiled sheepishly as he got up and poured his exhausted study companion a cup of water. "Little Pingping, you should be glad that you were in the Reflection Room copying the family rules last night. If you had been with me, you would be a corpse right now."

"Thank you, young master." Cheng Shouping accepted Zu An's cup of water humbly. It took a while for his mind to process Zu An's statement. "Wait a moment. What do you mean 'I would be a corpse right now'?"

Zu An pointed to the human-shaped imprint on the wall and said, "Do you see that? An assassin dropped by last night to kill me. It's only thanks to the blessings of heaven and my superior skills that I managed to escape the ordeal. If you had been around, you would have been forced to put your life on the line to save me. It's very likely that the enemy's dagger would have plunged right into your brittle body and torn it apart."

Cheng Shouping gulped fearfully as he muttered, "Thank god I was in the Reflection Room."

"What did you say?" Zu An's eyebrows shot up.

Cheng Shouping replied immediately with a fawning smile, "I said that it was a pity that I wasn't around. A person as loyal as me would surely have put my life on the line to protect you. That assassin would have had to step over my dead body before he could lay his hands on you!"

Cheng Shouping was so passionate in this declaration that his spittle flew everywhere. Zu An quickly shoved his face aside. "That's enough of you. Aren't you getting too into the script? Let me ask you something instead. Who's that proud-looking fellow who just walked out earlier?"

"Him? He's the precious son of Butler Hong, Hong Xingying," Cheng Shouping replied. "That fellow is a conceited punk, but there's no denying that he's a prodigious cultivator. Despite having never gone through any formal education, he managed to reach the third rank by studying on his own. Butler Hong has always been proud of him, and the Master and Madam are full of compliments for him too. They are expecting him to become one of the leaders of the younger generation in the Chu Estate, and they have been grooming him."

Ah, so he's the son of Butler Hong. It's no wonder why his hair is combed so impeccably, just like his father's.

"Tsk, I doubt he's that formidable. After cultivating for over a decade, he has only managed to reach the third rank?" Zu An scoffed. Useless trash like me can reach the third rank in just three days, but even I don't go around boasting about it!

Cheng Shouping shook his head wryly. No wonder they say that the young master has his head in the clouds. Despite being utterly incapable, he still runs his mouth as if he's a bigshot. If you could reach the third rank in your lifetime, I bet even the Master and Madam would be laughing in their sleep!

"Why are you staring at me like that?" Zu An glared at Cheng Shouping.

Cheng Shouping plastered a smile back onto his face. "I was thinking that maybe I should tell Madam to let you rest for the day, given how severely injured you are."

"There's no need for that. These small injuries won't hinder me. My father-in-law and mother-in-law are asking me to attend the academy for my own good, so how can I let them down?" Zu An thumped his chest as he spoke resolutely. Needless to say, he wasn't interested in attending the academy, but remaining in the estate was far more boring.

Due to the assassination attempt the previous night, Chu Zhongtian had stationed two guards at the entrance of his room, which prevented him from sneaking out even if he wanted to. Rather than being confined, he preferred to go to the academy instead. Perhaps he could find an opening to slip away and pursue his own agenda.

Hearing Zu An's motivated speech, Cheng Shouping's mouth dropped open, wide enough to fit a whole fist. He rushed forward and placed his hand on Zu An's forehead. "Young master, what's wrong with you? Are you having a fever?"

"Scram!" Zu An kicked him aside.

"Hahaha! Zu An, you're really becoming more and more mature. It looks like the effort I have spent on you isn't in vain!" A peal of laughter sounded outside, and Chu Zhongtian and Qin Wanru walked in with satisfied smiles on their faces.

"Father-in-law, mother-in-law, what are you doing here?" Zu An pretended to look flattered. Ah, it sure is hard having to put on an act every day. At this rate, I might be eligible for the Oscars if I transmigrate back to my previous world.

"I heard from Xingying that you have recovered from your injuries and are intending to head to the academy. I was a little worried, so I came over to check on you." Qin Wanru's usually-stern face held a tinge of gentleness.

Chapter 39: The Thief in the Flower Field

"I thought things through yesterday, and I realized that you were sending me to the academy for my own good as well." It was then that Zu An noticed Hong Xingying standing behind the two of them. The latter had a disinterested look on his face, and couldn't be bothered to meet Zu An's gaze. Why does this fellow treat me so coldly? It's almost as if I owe him hundreds of silver taels!

"You have wisened up quite a bit." Chu Zhongtian seemed in a good mood. He gently stroked his beard. "Chuyan will be delighted to hear this too."

A zealous look flashed in Hong Xingying's eyes at the mention of the First Miss, but he quickly concealed it.

Qin Wanru smiled at Zu An. "Since you have decided to go to the academy, you should have Xingying accompany you. He's also attending the academy from today onward. It would be good if the two of you looked after one another. Xingying is a smart and mature child, so I'm sure you can learn a lot from him."

Hong Xingying bowed in deference. "Madam, you're flattering me. I'll do my best to take care of him."

Zu An clicked his tongue quietly. It sounds good if you ask us to 'look after one another', but put crudely, you're basically using him to keep an eye on me. They must be quite worried after I played truant yesterday, so they're sending someone with me to prevent such things from happening again.

This also explained why Hong Xingying was so furious earlier on. It hadn't been easy for him to secure a chance to study at the academy, and Zu An's injuries almost cost him this chance. It was only natural for him to get angry.

While the academies here preached education without discrimination, securing a spot wasn't easy. At the very least, each applicant would have to prove their worth. Well-connected individuals like Zu An could get an easy pass.

It was much harder for others like Hong Xingying and the other servants of the Chu clan, as they required their Master's approval to enter the academy.

Shouldn't Hong Xingying be thankful to me, then? If not for me, how else could he have secured a chance to attend the academy?

Despite earning Rage points from Hong Xingying earlier, Zu An still felt that he'd gotten the short end of the stick in this situation.

Chu Zhongtian and Qin Wanru lectured him a while longer before taking their leave. Hong Xingying tossed his head arrogantly and left the room as well.

Zu An proceeded with his morning ablutions. Someone delivered breakfast to him as he was getting ready, so he had Cheng Shouping sit down and eat together with him.

Unexpectedly, his offhanded action caused the latter to tear up.

Young master, even though you're a little dumb, very boastful, and awfully incapable... you treat me really well! You don't think of me as a subordinate. Yes, I've decided. I'll help you to gain a footing in the Chu clan no matter what!

If Zu An had been aware of his thoughts, he would probably have kicked him in the face.

"Ahem ahem!" A hunchbacked figure passed by his window.

"Don't you play truant today. Remember to look for Wei Hongde." A voice rasped in Zu An's ears as he ate.

He raised his head to take a look, but Old Mi's figure was already nowhere to be seen.

Zu An nudged Cheng Shouping. "Did you hear a voice earlier?"

"I didn't hear anything at all. Burp~" Cheng Shouping was so engrossed in his food that his eyes had never left the table.

Zu An rolled his eyes in disdain. "Aren't you afraid of choking to death?" The voice he'd just heard sent a shiver down his spine. For some reason, the mysterious old man scared him. Chu Zhongtian and Qin Wanru seemed almost docile compared to him.

He would do well to take a good look around the academy today.

After finishing his meal, Cheng Shouping helped Zu An pack some daily necessities. As they walked out of the door, they found Hong Xingying already waiting outside, a sword in his arms. Upon seeing the duo, he asked impatiently, "What took you so long?"

You have successfully trolled Hong Xingying for 99 Rage points!

Is there a problem with this lad?

Zu An couldn't stand it any longer. "Are you the young master or am I the young master? What's wrong with waiting for a while?"

“So what if you’re the young master? There isn’t a single person in the Chu Estate who doesn’t know of your background. Do you think that you can scare me?” Hong Xingying sneered coldly.

Zu An looked him over from head to toe. “Do I owe you money?”

Hong Xingying was stunned by the abrupt question. “I don’t think so.”

“Then why are you so hostile toward me?” Zu An asked.

Hong Xingying’s body stiffened. He hadn’t expected Zu An to confront him directly. He glanced at Cheng Shouping, and chose to approach the matter carefully. “I don’t hate you personally. I just think that it’s a huge pity for the First Miss. The First Miss is such a talented and wonderful person. A man like you will never be a match for her!”

“This... He’s the young master after all. It isn’t appropriate for you to say such words,” Cheng Shouping protested weakly.

Zu An was amused by Cheng Shouping’s response. I didn’t think this lad would stick his head out for me in front of someone else.

Hong Xingying glanced at Cheng Shouping coldly. “Is there anything wrong with what I have just said? Why don’t you point out his strengths to me then?”

Cheng Shouping frowned in concentration. After a long moment, he declared, “While the young master doesn’t have any talents, at least his appearance is passable!”

Zu An, infuriated, immediately shoved Cheng Shouping aside. It was a miracle that this fellow could survive in the Chu clan to this day with such a foul mouth! “Ah, I get it now. In other words, you’re Chuyan’s admirer!”

Hong Xingying’s fair face immediately reddened upon hearing those words. “Who says so! I’m not her admirer! Stop talking nonsense!”

Hong Xingying’s triple-denial combo was too good an opportunity to pass up. “A capable servant and a beautiful miss; what a beautiful yet tragic love story! Still, don’t you think it’s shameless to covet another man’s wife?”

“You!!!” Hong Xingying glared at Zu An before turning his head away with a growl. He didn’t want to waste his breath arguing with the latter anymore!

You have successfully trolled Hong Xingying for 100 Rage points!

Unfortunately for Hong Xingying, Zu An had no plans on letting him off so easily. He walked up to Hong Xingying and looped an arm around his shoulders. “Fine fine, let me put it in another way then: The woman you love became my wife. That makes you sound less like an asshole for coveting my wife, right? Do you feel better now?”

You have successfully trolled Hong Xingying for 333 Rage points!

Hong Xingying gnashed his teeth in anger and he gripped the handle of his sword tightly. He somehow managed to hold himself back from drawing his sword. Taking a deep breath, he said, “All you’re

capable of is running your mouth! Hah, just you wait! The academy treats everyone equally. Soon I shall have you know the gulf that exists between you and me!”

Zu An chuckled softly. “I admire your confidence. You put on one face before my father- and mother-in-law, only to act in a different manner behind their backs. Aren’t you afraid that I would report this matter to them?”

Hong Xingying was unfazed by the threat. “Go ahead and tell them then. Let’s see whether they’ll believe a piece of trash like you, or a capable servant like me.”

Zu An pulled Cheng Shouping over. “I have an eye-witness here.”

Cheng Shouping shook his head frantically. “I didn’t see or hear anything at all!”

Zu An felt something in him about to snap. “Why are you acting like a coward?”

Hong Xingying sneered at the farce playing out in front of him. “Force him all you want to. It’s futile. If there’s one person that Master and Madam trust the least in this estate, it’s him.”

After saying his piece, Hong Xingying strode ahead of them, putting some distance between him and Zu An. It was as if he felt disgusted just standing next to trash like them.

Zu An and Cheng Shouping were left in his wake, staring speechlessly at one another. Zu An sighed deeply. “How in the world did you end up in such a miserable position? You should consider just smashing your head into that pillar over there and ending your life.”

“You have fallen so low that even a servant dares to criticize you, and you still dare to pick flaws with me!” Cheng Shouping retorted indignantly.

Zu An snarled, then turned his gaze to the young man walking away from them. A smile slowly formed on his lips. It wasn’t easy for me to stumble upon such perfect prey like you. I should take my time to milk you, lest you collapse before I have my fill of Rage points.

The three of them arrived at the entrance of Brightmoon Academy. Zu An glanced wistfully in the direction of the winding side path he’d taken the day before, and the image of a carefree woman swirling a gourd of wine flashed across his mind. He wondered if he would be able to meet her once more.

There were fewer people queuing up at the entrance of the academy as compared to the day before. Bored with waiting, Zu An took the time to look around. He spied a young man and a young woman tugging at one another, deep in conversation.

The man was quite good-looking, but he smelled of powder and perfume. His skin was fairer than most women, and from time to time, his eyes would twinkle seductively. This ‘young man’ seemed suspicious, and reminded Zu An of the stereotypical cross-dressing plotline that was often portrayed in historical dramas.

I’m not as foolish as Liang Shanbo. There’s no way I’ll let something as good as this slip past me!

Zu An walked over and looped an arm across the young man’s shoulders. “Hey bro, have we met each other before?”

You're the one who wants to cross-dress as a guy, so you can't complain even if I take advantage of you a little. Hahaha~

"You are...?" The 'young man' seemed a little confused. He was clearly trying to recall if he had ever met Zu An before.

Zu An was perplexed. He didn't expect this 'young man' to respond so nonchalantly. His gaze tracked downward, and he spotted the Adam's apple on his throat. His stomach instantly started churning. Shit, it's just a guy who looks like a girl!

He retracted his arm as if in shock, and apologized, "My bad, I thought you were someone else."

The young woman standing opposite the young man glared at Zu An as if he was an idiot, displeased that he had suddenly barged into their conversation. "Sigh. Where were we?"

"Ah yes, I remember now. Big brother Xiu, how did I wrong you and irk you so much? Tell me, and I'll change! Why must we break up with one another?" The woman was beautiful, and the tears glistening in her eyes gave her an incredibly pitiful look.

Zu An examined the feminine man closely. Is this sort of man considered charming in this world? Even if I were to be compared with him... Sigh, let's not talk about such a depressing topic.

The man reached out to grab the woman's hand, his voice brimming with emotion. "This isn't your fault. I'm just afraid that... I won't love you anymore in the future. So, I want to break up while we're still in love with one another. I shall bear all of the pain and heartache alone."

Zu An froze. This must be one of the trashiest break-up excuses I have ever heard! Holy shit, is this fellow the ancestor of the Scumbag Sect?

His words made the woman burst into tears. "Big brother Xiu, I didn't know that your love for me runs so deep! It's all my fault. I shouldn't have pushed you so much. They always say that distance makes the heart grow fonder. Perhaps you'll love me once more if we part for one another temporarily."

Zu An's eyes widened in disbelief. Are the women in this world so gullible? I see... Looks like this is really a haven for me!

"I'm glad that you understand me so well!" the young man replied with an agitated tone. The scene flipped suddenly on its head. "Now that we have broken up with one another, can you introduce me to your close friend? I'm referring to the young miss from the Liu clan that you have been..."

Smack!

There was a limit to how dumb a human could be. The young woman slapped him full in the face and fled tearfully.

The young man opened his fan and lightly stroked the cheek that had been slapped. He looked wistful as he intoned deeply, "The tender hand of a beauty; how it entrances me so."

Chapter 40: Just Like His Name

Zu An gave him a thumbs-up. “I thought that I’m as trashy as a person could possibly get, but it looks like I still have a long way to go before reaching your level.”

The man was not offended by Zu An’s words. Instead, he closed his fan and chuckled softly. “I can offer you some pointers if you want to. I am Xie Xiu. May I know what your name is?”

“I am Zu An.” Zu An thought that the man’s name was really reflective of his appearance—he sure was a charming man.[1]

“Oh? Your name sounds familiar. I seem to have heard it somewhere before,” Xie Xiu contemplated this as he placed his fan beneath his chin.

Zu An was about to respond when Cheng Shouping waved at him and called out, “Young master, it’s going to be your turn soon. Come over!”

Zu An clasped his fist at Xie Xiu and said, “Brother Xie, if a chance arises, I hope to learn the art of how to become a scu... Pui pui pui! I mean, the art of courtship from you in the future!”

“You seem to be a fellow peer. Of course, you are welcome to do so,” Xie Xiu clasped his own fist in reply.

Zu An made his way swiftly back to the queue. In front of him, Hong Xingying sneered coldly. “Birds of the same feather flock together. People like you can only make friends like that.”

Zu An shrugged nonchalantly. “What a pity that it’s a person like me who ended up marrying the goddess of your dreams.”

Hong Xingying immediately lost his temper. “You dare to insult the First Miss?”

You have successfully trolled Hong Xingying for 321 Rage points!

Zu An chuckled in response. “We’re a married couple. How could a statement like this be considered an insult?”

“You!!!” Hong Xingying almost drew his sword on the spot.

You have successfully trolled Hong Xingying for 344 Rage points!

A staff of the academy knocked on the door and shouted, “What are you causing a ruckus for? Those who dare to cause trouble will be immediately stripped of their qualifications as a student!”

Hong Xingying tamped down on his anger and turned stiffly to face forward. It would be a shame to ruin his own future over a wastrel like Zu An. Just wait till I make a name for myself in the academy. I shall free myself from the position of a servant, and I won’t have to hold back anymore!

Zu An shook his head. It was a pity they couldn’t carry on further. He turned his attention to Cheng Shouping. “What’s the background of that man named Xie Xiu?”

Cheng Shouping replied, “He’s the Second Young Master of the City Lord Estate.” Then, he leaned a little closer and continued with a hushed voice, “He’s a renowned wastrel in the Brightmoon City. He’s well-versed in zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting—he’s dabbled in practically everything. Be it eating,

drinking, whoring, or gambling, there's nothing that he wouldn't do. However, his cultivation appears to be his weak point. Because of that, his father is at a loss as to what he should do with him."

Just like you, young master, Cheng Shouping silently added in his heart. But soon, he shook his head in rebuttal. How can our young master compete with him? At least this Second Young Master Xie is proficient in so many skills!

"A wastrel? Interesting!" Zu An noticed that Xie Xiu had just approached another woman, Noticing his gaze, Xie Xiu nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

"Next, Wei Suo!"

Zu An was just about to wave to Xie Xiu when the staff member's voice thundered out. His eyes widened in surprise. He never thought that he would hear such a refreshing name in this world.[2]

He turned to look, and observed a young man of smaller stature stepping forward. His overall appearance strongly resembled a sneaky rat, accentuated by the two buckteeth he had. He gave the impression of a cunning man who wouldn't hesitate to do all sorts of underhanded things.

Wow, his parents must be prophets to have given him such a fitting name!

The academy staff member took out a crystal ball. The staff member pricked Wei Suo's finger and squeezed a droplet of his blood onto it. The crystal ball gave off a faint glow that was hardly visible unless one paid close attention.

"Lower Ding." (Equivalent to D-)

Wei Suo had been staring at the crystal ball in hopeful anticipation. Upon hearing the result, his excitement deflated like a leaky balloon.

The procedure baffled Zu An. He turned to Cheng Shouping and asked, "What are they doing over there?"

Cheng Shouping had an answer ready. "They are testing the students' aptitude for cultivation. All students who seek to enter the academy must go through this process. The classes they will be assigned to, as well as the cultivation resources they will be allocated with, will be determined by the results of this test."

Zu An was truly amazed. "Little Pingping, how is it that you have an answer to every question I ask?"

Cheng Shouping stuck his chest out in pride. "Of course! As a qualified study companion, it's only right for me to find out such details beforehand!" His tone was gleeful.

Zu An patted Cheng Shouping's head, but deep inside, he was starting to worry a little. He hadn't expected to go through an aptitude test in order to enter the academy. Given how many Marrow Cleansing Pills he had eaten, his talent should be at the maximum. Would the result of his test blow the minds of everyone here?

For an incompetent wastrel to suddenly become a top-notch cultivation prodigy, such a sudden transformation was bound to incur great suspicion. Would he be kidnapped to whatever passed off as a science lab in this world, to be dissected for research?

Zu An's first thought was to swap Cheng Shouping's blood for his own, but the chances of pulling that off were slim, considering that there were so many eyes here.

Forget it! If I can't maintain a low profile to survive, I could still take the domineering route just like the great Chen Beixuan! [3]

The staff member in front called out yet another name. "Ma Zhu!"

"Here!" A slightly plump young man ran forward.

The staff pricked his finger and squeezed a droplet of blood on the crystal ball. A moment later, the crystal ball glowed with a soothing white light. If the result of Wei Suo's test was like the spark of a firefly, Ma Zhu's result was like a bright light bulb.

"His talent is upper Yi!" (Equivalent to B+)

The surrounding crowd broke out in excited chatter. Even the academy's staff began whispering amongst themselves. Few cultivators in the country had an aptitude that reached Yi class. Within the boundary of a prefecture, an upper Yi class cultivator could easily be considered as a genius!

Ma Zhu clearly understood the significance of having an upper Yi class talent. After bowing to the academy's staff, he strutted down like a proud peacock, enjoying the envious looks that others directed toward him.

Hong Xingying sneered at Ma Zhu's pretentious attitude. A mere upper Yi class talent, and he acts as if he owns the world. How embarrassing!

He had been waiting for this day for a long time. He knew that his talent was top-notch amongst his peers, and that it could even rival that of the First Miss.

The only reason why the First Miss was more outstanding than him was due to the abundance of cultivation resources she had at her disposal. The mere son of a butler like himself couldn't hope to acquire the same amount. Over time, the disparity between the two of them only grew larger and larger.

Over the past few years, he had served the Chu clan to the best of his ability. He carried out all of the missions that Master and Madam assigned to him perfectly, no matter how tiring or difficult they were. He considered all his efforts to be worth it, as long as he could glimpse the ravishing profile of the First Miss from afar.

The disparity in their backgrounds made him feel inferior to and unworthy of the First Miss. He chose instead to devote himself to silently protecting her. He would have been satisfied if she could find a capable man from an outstanding background who was worthy of her.

To his delight, the Chu clan had chosen to draft in a son-in-law for the First Miss. Men of distinguished standing would never lower themselves to such a demeaning station, and so those who participated in the selections were lesser nobles and ordinary civilians. It seemed that his chance had come.

While he might have been no match for the young masters of the distinguished clans, he backed his aptitude in cultivation to set him apart from the lesser candidates, and so attract the First Miss' attention.

In fact, it was rumoured that Madam Chu had already decided on him as her son-in-law. Everyone around him congratulated him as if the outcome was settled. While he maintained a nonchalant air, in truth, it felt as though the warmth of spring had entered his heart, bringing with it the blossoming flowers of happiness. From time to time, it seemed the First Miss smiled at him faintly; it turned out that she was interested in him too.

His mind was filled with the thought of how the beautiful and lofty First Miss would soon become his wife. He imagined how he would be able to embrace her tender and fragrant body to sleep every night, which made him giggle in his sleep.

The results of the draft were like a slap in the face. The First Miss had chosen a notorious good-for-nothing as her husband instead. When he heard the news, he fell from cloud nine down into the pits of gloomy despair. He became the laughingstock of those around him.

He wallowed in depression for a time, before rage bubbled up in his breast to take its place. Why? If she had chosen an outstanding man, I would have willingly conceded defeat. But this Zu An is useless trash! How can he be worthy of the First Miss?!

Is it because he looks handsome?

Impossible! The First Miss isn't such a shallow woman!

He brooded for a long time, and came to the sad conclusion that it was all due to his humble background. He was just a servant in the Chu Estate, so it had never crossed the mind of the First Miss to think of him as a man.

Thus, he begged his father to use his connections to get him into Brightmoon Academy. Doing well in the academy would be the first step towards becoming an official and building up his own clan. By then, he would be able to stand on equal terms with the First Miss and have her notice him as a man.

So what if the First Miss is already married? Her husband is trash! I can definitely win her over!

His only regret was that the goddess of his heart would not be a maiden anymore. However, as long as she could be his, none of that would matter. Besides, what about Second Miss Chu? She might have a bad temper, but she already possesses such moving beauty despite her young age. She's bound to become a gorgeous woman on par with the First Miss in just a few years!

I have plenty of time anyway! I can wait for her to grow up!

This day shall go down in the history of Brightmoon Academy—No, the entire country shall remember this very day! I, Hong Xingying, shall rise from dust to become a majestic dragon! Everyone here is no more than a stepping stone on the way to the heights of my greatness! Everyone here shall witness history being made! I have waited for this moment for a very long time!

Hong Xingying's heart harbored great ambitions.

"Next, Hong Xingying!"

Hong Xingying turned and fixed Zu An with a hard stare. "Watch and realize the gulf that exists between you and me. There's not a single part of you that's worthy of the First Miss. Only I can bring the First Miss happiness!"

Zu An raised a hand. "Teacher, this man over here has a fetish for other people's wives! He keeps thinking of taking my wife for his own. Wouldn't it be dangerous for the other female students and teachers if such a person was allowed into the academy?"

You have successfully trolled Hong Xingying for 156 Rage points!

Hong Xingying had not expected Zu An would be so shameless as to lodge a complaint with the teacher! No matter which world one was in, those who made petty reports on others were always the most reprehensible scum! Does he have no sense of shame at all?

Hong Xingying was on the verge of lashing out, when the cold stare of the academy staff member froze him in place. "That student over there! While our academy prioritizes the aptitude and cultivation of our students, we pay great heed to the students' character as well. I hope that you will tread wisely in the future."

Hong Xingying bowed immediately. "Yes, I'll heed your guidance." He knew that the staff member's opinion of him could go no lower, but it mattered not. His strength alone would reverse their impression of him!

The staff member nodded in acknowledgement of Hong Xingying's respectful words, then gestured him forward. "Come over here and have your aptitude tested."

Hong Xingying took a deep breath as he made his way over to the crystal ball. Just like the students before, he squeezed a droplet of blood onto it. A moment later, the crystal ball shone with a blinding radiance. If Ma Zhu's light was that of a lightbulb, Hong Xingying's was that of the moon.