

Immortal 351

Chapter 351: Luring the Tiger From its Den

"Me?" Zu An was surprised. After all, Qin Wanru had never liked him, and yet she wanted him to accompany her today.

Qin Wanru rolled her eyes at him. "You have close ties to the Wei clan, and besides, you're the one who helped to facilitate this. Who else would I bring if not you?"

Chu Huanzhao rushed over when she heard that the two of them were heading out. She proclaimed loudly that she was going with them.

Qin Wanru rejected her straightaway. "We are going out on official business. You need to stay at home."

Chu Huanzhao pointed at Zu An. "How come even brother-in-law gets to go, but not me?" she said unhappily.

Zu An was stunned for a moment.

What do you mean, even I can go? Do I seem so lowly to you?!

I haven't spanked this kid in a while. It seems like she's itching for a beating.

Qin Wanru gave her daughter a hard look. "Be obedient!"

Her statement was delivered with all the power she had accumulated over the years. Chu Huanzhao stuck out her tongue and left unhappily.

The two of them arrived in the Wei clan. When he received news of Qin Wanru's arrival, the head of the Wei clan came out personally to welcome them.

After exchanging greetings, the two of them headed into the study to discuss the details.

Meanwhile, Wei Hongde showed Zu An around.

However, Zu An was not in the mood for a tour at all. He claimed to be a little tired, and requested for a room where he could get some rest.

Wei Hongde was rather surprised, but acceded to his request in the end. After all, the clan master had important matters to discuss, and there was no way he would be done quickly. As such, he arranged a guest room for Zu An. It just happened to be the one he had used the last time.

Zu An lay down on the bed. Once Wei Hongde left, however, his eyes flew open.

This opportunity was too good to pass up. He might as well go looking for Old Mi's case again.

However, he suddenly remembered the terrifying cultivation possessed by the mysterious old expert he had met the last time, and quickly grew discouraged. Stealing something from under that old fart's nose would surely prove too difficult.

Just then, a figure jumped in through the window. Alarmed by this sudden development, Zu An's whole body tensed. "Show yourself!"

"It's me!" A captivating figure slowly walked towards him, staring at him with her ever-smiling peach-blossom eyes. Who else could this be but Pei Mianman?

"Big Manman!" Zu An's eyes brightened. He spread his arms, welcoming her into his embrace. "Long time no see! Come and give this big brother a hug!"

Pei Mianman was not amused.

She easily evaded him. "You're getting more and more daring! I definitely need to make Chu Chuyan see this side of you someday."

Zu An seemed unfazed by her threat. "Chu Chuyan doesn't even care if I do this sort of thing. Who knows, she might even be happy to see the two of us together. That way, the two of you can continue being sisters."

Pei Mianman finally couldn't take his teasing anymore. She snorted and said, "Enough already. I wanted to ask you for your help."

Zu An looked disappointed. "I thought that our meeting today was fate giving us another chance, but it seems you were actually looking for me."

Pei Mianman looked around and realized that this was the room the two of them had stayed in the last time. Her face heated up when she recalled what had happened that night. "I only sought you out after learning that you were here."

"Are you still looking for the same thing?" Zu An let his smile fade. "That terrifying expert is still in the Wei Estate. Are you looking to throw your life away?"

"I was caught off guard the last time because I didn't know that such an expert was here," Pei Mianman said. "I came prepared this time, so matters will go much more smoothly. Of course, the odds of success will be higher if you agree to help me."

"What sort of help do you need?" Zu An asked.

Pei Mianman walked over to the window and gazed towards the distant silhouettes. "I'm going to head towards that courtyard to draw out that mysterious expert. You'll use that chance to sneak in and find something for me."

Zu An frowned. The plan was simple—lure the tiger from its den. Simple plans were usually quite effective, but there was a key issue to this one. "The level of that fellow's cultivation is far above yours. How in the world are you going to get away?"

Pei Mianman said, "You don't need to worry about that. I have my own way of dealing with it. You just need to help me find what I need."

Zu An knew how mysterious she was. She might actually have some way of dealing with that expert, just as she claimed. "What are you looking for?"

A look of hesitation crossed Pei Mianman's face. However, she knew that there was no way he would be able to find what she needed without knowing what it looked like. "It's a dark golden tile. It's this long and this wide..."

She outlined the shape, size, and various other traits of the item.

Zu An couldn't hide his curiosity. "What is this tile used for? Why would you go through such great risks to get it?"

Pei Mianman remained silent.

"If you don't want to tell me, you can forget about my help." Zu An's mood darkened. He felt really annoyed for some reason.

Pei Mianman bit her lower lip. There was clearly some internal struggle going on within her. In the end, she said, "Whatever. I've saved your life before and you've saved mine. That makes the two of us close. I'll let you in on this, then. However, you have to promise me that you won't tell anyone else what I am about to tell you, including Chuyan. I'm not saying this because I don't trust you, but because this matter is too important."

"Sure, I'll keep this secret for you." Zu An didn't dare to joke around when he saw how serious she was.

Pei Mianman lowered her voice and said, "You can enter and exit the imperial palace freely using this tile."

Zu An leapt in shock. "What the heck are you trying to do, stealing something like that?!"

Pei Mianman shook her head. "That's not something you need to worry about. I have my reasons."

Zu An grew serious. After taking a moment to think about it, he nodded. "All right, I'll help you!"

"Thank you!" Seeing that he was still willing to help her after hearing all that, Pei Mianman beamed gratefully.

Zu An was taken aback by this beautiful sight.

Pei Mianman blushed. She hurriedly said, "Regardless of whether you find that tile or not, you have to leave within the time it takes to burn a stick of incense. Things will go south if that expert rushes back and finds you."

"I know." Zu An knew that he was no match for someone that even Old Mi was scared to face. He wouldn't possibly dare to face that fella head on.

"By the way, regardless of whether you succeed or not, I'll be waiting for you two hours later by the gazebo outside the academy." Pei Mianman paused, then added, "That gardener in your clan estate is also dangerous. We might be exposed if we meet in the Chu clan."

"All right!" Zu An was just about to suggest something similar. Old Mi had even seen him with Pei Mianman previously. Now that they had something so important to discuss, they obviously had to avoid him.

"I'll be going, then. Get ready." Pei Mianman walked over to the window.

“Be careful.” Even though she said she had a countermeasure prepared, Zu An was still anxious. After all, that expert was just too formidable.

“Don’t worry!” Pei Mianman smiled. Just as she was about to leave, she abruptly turned around. “I suddenly understand why Chuyan likes you.”

With that, her figure disappeared. Only her fragrance lingered in the air.

Zu An was stunned. It took you so long to figure that out?

Isn’t it obviously because I’m handsome, rich, talented, and courageous?

He didn’t have to wait long. There was a loud whoosh, and he vaguely glimpsed two figures rush out.

Zu An shivered inside. He retracted all of his aura and sneaked towards the courtyard.

Chapter 352: Conditions

Along the way, he saw that the guards of the Wei Estate had already begun to move, but they were all headed in the direction of the supposed assassin. He used this chance to sneak into the darkened courtyard.

An eerie feeling enveloped him the second he entered the courtyard. The lightning here was dim. Compared to the other places in the Wei Estate, this place seemed much more secluded and concealed.

There weren’t any servants inside, and no maids or guards either. Not a single person was in sight.

The interior of the residence felt like a haunted house. It seemed totally devoid of life.

Zu An kept a firm lid on his thoughts. He knew that time was pressing, and he needed to find what he was looking for as quickly as possible.

Not only did he have to help Pei Mianman find her tile, he had to find the case that Old Mi was interested in as well.

Even though Old Mi had told him to give up on the search, he still wanted to know what was inside.

Of course, he wouldn’t normally have taken such a huge risk and let his curiosity get the better of him. However, he had been presented with a rare opportunity. Pei Mianman had even helped him lure that expert away. It would be a pity if he couldn’t find it.

The arrangements of rooms in these large clan residences were all somewhat similar. Zu An was already familiar with the arrangement of rooms in the Chu clan, so he quickly located the study.

He gave the study a cursory once-over, paying special attention to the containers on the bookshelf. After all, according to all those TV dramas he’d watched, these were the most likely places where hidden mechanisms would be.

However, he didn’t find any such mechanisms in the study.

As such, he decided to search the bedroom next. He quickly went into the bedroom behind the study.

Zu An frowned as soon as he entered. He subconsciously fanned the air in front of his nose. What is that smell?

A strange odor permeated the room. He could tell that it was some sort of expensive incense. However, there was no way it should have smelled like this.

The smell of incense was mingled with a lingering smell of urine. This was what gave the odor its characteristic awfulness.

It wasn't completely fragrant, yet it wasn't completely putrid either. It was just indescribably nauseating.

What the heck is the Wei clan doing? Can't they clean a room properly? Zu An cursed, but he didn't stop his search.

He scanned the entire room quickly, then headed straight for the bed.

He undid the bedding and lightly tapped the boards underneath the bed.

Sure enough, there was a hollow sound.

Sigh, these fellas really don't have any creativity when it comes to hiding things... Zu An gave an inward shake of his head. This was such an overused cliché! Who would've guessed that the people of this world would devise hiding places like this as well?

He quickly found a hidden mechanism. He triggered it and opened the hidden compartment, revealing a case inside. It was clearly the same as the one Old Mi had shown him before, both in terms of the shape and the decorative details. He hurriedly took out the case Old Mi had given him and put it in place of the stolen box. This way, whoever opened the compartment again wouldn't immediately realize that the contents had been stolen.

He was curious to see what was inside. He had a subconscious urge to open it to take a peek, but the design of the case was extremely exquisite. A layer of light flickered across its surface, which was most likely some type of seal.

He had no time to perform a careful examination. He stowed it away and began to search for Pei Mianman's tile.

Unfortunately, he didn't find any trace of that tile.

His time was almost up. The sound of approaching footsteps came from close by.

He had no choice but to end his search and leave.

I wonder if big Manman can escape that fellow's clutches. Zu An was more than a little worried. He decided to make a detour to a smaller room. Once there, he knocked over an oil lamp, which quickly sent flames and smoke shooting out.

Using the ensuing chaos as cover, he quickly returned to his own room.

"There's a fire! There's a fire!"

Soon, shouts of alarm filled the Wei Estate. Servants rushed over with buckets of water to put out the fire.

Zu An pretended to be a bystander. He even pulled over a few servants to ask them what was going on.

His expressions were so realistic, it was truly an Oscar-worthy performance.

He let this go on for a while longer before rushing over to Wei clan's study with a worried expression. He just happened to bump into Qin Wanru.

"Madam, are you all right?" Zu An asked out of concern.

"I'm fine." Qin Wanru looked around the chaotic Wei Estate in confusion.

Someone rushed over to give a report to Wei Dabao. His expression grew dark when he heard the report. He clasped his fist towards Qin Wanru and said, "I really must apologize to Madam Chu. Something has happened within the clan estate. We've made a mockery of ourselves today."

"There's no need for such harsh words, Master Wei," Qin Wanru replied. "Since something has happened in your home, we shall not trouble you any further. Farewell."

Wei Dabao nodded. "I've already said everything I needed to say to Madam. Please consider what we discussed carefully. Our Wei clan makes this offer with the utmost sincerity."

Qin Wanru smiled at him and nodded once, before leaving with Zu An.

Qin Wanru entered her carriage, while Zu An rode on a horse alongside the carriage.

In the end, his curiosity got the better of him. He guided his horse over to the carriage and asked, "Madam, how did the talks with the Wei clan go?"

Qin Wanru lifted a corner of the curtain. Her expression was unreadable. "Let's talk inside the carriage."

The guards escorting them exchanged a few looks. It seemed like Madam was becoming more and more fond of the young master! They couldn't afford to casually offend the young master in the future.

The guards who had bet against Cheng Shouping all scowled miserably. It seemed like they really were going to lose that bet.

Zu An was overwhelmed by her invitation. Previously, if she wasn't already furious at him, she was always building up to it.

Such an amiable invitation was a rarity.

A refreshing fragrance greeted him as he entered the carriage. The rich smell was completely different from what Chu Chuyan gave off. It was clearly Qin Wanru's own smell.

Zu An thought back to the odor that had permeated the bedroom in the residence. Despite it coming from an expensive incense, he'd found it utterly repulsive. The smell that filled his nose right now was worlds better.

Qin Wanru frowned when she saw him flaring his nostrils. This fellow really had no sense of etiquette.

However, as a woman, it was hard for her to be mad at a man for appreciating her scent.

She coughed to get his attention. "Chu Chuyan told me again and again to trust you before she left. Even though I still don't know why she trusts you so much, I believe Chuyan wouldn't say such a thing casually.

"You are an intermediary in this matter concerning the Wei clan as well, so there is no need to hide our conversation from you."

Zu An felt relieved. He didn't expect his wife to care that much about him. He clasped his fist. "Thank you, Madam," he said respectfully.

Qin Wanru continued, "The Wei clan is prepared to offer us a loan at 8.8% interest."

Zu An focused on the most important part of the deal. "How much are they loaning us?"

"An unlimited amount," Qin Wanru said.

"Unlimited?" Zu An was stunned.

"Indeed. They will provide us with as much as we want." Qin Wanru's voice also carried a fair amount of shock. Clearly, she too was taken aback by the Wei clan's apparent wealth.

"Do they own a gold mine or something?!" Zu An was stupefied.

"They are most likely a front for some other high-ranking officials," Qin Wanru said.

"If this is true, then this interest rate is a good deal!" Zu An said.

Even by the standards of his previous world, 8.8% interest was considered low. Banks usually offered a starting rate of around 6%, but it was rare for anyone to get a loan at such a rate. Only people with connections were typically offered that rate. Most companies would be counting their blessings if they could borrow at 12%, let alone the Chu clan, especially considering the amount that they had to borrow.

From every angle, the Wei clan's conditions were extremely favorable.

Qin Wanru sighed. "It would be great if it were that simple. However, they have demanded that we put up our Chu clan's salt mines as collateral. I'm worried that this is all a ploy to rob us of our salt beds as well."

Chapter 353: A Sudden Realization

"They want our salt beds?" Zu An frowned. Objectively speaking, it was completely normal to require something as collateral. The Chu clan's most valuable assets were their salt beds.

However, the Wei clan had proposed this requirement when the Chu clan was in such dire straits, with the backing of the imperial palace as well. It was difficult for anyone not to draw the obvious connection!

Perhaps the Wei clan had realized this problem themselves, which was why they proposed such a low interest rate. The Chu clan wouldn't have even given their proposal any consideration otherwise.

“What does Madam plan to do?” Zu An asked.

Qin Wanru shook her head. “I haven’t thought it through yet. Let’s discuss this with everyone else when we head back.”

She rubbed her aching forehead. It was obvious that she had been working constantly since her husband’s detainment, and hadn’t gotten any proper rest.

Zu An tactfully decided not to disturb her any further and withdrew from her carriage. He quickly shifted his attention to the case he had acquired from the Wei clan estate. He took it out several times along the way, but he couldn’t find a way to undo the seal.

After escorting Qin Wanru back to the Chu Estate, Zu An was just about to head out to meet Pei Mianman. However, he ended up bumping into Old Mi first.

Zu An gave a start when he saw the old gardener. “Greetings, Elder.”

Old Mi frowned. He pulled him to the side. “Don’t call me that in the future. I don’t like drawing attention.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Zu An replied.

“I heard that you went to the Wei clan with the Madam.” Old Mi looked at him. His searing gaze seemed as if it could see right through him.

Fortunately, Zu An was already prepared for this, and wasn’t at all flustered. “Yeah, the Madam went to the Wei clan to borrow money. We just came back from their estate.”

“Did you bump into that man you met last time?” Old Mi asked nervously.

“No. The Madam and their clan master had things to discuss. I just waited for them to finish.” Zu An was really curious as to why Old Mi was so scared of that old expert.

“That’s good.” Old Mi sighed in relief. “Did you find that case that I wanted you to look for?”

Zu An shook his head. “I didn’t. Didn’t you tell me to not look for it anymore?”

Old Mi frowned.

Zu An felt a sinister chill sweep through his entire body. Old Mi was definitely using his consciousness to probe his belongings right then.

Fortunately, he’d stored the case within the Brilliant Glass Bead. He would’ve been exposed otherwise—the seal on the case would definitely have reacted to his consciousness.

After a brief moment, Old Mi nodded. “Indeed, indeed. It seems like my memory is worsening with age, heh heh...”

He tottered away. No matter how one looked at him, he seemed like an ordinary old gardener.

Zu An roamed around the estate as if he had business with some other people. Only after he was convinced that he had slipped free of Old Mi’s suspicions did he sneak out of the Chu Estate.

He purposely made several detours along the way. After he was sure no one was following him, he headed to the gazebo near the academy.

Zu An couldn't contain a sigh when he saw that familiar gazebo. This was where he had first met Shang Liuyu. He hadn't expected that he would be meeting with another woman here today.

"Did you say something?" A sweet and pleasant voice drifted over. Pei Mianman had emerged from the darkness and was walking towards him.

Zu An sighed. "I'm just glad that you're fine. I was worried that you wouldn't be able to get away from that guy."

Pei Mianman smiled. "I need to thank you for lighting that fire. If you hadn't, I might have been caught by him despite all of my preparations."

Just the thought of that man was enough to trigger some lingering fear within her.

"I did that on a whim. The fact that you were able to get away was all because of your own skill." Zu An laughed.

A sudden notification popped up.

You have successfully trolled Wei Dan for 358 Rage points!

Wei Dan? This was probably the name of that mysterious expert from the Wei Clan.

These Rage points probably came from his discovery that his courtyard had been set on fire. Thanks to the efforts of the Wei clan servants, the damage had been minimal, as the fire had been put out quickly.

He probably hadn't yet realized that the cases had been swapped, either. If he had, his anger would have been much more intense.

"Did you find what I was looking for?" Pei Mianman asked anxiously.

Zu An took out a case. "I only found this thing."

He was curious as to what was inside the case, but he couldn't find a way to open it. However, with her experience, he expected that Pei Mianman might recognize it, and might even have a way to open it.

"Hm?" Pei Mianman took the case from him and examined it.

Zu An said, "Be careful, there's a seal."

Pei Mianman smiled. "That's nothing."

A small black flame appeared above her fingertip. Then, with a tap, the flame spread out across the case in a layer. The film of light covering the case was quickly burned away.

"It's done!" The corners of Pei Mianman's lips curved upwards. She reached out a hand to open the case.

"Be careful!" Zu An quickly stopped her. This was something that Old Mi had been desperately searching for. He was worried that it might contain some hidden mechanism.

Pei Mianman nodded. She placed the case on the ground, and the two of them stepped back a few meters. Pei Mianman sent a wave of gentle energy towards the case with a wave of her hand. The case was thrown open, as if by an invisible hand.

The two of them waited for a while. When they saw that no hidden mechanisms had been triggered, they quickly rushed over to the case.

The case was padded with a layer of soft material. In the center of the case lay an object, wrapped in expensive brocade and tied with red string.

Pei Mianman's heart sank. From the size of the package, there was no way it could be the tile she was looking for.

Zu An undid the red string out of curiosity, and slowly unraveled the brocade. He was stunned. "What is this thing?"

Undoing the brocade had revealed a dark object, which resembled a sun-dried earthworm.

When he recalled how serious Old Mi had been about acquiring this item, Zu An brought the case up to his nose and took a whiff. "Is this some kind of miraculous medicine?"

There was a hint of a medicinal odor, but it was extremely strange. It wasn't the same medicinal odor that he was familiar with from Ji Xiaoxi's place.

At this comment, Pei Mianman suddenly grew interested. She moved closer to him to examine it. "I don't think it is. I don't sense the slightest ki fluctuation. It doesn't seem like a treasure at all."

"This thing is definitely extremely important," Zu An said decisively. If it weren't, Old Mi wouldn't have been constantly obsessed over it.

"Where did you find it?" Pei Mianman asked out of curiosity.

"There was a hidden compartment underneath his bed. It was quite well-hidden, so it must be pretty important," said Zu An.

"Hidden underneath his bed..." Pei Mianman's brows drew together in a confused frown. A sudden thought struck her, and her face turned completely red. She threw the case away as if it were boiling hot.

"Hey, hey, hey! Be careful!" Panicked, Zu An rushed to catch it. He couldn't help but ask her, "What are you doing?"

Pei Mianman turned around and snorted. Her face was still red. "That thing is what you men consider your treasure."

He rarely saw her this embarrassed, which only stoked his curiosity further. "Do you know what it is?"

He brought it closer to his eyes while saying this.

Pei Mianman was mortified as she saw him bring it all the way up to his nose again. She couldn't hold herself back any longer and said, "Wait, stop! That's... that's a eunuch's... the source of a eunuch's distress..."

“Source of distress?” Zu An didn’t seem to understand her at first. He was just about to probe further, but realization struck him. He too tossed the case away as if it were burning his fingers. “God damn it!”

He felt his stomach churn as he recalled how he had been turning it over and over in amusement, and how he’d even taken a strong sniff of it. He ran over to the bushes and threw up.

His behavior improved Pei Mianman’s mood dramatically. She even patted his back gently.

Zu An was almost lost for words. “Sis, couldn’t you have told me that a little sooner?!”

“I only just realized it as well!” Pei Mianman’s face turned red. “Besides, you’re the man here. Why didn’t you recognize it first?”

Zu An’s face darkened further. “I’m used to seeing soaring eagles! Why would I recognize this dried-up earthworm?”

He felt more and more grossed out.

Pei Mianman roared with laughter. “It’s probably because some court eunuchs are castrated at a young age. They preserve their members with all sorts of medicines to prevent it from decaying. After drying it out, I believe that only... that much of it is left over.”

Zu An was speechless for a moment.

Even though he knew that eunuchs existed, it was still a rather distant concept to him. How could he have known?

Pei Mianman suddenly grew anxious. “Eunuchs always care a lot... about these treasures. When they are buried, these things need to be buried together with them, to symbolize that their bodies are whole. Only then can they be complete in the next life. These things are usually preserved carefully within the palace, and can’t be removed by anyone. Eunuch Wei must hold special status in the palace. The emperor likely showed him favor and allowed him to keep this himself.

“This means that you’ve stolen his treasure. Once he finds out, he won’t let this rest until you are dead. Should we find a chance to return it?”

This thing was completely useless to anyone else, but it was a sore spot for all eunuchs. It was enough to drive them completely mad! The risks of keeping it were completely disproportionate to the benefits.

“Don’t worry, I did something to make sure that the theft isn’t immediately discovered.” Zu An had a strange expression on his face. After putting these clues together, a sudden revelation came to him. Many things that were beyond his understanding before seemed to make much more sense now.

Chapter 354: Two-Person Operation

If this thing wasn’t Wei Dan’s, it probably belonged to Old Mi!

No wonder Old Mi always had a strange smell on him as well, although it was a little more faint. He hadn’t thought about it too much before, since older people always had a bit of a scent about them.

Now that he thought about it, the smell was extremely similar to the smell in Wei Dan's room!

Old Mi had probably asked Zu An to approach the Wei clan because he wanted him to gather information on Wei Dan's movements.

Wei Dan was probably a recent arrival in Brightmoon City, and Old Mi was probably his target.

Zu An presumed that Old Mi had fled the Imperial Palace because of something that happened in the past. He'd been living incognito as a gardener in the Chu clan to throw off his pursuers.

However, despite hiding out for so many years, the Imperial Palace had still managed to pick up some clues as to his whereabouts. That was why Wei Dan had come to Brightmoon City.

However, Wei Dan didn't know exactly where Old Mi was, or he would have come after him already.

Zu An suddenly realized why Wei Dan's expression had been slightly strange when they'd met previously. He had used the Sunflower Phantasm in front of everyone during the Clans Tournament. Someone had probably recognized it and informed Wei Dan.

The black eyes sported by the academy teachers recently were probably a result of Wei Dan's investigation.

Now that his investigation into the academy was more or less wrapped up, the Chu clan was likely to be his next target.

He felt regret that he was the one responsible for exposing Old Mi, after he had hidden out here for so much of his life.

His first reaction was to find Old Mi and warn him to be more careful. However, he had lingering doubts as to whether that old man was friend or foe, which gave him pause.

Forget it, I'll wait for the situation to play out, then act accordingly.

"What's up with you?" Pei Mianman was a bit worried by the series of changes in Zu An's expression.

"It's nothing." Zu An forced a smile. "It's unfortunate that we didn't find your tile."

Pei Mianman sighed. "That was to be expected. He probably carries it on him."

Zu An felt a shock run through him. "Don't be reckless. There's no way for you to get it if he keeps it with him."

Pei Mianman smiled. "Don't worry. Do I look that stupid? Of course I won't do something that dangerous."

Her tone of voice clearly indicated that she wouldn't be giving up on her search for the tile. Zu An wanted to say something else, but hesitated. Forget it, I won't be able to convince her otherwise. She knows what she is doing, and she won't throw her life away.

Pei Mianman was just about to say something when she suddenly noticed that Zu An picked up the dried, shriveled-up thing. She was alarmed. "What do you need that for?"

"Who knows, it might come in useful one day." Zu An smiled. He stowed it back in the case, and then put the case away.

"Gross!" Pei Mianman said in disgust. She couldn't take any more of this. With a light tap of her toes, her figure disappeared into the night.

Zu An smiled. There were many things he couldn't explain to her. This thing might just come in handy at a crucial moment. How could he just throw it away?

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It was already late into the night by the time he returned to the Chu clan estate. Zu An went to the Unvoiced Residence, but unfortunately, the beauty who called this place home was already gone. A cold emptiness seemed to fill the large space.

Zu An released a long sigh. He missed the feeling of sleeping next to his lovely wife.

Chu Chuyan wouldn't be back for a long time. It seemed like he was going to have to live like a monk for a while.

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Two peaceful days passed. On the third day, Zu An didn't go to the academy, but sought out Qin Wanru privately instead. "Madam, there is something I need your help with."

"What is it?" Qin Wanru was surprised. Why was this guy being so mysterious?

Zu An said "I've discovered the whereabouts of the stolen salt permits."

"What?!" Qin Wanru stood suddenly. The reason the Chu clan was in such dire straits was because of those salt permits. How could she remain calm? "Where are those salt permits? I will send men over and seize them back at once!"

Zu An was floored by her sudden outburst.

It took him a while to find his voice again. "I didn't tell Madam this before because I was worried that Madam would get too worked up. If we send in our troops, we will scare off our quarry before we even get there. How could we possibly get back our salt permits then?"

Qin Wanru frowned. "What do you mean?"

Zu An said, "I have reliable information on where the salt permits will be tonight, but we might scare them away if we send our guards in."

Qin Wanru furrowed her brow. Zu An's words made a lot of sense. "What do you have in mind, then?"

Zu An said, "The two of us should go undercover and find a chance to seize those salt permits back. We'll keep this matter top secret."

"The two of us?" Qin Wanru was shocked.

Zu An nodded. "I could do this alone, but my level of cultivation is still quite low. It would be much safer to have an expert at my side. Considering my options, the most trustworthy person in all of the Chu Estate is still your respected self."

Qin Wanru snorted. "You probably wouldn't have told me about the salt permits if you didn't need me along as backup."

Zu An laughed awkwardly. "I just don't want to alert the enemy by accident."

"Are you sure that the two of us can take on this matter by ourselves?" Qin Wanru asked.

She knew that whoever had gotten their hands on these salt permits was definitely no ordinary organization. Even though her cultivation was quite high, she was hardly the strongest one in Brightmoon City.

Zu An smiled ambiguously. "Is Madam afraid?"

Qin Wanru's temper flared. "What kind of joke is this? Why would I be scared?"

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 111 Rage points.

Zu An couldn't help but laugh. This woman really was easily irritated. She had taken his bait so easily. "There is no need for Madam to worry. We'll scare them away if our party is too large. Two people is perfect. I have other arrangements as well."

"Other arrangements?" Qin Wanru was stunned.

"I'll explain along the way. Let's make a move first." Zu An said.

"Fine!" Qin Wanru got up to leave.

However, Zu An stopped her. "Madam, I fear that your current outfit isn't suitable."

Qin Wanru was currently dressed in the splendid clothes of a duchess, an outfit that dripped with extravagance and grandeur. She would be the focal point of everyone's attention no matter where she went. How could she be part of this operation in such a getup?

"Give me a moment." Qin Wanru left the room quickly.

Just as Zu An was beginning to feel bored, Qin Wanru's voice came from behind him. "I'm ready."

Zu An turned around, and was stunned by what he saw. Qin Wanru's figure-hugging outfit was simple, without any embroidery. Even the phoenix headdress she usually wore was gone.

Her meticulously-coiled hair was casually bound up.

Compared to her usual grace and elegance, there was the air of youthful beauty about her.

Her wonderful figure was vividly on display, accentuated by the cut of her clothing.

Qin Wanru frowned. "What are you looking at?!"

Zu An smiled. "This is the first time I've seen this side of Madam. If I didn't know better, I would've thought that you were Chuyan and Huanzhao's big sister."

“What a slick tongue! No wonder Chuyan was deceived by you.” Qin Wanru scoffed. However, a slight smile lingered in her eyes. Which woman didn’t enjoy being praised by others for looking young and pretty? His tone had even sounded quite sincere just now.

The two of them didn’t leave through the main entrance to avoid drawing attention, but jumped over a remote courtyard wall instead.

Qin Wanru checked her surroundings. Satisfied that no one was about, she turned to Zu An and asked, “Where are we going now?”

“The River Patrol barracks!” Zu An said quietly.

“The River Patrol barracks?” Qin Wanru’s face darkened. “That’s where the salt permits are?”

“That’s not it.” Zu An shook his head. “Wasn’t the Madam worried that the two of us might not be enough? We’ll need their strength as backup.”

Qin Wanru frowned. “You didn’t want me to bring the Red Cloak Army, but you’re seeking out the River Patrol Army. Won’t they be scared away all the same? Those River Patrol Army soldiers are all good-for-nothing. How can they compare to our Chu clan’s Red Cloak Army?”

Chapter 355: What the Hell

“Does Madam really think that Sang Qian will order his troops to come along with us?” Zu An asked.

“Of course he...” Qin Wanru suddenly understood what he was implying. The salt permits belonged to the Chu clan and Wang clan. If Sang Qian led his troops in a successful operation to recover them, then the salt permits would, by all accounts, have to be returned to their rightful owners.

That would mean that the Chu clan would make it through the current crisis effortlessly. How could the Sang clan possibly tolerate such an outcome?

However, if the Sang clan didn’t do anything about this, they would have to worry about these salt permits somehow ending up back in the hands of the Chu clan. They wouldn’t want to see that happen either.

There was only one possibility left—the safest thing to do would be to get the salt permits into their own hands. Since they couldn’t openly use the River Patrol troops to do so, they would most likely dispatch a few trusted aides to handle the matter.

Qin Wanru couldn’t help but give Zu An another look. This fellow didn’t seem at all like that good-for-nothing she always thought he was!

“Why is Madam looking at me? Even though I’m married, I still get embarrassed if you look at me like that.” Zu An touched his face as though he was feeling shy about the whole thing.

Qin Wanru gritted her teeth.

This guy was still as annoying as before!

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 123 Rage points!

Zu An was afraid that her temper would get the better of her. He said in a panic, "Madam, I need you to leave Sang Qian a letter, so that Sang Qian won't be in the dark about these salt permits. My level of cultivation is too low, and I might be discovered if I go inside."

Qin Wanru's complexion eased considerably at his indirect praise. She grabbed the letter with a snort and said cockily, "Watch me take care of this!"

Choosing a remote section, she snuck into the River Patrol barracks.

Her heart was pounding. She had done such risky things often when she had been young, but her life as a duchess had been too pampered. There was always another person around to take care of things. Because of this, she had even neglected her cultivation a bit.

She was worried that she might be discovered, but this excitement made her feel as if she was young again...

Zu An remained waiting outside. A while later, Qin Wanru finally came back out.

He went up to her immediately. "So? Did you successfully notify him?"

Qin Wanru snorted. "It's such a simple matter. Why wouldn't I be able to take care of it?" She looked relaxed on the outside, but her heart was pounding crazily. She had almost been discovered several times, but thankfully, those soldiers were nowhere near elite. If they had been competent enough, she might not have made it back out.

Zu An gave her a thumbs-up. "Madam is formidable after all!"

Qin Wanru felt her face burning at Zu An's constant stream of praise. "Enough already! Where to next?"

"We're attending an auction." Zu An fished out an invitation letter. He'd received this letter from Qiu Honglei.

Qin Wanru took it and looked it over a few times. She couldn't help but ask, "Where did you get this thing from?"

Zu An shook his head. "I have my ways. I promised that person that I wouldn't leak out their identity."

Qin Wanru didn't probe further. Instead, she said with a snort, "It seems like you know quite a number of people."

Zu An chuckled. "What can I say? I'm just too friendly and approachable. I've ended up with a bunch of friends without even realizing it."

Qin Wanru stared at him, speechless.

Why does this fellow always seem like he needs a beating?

The auction was located within a remote residence to the north of the city. However, the place wasn't all cold and cheerless. Bright lights were visible even from far away, illuminating human-sized silhouettes which moved about within.

Qin Wanru was just about to head in when Zu An grabbed her hand.

“What is it now?” Qin Wanru looked at his hand in displeasure.

“Is Madam going to enter just like that?” Zu An said with a bitter smile.

“Is there a problem?” Qin Wanru was confused.

Zu An considered his words carefully. “Even though you’ve changed your clothes, your face is still the same! Don’t you know how famous the duchess of Brightmoon City is? Not to mention that you’re gorgeous as well. You’ll definitely be the target of everyone’s attention even in these ordinary clothes. Wouldn’t our plans be completely ruined if someone recognized you?”

His constant flattery was most pleasing to Qin Wanru. Of course, she also cared about the success or failure of this mission, so she hurriedly asked, “What can we do, then?”

Zu An thought for a moment, then passed her a mask. “Wear this mask. It’ll make you look like an ordinary person.”

This was something he had gotten from Chen Xuan’s corpse. These masks had allowed the bandit chief to evade the attentions of both the Chu clan and the Brightmoon City authorities.

Qin Wanru took the thin mask from him. She let out a faint exclamation. “Only the best runemasters can make such masks! Where did you get something like this?”

Zu An waved his hand. “Haven’t I already told you that I have a lot of friends?”

Qin Wanru said nothing this time. She was completely baffled. Where did this guy get all these connections?

Not even Chu Zhongtian or herself could get an invitation letter to such an auction. And now, he even had such a mask in his possession!

When she put on the mask, a cold sensation spread across her face. The runes on its surface glowed blue for a moment, and then the mask began to change appearance based on her facial structure, finally adhering closely to her face.

Qin Wanru took out a mirror. An unfamiliar face stared back at her. She was shocked and amazed.

Zu An sneered inwardly. Why did women always carry mirrors on them? “Madam, I must apologize about how ordinary this mask makes your face seem. However, this is better for us. We need to maintain a low profile during this operation.”

Even he was amazed at Chen Xuan’s masks. It made the wearer neither too attractive nor too ugly. After all, being too ugly would draw attention as well.

The mask gave its wearer a perfectly plain face—one that would draw no attention in a crowd.

Qin Wanru seemed perfectly indifferent. “Why would I care about something like that?”

With that, she strode off towards the entrance to the auction house.

Zu An quickly put on a mask of his own and followed her.

Qin Wanru gave him a few good looks, just so that she could remember his new face. She didn't want to end up losing him inside.

The two of them arrived outside the residence, and were promptly stopped by some guards.

Zu An took out the invitation letter. After it was carefully examined, they were let inside.

"The people behind this auction are definitely bigshots! Even the weakest of those guards was at the fourth rank," Qin Wanru said quietly.

Zu An nodded, a serious expression on his face. "Exactly. That's why we have to be careful. It'll be really bad if we were discovered."

Qin Wanru acknowledged this, her eyes vigilantly scanning their surroundings.

Zu An gave her a warning look. "Madam, act more natural. If you keep doing that, everyone will know that you're here to pick a fight."

Qin Wanru blushed. Fortunately, it was blocked by the mask.

"By the way, Madam has lived in Brightmoon City for so long. Do you know who controls the city's black market?" Zu An asked. He'd been wanting to know what organization was behind Qiu Honglei for a long time now. Unfortunately, with his limited knowledge of this world, he couldn't even begin to guess.

Qin Wanru shook her head. "I don't know. I thought that the Plum Blossom Sect was the one operating it, but it now seems like that wasn't the case."

In the eyes of nobles like her, the black market was part of the underground. Since these denizens never went too far or caused any huge ruckus, everyone turned a blind eye to them. She herself had never paid much attention to such affairs.

A provocative whistle suddenly came from behind them, followed by perverted laughter.

"Check her out! Damn!"

"I didn't think I'd bump into a babe like this here!"

"Let's go take a look."

...

Several salivating hooligans walked around them and stopped in front of them.

"What the hell man, how can you be that ugly with a body like that?"

Qin Wanru's eyes grew wide.

Chapter 356: Do You Know Who I Am?

In truth, the mask did not make Qin Wanru look ugly—her face was just plain. However, her impressive curves had made their minds go wild, and the contrast between expectation and reality had left them hugely disappointed. That was why they subconsciously felt that she was ugly.

As a duchess, everyone took extra care to be respectful around her, fearful of offending her.

No ordinary man would be able to get close to her. The few who could wouldn't even dare to stare at her for too long. When had she ever been criticized by a group of men like this?

Not only that, they had even dared to call her ugly! Even though she knew it was because of the mask she was wearing, she found it difficult to endure such humiliation.

Just then, someone else spoke up.

"I think she looks all right—at least, she's not as bad as you say. I can sense a certain noble temperament from her as well. I appreciate that in a woman.."

"How could you even call this type of shit 'noble'? Are you blind?"

"You may be right... She does seem to carry herself slightly differently from other women."

"Screw it man! With that body, who gives a crap about her face? I'll definitely hit it!"

...

Zu An could see that Qin Wanru was so angry, her entire body was shaking. He was surprised that she hadn't blown up yet, given her personality. She was probably controlling herself so that they wouldn't end up scaring their targets away.

However, these dudes were surely taking things a little too far. Zu An coughed and stood in front of her. "Fellas, did you eat shit today before coming here? Why are your mouths so disgusting?"

When had those people ever heard such destructive words before? All of them erupted simultaneously.

You have successfully trolled Ji Wuli for 765 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled Chen Bo for 765 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled Jin Zhu for 765 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled Long Zi for 765 Rage points!

Qin Wanru was so angry that smoke seemed to be coming out of her nose and ears, but she smiled when she heard this. She'd always felt like Zu An ran his mouth too often, but it seemed quite adorable today.

"Screw you, brat! Do you know who we are?!" The four furious hooligans leaned towards the two of them hatefully.

"Please enlighten us," Qin Wanru said coldly. These four definitely seemed easy enough to provoke.

"We are East Cheapo, West Lewd, South Pervert, and North Wastrel!" Each of them assumed a pose after introducing themselves. They had definitely spent a lot of time practicing this.

Qin Wanru was stunned speechless.

Even Zu An stared at them in a daze.

He hadn't expected this world to have such silly but amusing characters.

"I can tell that these names really do suit the four of you." Zu An's sigh was full of admiration.

"Now that you know who we are, just leave the woman and walk away quietly! Even though she is a little ugly, she's got a perfect body. We brothers will reluctantly accept it," Ji Wuli said.

Qin Wanru was about to explode. She really wanted to chop these people up and feed them to the dogs.

Zu An turned their question back on them. "Do you four know who I am?" he asked coldly.

They were taken aback by his sudden domineering tone. "We do not. Your distinguished one is?"

"I guess there's no need to worry then, since you all don't know me." Zu An moved before he even finished his sentence. His figure split into several afterimages. All four of them were smacked in the face.

After Mi Li's modification, his Sunflower Phantasm had become even more formidable. He could now move even faster.

How could an ordinary person possibly react in time? The most that any of them saw was a blur, and then their mouths suddenly hurt. All four flew through the air and fell to the ground.

Qin Wanru's eyes grew as wide as saucers. Not even she could see how Zu An had accomplished this in that split second.

She hadn't expected him to make a move so quickly as either. Didn't they just agree to maintain a low profile, to avoid attracting any attention?

The four louts were all stunned, their heads ringing. They worked their jaws individually, and each of them spat out a few teeth.

"You... you... actually dare to provoke the four of us brothers? Aren't you afraid we will retaliate?!" All four of them pointed at Zu An and showered him with curses. They tried to climb to their feet, but they were still slightly dizzy from getting smacked.

Zu An laughed loudly. "You don't even know who I am! How are you going to retaliate?" With that, he grabbed Qin Wanru and ran inside.

The four of them were left lying on the ground, questioning the meaning of life. This guy made so much sense! There was nothing they could say to rebut him.

This only fueled their anger further.

You have successfully trolled Ji Wuli for 888 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled Chen Bo for 888 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled Jin Zhu for 888 Rage points!

You have successfully trolled Long Zi for 888 Rage points!

Qin Wanru followed Zu An inside. They quickly found a place within the crowd to sit. She couldn't help but ask, "Didn't you say that we should keep a low profile, and not cause any sort of trouble?"

Zu An sighed. "I couldn't just stand by and let them bully you like that, could I?"

Qin Wanru was stunned. She found herself lost in her own thoughts. She remembered times gone by, when Chu Zhongtian had protected her like this as well, in their younger days.

After she had become a duchess, there had been no need for her to take any risks. She hadn't experienced being protected like this for many years.

She quickly cleared her mind, and pulled her hand out of his without batting an eyelid. "Wouldn't this draw attention to us?"

Zu An said, "Don't worry. There weren't many others present, and we managed to leave quickly. I don't think we drew too much attention."

Qin Wanru exhaled in relief.

More guests began to enter the auction hall, and the four louts who had accosted them came in as well, searching all over for them.

However, this was a special auction, and so every guest was granted their own independent space. The actions of those four quickly drew the attention of the staff, who were clearly displeased. Some guards stepped forward to restrain the four of them and led them away. They were either brought to a different section of the hall, or escorted out of the residence completely.

Soon afterwards, a slender and pretty young woman walked on stage to declare the start of the auction. Quite a few people whistled when they saw her.

Zu An hardly batted an eyelid. After all, there were always beauties at his side. Even though this woman wasn't bad at all, she still paled in comparison to the gorgeous women that he was used to.

Even her figure couldn't match up to Qin Wanru's.

Huh? Something feels strange...

The auction began, and a large variety of goods were brought out. The crowd grew heated as they bid against each other. Even Zu An felt tempted to bid on some of the items. However, he forced himself to focus on the reason why they had come in the first place.

The item they were waiting for finally appeared. When the crowd learned that it was a huge batch of salt permits, gasps were heard from all directions.

The crowd was clearly aware of the difficulties that were facing the Chu clan. To secure these permits would be to offend the Chu clan.

However, those who had been invited to participate in the auction all had considerable powers backing them. Some had even been notified in advance that these permits would be up for auction.

Within moments, someone called out a price. A second soon followed, and soon, the bidding had kicked into full swing.

In this age, salt represented money. With these salt permits, anyone who controlled them could legally sell illicit salt. They could make a killing without incurring much cost!

The price slowly climbed higher and higher.

Even Qin Wanru couldn't resist the urge to throw out a bid. After all, buying back the salt permits would definitely be cheaper than paying out the sixteen million taels of silver that they owed. The costs would still be justified.

Zu An stopped her. "These are ours to begin with—why do we have to spend money to acquire them? Don't worry, someone will give them to us soon."

As soon as the words left his mouth, a group of large men stormed in from outside, led by none other than Sang Qian. He looked around him and spoke with a clear, ringing voice. "I've received a report that an illegal transaction is being carried out here. I've come here to seize these illegal goods. Those uninvolved, please step aside immediately."

Chapter 357: Rob and Kill

A huge commotion broke out. No one in the crowd had ever thought they would run into something like this!

Those who were more cowardly fled straight away. Those with more notable backgrounds or higher levels of cultivation decided to stay and watch how things would pan out.

Those working for the black market dealer were all shocked. Many guards secretly surrounded the auction hall.

The young woman in charge of the auction shook her head in their direction. Then, she forced a smile and walked towards Sang Qian. "My lord, surely there has been some misunderstanding here. All of our activities have been cleared with the authorities."

She slipped him a stack of banknotes as she said this.

The black market in Brightmoon City had flourished for so many years. To do so, it had to build up significant connections with government officials. Bribes had been paid out beforehand, and more bribe money had been prepared for tonight's auction, just in case.

Sang Qian pushed her away. "Don't bother trying such tricks on me. Search this place!"

"Yes sir!" Those subordinates instantly leapt on stage. Everything else in the auction had already been sold. The salt permits were the only item left.

Qin Wanru was shocked. "Didn't you say that he wouldn't bring all his men with him? What's going on here?" she asked quietly.

Zu An pointed out their clothing. "Take a look. None of them are wearing official uniforms. All of them are in casual wear. Also, the first thing Sang Qian said was that he had been notified of the presence of illegal goods—he didn't mention salt permits at all. It's obvious that they want to deal with this matter quietly."

The female host's expression grew ugly. "Commander Sang, this is not in accordance with regulations!"

It was crucial for all those in her field to be familiar with all the important individuals within the city. Sang Qian's own status—not to mention his father's—was enough to make him a well known figure in the city. It wasn't a surprise that she recognized him.

"How is this against regulations? I am responsible for arresting thieves. If all you have done is in accordance with the law, then you have nothing to worry about. We have no intention of wronging anyone, but we will not let criminals run free." Sang Qian spoke with a bold and righteous attitude.

Those working for the black market were clearly agitated by this. Many of them were so angry that they wanted to dash up and confront Sang Qian, but they were stopped by their companions.

Seeing that Sang Qian wasn't messing about, the black market dealers seemed to accept their fate. The guests who had stayed behind couldn't do so any longer, and they quickly left, one after another.

Zu An grabbed Qin Wanru. "We're leaving!"

"We're leaving just like that?" Qin Wanru was stunned. She wasn't even in the mood to berate Zu An for grabbing her so disrespectfully.

"No one will notice if we leave now, but we'll draw attention if we stay behind," Zu An explained.

"Besides, this is not the place where these two parties will fight it out."

Qin Wanru couldn't believe her ears. "Do you really think that these black marketeers will move against Sang Qian?"

"Not openly, they won't, but no one knows what they will do in secret." Qiu Honglei had warned him earnestly against making a move against them. Clearly, the organization she worked for was not one to take such provocation lying down.

These salt permits were worth a few million taels of silver, after all. More importantly, Sang Qian had crossed the line.

If they did nothing, the black market's reputation would be completely ruined.

This reputation was perhaps even more important than the several million taels of silver.

Unfortunately, Sang Qian didn't know any of this. Clearly, as Qin Wanru had said earlier, the nobles of Brightmoon City didn't think much of the black marketeers.

None of them knew that there was such a formidable power backing them.

Sigh, this is what happens when your information isn't accurate.

Zu An and Qin Wanru departed the residence. However, they didn't go far. They found a hiding spot close by, in the branches of a large tree.

Even though Qin Wanru wasn't fully convinced, Zu An sounded so confident that she was willing to go along with him.

They hid within the tree and waited. Qin wanru's eyes suddenly narrowed—the four who had mistreated her earlier had come into view.

“Damn it, I didn’t expect officials to show up. I wanted to find that ugly chick.”

“Yo, I thought she was kind of ugly before as well, but the more I think about her, the more I seem to want her. Isn’t that strange?”

“Heh, with that kind of ass and chest, who cares about the face?”

“That woman is a ripe honey peach, nice and juicy. I bet playing with her will feel amazing! I’m getting jealous of that man next to her. He must be living in heaven every day!”

Zu An was slightly embarrassed. These fellas’ mouths were absolutely filthy, but he didn’t have any long range moves that he could employ against them to shut them up.

Qin Wanru’s anger was so great that her face turned a deathly white. Ripping a few leaves off the tree, she flicked them forward with her fingers. Trailing streaks of green light, they shot through the darkness.

Zu An was left in awe. As expected of a sixth rank expert! There was no way he could pull off something like that.

“Ah! My butt!”

“Who hit me?!”

“My waist!”

“Damn it! Who hit me in the face! I’ve lost more teeth...”

The four louts screamed in rage, looking around frantically to no avail.

“Ghosts don’t exist... do they?”

“Bro, I felt a chill run down my spine just now.”

“Let’s get out of here!”

...

Zu An was a bit surprised to see them get away. “Madam, why didn’t you kill them?”

“Do I look like such a ferocious woman to you?” Qin Wanru scoffed in annoyance. “Even though they are despicable, they don’t deserve death. It’s enough to teach them a lesson.”

Zu An laughed. “You have such a sharp mouth, Madam. I never expected you to have a heart as soft as tofu!”

Qin Wanru’s face grew red. “Shut up, someone’s coming.”

Zu An peered through the gaps in the leaves. Sure enough, Sang Qian’s group walked into view, escorting a cart with several large chests inside. These were most likely the salt permits.

“Strange... they didn’t arrest a single person.” Qin Wanru’s cultivation was higher than his, so her eyesight was naturally sharper. She swept her gaze across the entire group of them.

Zu An took a moment to analyze the situation. "Sang Qian probably doesn't want to escalate this matter any further. He's letting the black marketeers know that he won't touch their men, but he wants those goods. He wants them to admit defeat."

Qin Wanru gave him a look. His analysis was incredibly sharp. He was nothing like that muddle-headed idiot she thought he was!

Hmph! He was probably just putting on an act before! I can't believe he actually deceived me!

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 379 Rage points!

Zu An was stunned. Why did she get angry at him out of nowhere?

"We're following them!" Qin Wanru was still annoyed at being constantly dragged around by Zu An, so she decided to take the initiative this time. She grabbed his collar and followed Sang Qian's men quietly.

They were still within the city limits. Even though this neighborhood was more remote, there were still homes along the streets that they could use as cover. Although she was dragging someone with her, they didn't give away their presence.

Zu An was crying inside. He had been hoisted by the collar, and was being carried around like a little chick!

Qin Wanru was weighing her options. Sang Qian was only at the fifth rank. Even with a group of subordinates, she still had an even chance to seize the salt permits.

Not to mention, she had Zu An to help her.

The size of the chests was the biggest issue. It would be difficult for them to haul them back to the estate.

Zu An noticed how eager she was to jump in, and he was quick to caution her. "Don't be anxious, someone will come."

Suddenly, as if his words were some sort of confirmation, a volley of arrows flew towards Sang Qian's group.

Sang Qian drew his blade in an instant to deflect the oncoming arrows, but he couldn't block all of them. A number of subordinates behind him were struck down.

A group of black-clothed men leapt out from behind the houses around them, their blades glinting in the moonlight. They charged straight in.

Sang Qian's voice was strained with anger, and shot through with more than a hint of alarm. "Name yourselves! Attacking a court official is an offence that can lead to the eradication of your clan!"

The black-clad individuals remained silent. They were completely focused on cutting down the people in front of them. Every single strike from one of these attackers hit a vital point of their opponents'.

Almost all of Sang Qian's men were wounded in this first exchange, and several lost their lives immediately.

Qin Wanru was shocked. "Where did these black-clad men come from? Their individual cultivations are even higher than that of the soldiers in the Red Cloak Army!"

Chapter 358: A Good Deed

Zu An was surprised to learn that nearly every single one of these black-clad men were at the fourth rank. As cultivators at the fourth rank, all of them were strong enough to be considered for positions of authority in a small county!

In other words, the strength of these black-clad men were about the same as his own, perhaps even higher. After all, he had just broken through to the fourth rank.

Sang Qian had brought his trusted aides with him this time, and not those River Patrol Army idiots. If they'd been here, they would probably have been wiped out in that first exchange.

Even so, Sang Qian's group seemed no match for these black-clad men. Their levels of cultivation were high, and their attacks were vicious.

Sang Qian roared in anger as his subordinates fell one after another. "Go to hell, you thieves!"

He swung the long blade of his sword at them. Flames raged across the blade's surface, extending forward to form a forty-meter long saber. It swept ferociously through the black-clad attackers.

The attackers scattered, frantically trying to evade this deadly blow. A few of them were unable to dodge in time, and were cleaved in two by the blade. Those men who were still conscious after suffering such deep wounds screamed miserably as the merciless flames continued to burn their flesh.

Zu An was stupefied. He couldn't wrap his head around just how long this blade was. If Sang Qian knew what I've been doing to Zheng Dan, I might be the one attacked by this forty-meter blade. Would I even be able to dodge something like this?

Those two are really incompatible, though. Zheng Dan wields the water element, while he wields the fire element.

"Even though these black-clad attackers have a decent level of cultivation, Sang Qian is clearly much stronger," Qin Wanru observed. "The gap in strength between fourth and fifth rank isn't something that can be bridged through sheer numbers. Not to mention, Sang Qian is considered a powerhouse even among fifth ranked cultivators."

"Don't worry. I'm sure there's more to these attackers than just these men." Zu An knew how mysterious Qiu Honglei's background was, and he was confident in this statement.

As soon as he said this, a lantern was lit nearby. It was a small lantern, and emitted a weak yellow light.

However, as soon as it appeared, a strange and suffocating pressure suddenly seemed to weigh down on Sang Qian.

Sang Qian instantly felt as if he had been mired in a swamp. Even the air around him seemed to have become sticky. The easiest of movements now seemed to require several times the strength just to execute.

His ferocious blade of flame slowed as well, as if it was moving in slow motion.

As expected of a duchess, Qin Wanru was quick to realize what sort of artifact the lantern was. "That lantern should be a magic weapon with movement-restricting effects. I wonder who this amazing weapon belongs to!"

Zu An was alarmed. "Movement restriction? Isn't that overpowered? You could use it to freeze your enemy and kill him!"

Qin Wanru shook her head. "It's not that easy. The strength of its effects depends on the difference in cultivation between the two parties. If it was used on a weaker cultivator like you, it's possible you might not be able to move even a single finger."

Zu An sulked. Thank you so much for explaining this to me. But did you have to roast me as well?

"As for those with higher cultivations, it will only cause their movements to slow down," Qin Wanru added. "Of course, if we consider those with even higher levels of cultivation, this lantern might not do much to them at all."

"What if it were used on you?" Zu An asked curiously.

Qin Wanru's face went red. She stared at him for a moment, open-mouthed.

Why can't you hold a conversation like a regular person?

"It'll probably have some effect on me," Qin Wanru finally said with a huff.

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 233 Rage points!

Zu An sneered. Women are all so petty.

He quickly shifted his gaze back to that lantern. Why did it look so familiar?

Another man wearing black jumped out, and threw a fist towards the blade of flame, which had slowed significantly.

The limestone that paved the street ruptured. Endless amounts of earth surged forward, forming a massive earthen fist that smashed through the blade of flame. Sparks flew in all directions. The blade of flame had been blasted apart!

Qin Wanru was startled. "It's an earth element cultivator, fifth rank!"

"Is this person stronger than Sang Qian?" Zu An asked.

Qin Wanru shook her head. "That's hard to say. However, Sang Qian's movements have been slowed by that lantern. Most of his efforts are focused on counteracting its effects."

Zu An's attention was drawn by the appearance of another figure. This beautiful silhouette walked slowly out from the shadows lining the street. Even though she was completely clothed in black, her outfit couldn't hide her beautiful physique.

"Those boobs look familiar..." Zu An mumbled to himself. He wasn't sure, though. He could recognize Pei Mianman's boobs from a mile away, but it was harder to pinpoint who exactly this set belonged to.

Sang Qian knew that both of these individuals were trouble, especially the female lantern user. His face paled. "Hurry, take the salt permits away!" he ordered his subordinates.

Zu An had to give this Sang Qian some credit. "I guess Sang Qian isn't a complete coward. He didn't leave his subordinates behind and run away."

Qin Wanru snorted. "How could any cultivator who has managed to reach his level at such a young age be that incompetent?"

His subordinates fled, taking the cart with them. "Do you think it'll be that easy?!" the earth-element cultivator roared.

He pressed his hand against the ground, and the ground surged towards their group like an ocean wave.

Sang Qian leapt in front of this wave, stabbing his sword into the ground. There was a loud boom, and dirt flew everywhere. The ground stopped its rippling, and became calm again.

Without pausing, he charged at the earth-element cultivator. The two of them began to fight.

Another group of black-clad men chased after the salt permits.

Occupied as he was, there was no way Sang Qian could deal with them. He could only wish his subordinates the best.

All of his attention was focused on the earth-element cultivator. There was another mysterious expert around as well, so he had to dispatch this earth-element cultivator quickly if he wanted a chance to deal with her too.

His cultivation was clearly higher than his opponent's. The earth-element cultivator soon found himself in a difficult situation.

"Junior sister, what are you waiting for?!" That earth element cultivator cried out in a mixture of fear and anger.

The lantern-wielding woman smiled. "Senior brother, please hold on for a while longer. I have two little rats to deal with first."

She tapped her toes gently against the ground, and flew towards where Zu An and Qin Wanru were hiding.

Qin Wanru was alarmed. "Go after the salt permits!" she said. She pushed Zu An's shoulder, propelling him in the direction the cart had taken with a gentle wave of force.

"Take care of yourself!" Zu An warned, his eyes on the figure holding the lantern.

Even though that woman had altered her voice, he had already deduced her identity. Who else could it be but the Immortal Abode's Qiu Honglei?

The woman had always been shrouded in mystery, and he didn't know that her cultivation was so high.

In a flash, Qin Wanru engaged the woman in combat.

"Huh?" Qiu Honglei clearly hadn't expected a sixth-ranked expert to be hiding there. She almost paid a big price for that.

Fortunately, her lantern was a magic weapon with extraordinary power. It was able to restrict Qin Wanru's movements enough to help her avert disaster.

Zu An exhaled in relief when he saw that Qin Wanru still held the advantage. She was at the sixth rank after all—why was he getting all worried?

He ran off in the direction of the stolen salt permits.

From a distance away came the vague sound of fighting. In a few moments, he stumbled upon Sang Qian's subordinates, who were engaged in a pitched battle against their black-clad pursuers.

The cart, with its chests full of salt permits, had been pushed to the side.

It was obvious that whichever side won this battle would obtain the salt permits, so it was a complete waste to guard the cart. Now that battle had been fully joined, neither side wanted to waste any strength unnecessarily.

Zu An gasped. The fighting was intense! Blood splattered, and bits of flesh were flying everywhere. Whose arm was that that was just sent flying?

He used Grandgale right away, appearing next to the cart almost instantly.

However, he was in no rush to leave. Instead, he coughed lightly and called out, "Thank you all for your efforts!"

The fighting stopped momentarily. Combatants on both sides looked towards the person that had appeared beside the cart. They had no idea where he had come from.

"Y'all seem to be awfully busy, fighting over whatever is in this cart. I've always been a softhearted man who hates violence, so I'll do a good deed today and take this with me. That way, you guys don't have to kill each other anymore!" Zu An smiled. He leapt onto the cart. With a flick of the reins, he urged the horses leading the cart into motion and drove the cart away.

The officers from the River Patrol Army and their mysterious black-clad opponents stared after him, stupefied.

You have successfully trolled the River Patrol Army for 66... 66... 66...

You have successfully trolled the mysterious black-clad men for 99... 99... 99...

Chapter 359: Out of a Tiger's Cave and into a Wolf's Den

Who the hell is this guy? Where did he come from?

This guy is such a piece of shit!

They might not even have noticed if he had quietly taken the salt permits away. However, he deliberately announced it to all of them! Did he really do this just for the sake of angering them?

Why would he take such a big risk, though? Is there a screw loose in his head?!

Their minds were occupied with these thoughts, but that didn't stop them from taking action. With a roar, they all chased after him with blades in hand.

The two sides even stopped fighting against each other. They tacitly agreed to deal with Zu An first.

Zu An frantically drove the carriage forward. He turned a corner, and for a brief moment, he was out of sight of his pursuers. He took out the Brilliant Glass Bead and stored all of the chests inside.

He jumped up into a nearby tree and hid. The horses continued to speed off into the distance.

His pursuers had no idea what had just happened. They continued to scream and shout as they chased after the carriage.

A huge smile spread across Zu An's face as Rage points continued to flood in. He could have stored those chests into the bead when he first reached the carriage, but he didn't do so precisely because he wanted to farm some Rage points.

How could he waste an opportunity to piss off so many people at the same time?

Worried about how Qin Wanru was faring, he rushed back the way he came.

Along the way, he received another batch of Rage points. Clearly, those men had finally caught up to the carriage and realized that all the chests were gone.

"Sigh, I wonder if they'll start fighting again." Zu An said. He almost sounded as if he wanted the whole world to fall into chaos.

He returned to the place where he had left Qin Wanru earlier, to find that only a small handful of men from the River Patrol Army remained. If Sang Qian hadn't accounted for close to half of the enemies by himself, this small remnant would have already been wiped out a long time ago.

Meanwhile, Qin Wanru and Qiu Honglei were still tangling with each other.

Even though Qin Wanru's cultivation was high, she had lived like a princess for many years, and didn't have much combat experience.

On the other hand, Qiu Honglei clearly had much more experience fighting. Utilizing the slowing effects of her strange lantern, she gradually seized the advantage.

Qin Wanru was frustrated at her inability to deal with someone with a lower cultivation than hers. She screamed, and an icy gale suddenly started to blow about. Countless icicles flew out from behind her.

This was the first time Zu An had seen her use elemental power! He hadn't expected her to wield the ice element, like Chu Chuyan did.

Her nature didn't seem to match the ice element at all.

Since she had such a fiery temper, Zu An had naturally assumed that she wielded the fire element.

"What?" Qiu Honglei seemed to have realized something as well. She swept her fingers forward quickly, and the weak yellow light inside the lantern flowed outward. The icicles slowed as they made contact with the yellow light.

Losing all their momentum, the heavy icicles fell to the floor one after another, exploding into fragments of ice.

However, Qin Wanru seemed to have already predicted this. Her expression remained completely composed. She pressed her hand to the ground.

A dark blue halo suddenly appeared beneath Qiu Honglei. In the blink of an eye, the fragmented ice suddenly seemed to come alive. They flowed together, wrapping around her legs and locking her firmly in place.

Qin Wanru's figure flickered. A palm flew towards Qiu Honglei's chest.

Zu An was horrified. "Please have mercy!" he blurted out.

Qin Wanru didn't know who her opponent was, but Zu An knew that she was Qiu Honglei.

Qiu Honglei had treated him extremely well, and the two of them could be considered friends. He had no desire to see her die.

However, Qin Wanru was still a sixth rank cultivator. Although he had already activated Grandgale to close the distance, he was still a step too late.

Qin Wanru's palm had already made contact with Qiu Honglei's chest.

Qiu Honglei's legs were frozen in place, so she couldn't move at all. She turned to look towards Zu An at the last second, confusion clearly visible in her eyes.

It was unclear whether she was confused as to why an enemy was concerned about her, or if it was because she recognized him.

Qin Wanru's hand passed through her chest. Qiu Honglei's entire body shattered.

Yes—it shattered. Her body shattered like glass.

Zu An was stunned. "Lightshadow Doppelganger!" Qin Wanru cried out in alarm.

Qiu Honglei's figure had already appeared behind her. Her slender white hand shot towards the middle of Qin Wanru's back like a knife.

Qin Wanru was already much slower than usual, due to the lantern's effects. There was no way she could dodge this attack in time.

"Madam!" Zu An had moved in to save Qiu Honglei, but he hadn't expected the tide of battle to turn so quickly. Now, the one who was in danger was Qin Wanru.

How could he ever face Chuyan and Huanzhao if he let something happen to Qin Wanru?

He used Grandgale to get closer. Nothing else mattered at this moment. He grabbed Qin Wanru and tried to flee.

However, his movements were instantly slowed when he made contact with the faint yellow radiance. His body felt as if it weighed ten times more than usual.

The lantern's pale yellow light looked warm and cozy; however, it was only now, when he was within its area of effect, that he realized that this color could actually feel so ice-cold.

Qiu Honglei froze momentarily when he suddenly appeared in front of her. She was clearly hesitant.

In this moment of hesitation, Zu An just happened to see a well nearby. He summoned Blue Mallard. The water in the well surged upward like a dragon, threatening to swallow up that lantern floating in midair.

Qiu Honglei was shocked. She immediately pulled the lantern back in panic.

Zu An used this chance to summon Grandgale. He grabbed Qin Wanru's hand and blinked away.

Qiu Honglei watched the two retreating figures, a pensive look on her face.

Zu An and Qin Wanru stopped several li away. Zu An gasped for air. Everything had happened way too quickly just now. A single mishap and their lives would've been ended!

Then again, didn't Qiu Honglei show them mercy in the end?

Did she recognize me?

I guess that's not too surprising. A mask isn't enough to hide the awesomeness of a popular guy like me.

Qin Wanru finally came to her senses. "Why did we run?!" She cried, pulling her hand away. "That was just an accident! I could've defeated her..."

She grew more and more ashamed as she spoke. If Zu An hadn't stepped in just now, she could have been seriously injured. A sixth rank cultivator losing to a fifth rank was almost too shameful to bear.

However, that woman's strength wasn't like that of a fifth rank expert at all!

Zu An laughed inside. Qin Wanru was acting like a little girl, unwilling to admit defeat. Of course, this was well in line with her usual temperament. "Madam, have you forgotten what we came here for? We didn't come for a fight."

"The salt permits!" Qin Wanru seemed as though she had just woken up from a daze. "Did we lose the salt permits in the end?"

She couldn't help her disappointment when she saw that he was empty-handed. It was to be expected, of course, since the enemy had such overwhelming numbers.

However, he had just saved her life, so she couldn't bring herself to criticize him.

"Don't worry, I got the salt permits!" Zu An said nonchalantly.

“What?!” Qin Wanru was ecstatic. She looked around anxiously. “Where are they?”

Her smile suddenly froze. “Be careful, someone is coming from over there.

“Their cultivation is extremely high. They could be at the seventh rank!

“It’s probably someone allied with those black-clad men!”

Qin Wanru analyzed the situation in the blink of an eye.

The two of them grew instantly nervous.

Chapter 360: On the Verge of Being Exposed

Zu An saw a group of people come out of another alley. The one in the lead was an elderly man with silver hair. Despite this, he was bursting with health and vigor, betraying no sense of frailty. His eyes seemed as though they could peer through a person’s soul, and his gaze was sharp, like a wolf seeking its prey.

Just meeting him eye-to-eye was extremely uncomfortable. This was probably the seventh-ranked expert Qin Wanru had spoken of.

“How do you know they are on the same side as those black-clad men?” Zu An was puzzled. They were all dressed in ordinary clothing, instead of all black, like what the others had worn.

How could she tell that they were a part of the same group?

Qin Wanru moved closer and said quietly, “Look at the decorative designs on their sleeves. They’re the same as those worn by the black-clad men.”

Zu An looked more closely. Sure enough, there were strange cloud-like symbols on their sleeves.

He vaguely remembered those black-clad individuals wearing similar symbols.

He wouldn’t have noticed this at all if Qin Wanru hadn’t pointed it out to him.

He felt a slight admiration. Even though she seemed so irritable and headstrong all the time, she actually possessed a meticulous side to her as well.

A sudden thought occurred to him, leaving him slightly stunned. If you mixed Chuyan and Huanzhao together, wouldn’t you get Qin Wanru?

Poor Huanzhao really got the short end of the stick though. She only ended up inheriting her bad qualities. Sigh... I need to treat her better in the future...

Zu An brought his mind back to the present. Dealing with the situation at hand was still the top priority. “Can you defeat him?”

Qin Wanru blushed. She shook her head slightly and said quietly, “I can’t.”

Zu An said with a sigh, “That Qiu... ahem, ahem, that woman from before managed to beat you despite being one rank below you. Aren’t you only one rank beneath that old man too?”

Qin Wanru resisted the urge to slap him.

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 250 Rage points!

Can't you say something nice for once?!

However, that woman had indeed gotten the better of her despite being a full rank below her. She couldn't argue against this fact.

That made her even more angry.

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 337 Rage points!

Zu An couldn't help but give her a look. If you can't beat that old man then you can't. Why are you getting so mad at me?

By this time, the elderly man had reached them, along with his dozen or so followers. "Halt!"

Qin Wanru froze. She was just about to attack when Zu An stopped her. They were clearly outmatched, so fighting wasn't the smartest choice.

"What's wrong with you?" Zu An had an impatient look on his face.

"What are the two of you doing out here in the middle of the night?" That elder demanded.

An idea came to Zu An. "I'm on a stroll with my wife. Is something wrong?"

Qin Wanru was furious. How dare this rascal take advantage of her?

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 777 Rage points!

Zu An merely tapped her hand gently, asking her to remain calm.

Qin Wanru hesitated. They knew next to nothing about these people, and they had formidable levels of cultivation. It wouldn't end well for them if they ended up fighting.

These people had even dared to rob the River Patrol Army in the middle of the street. She probably wouldn't be able to get away even if she revealed her true identity.

On top of that, she was also a woman, and a pretty one at that. It was entirely likely that she would suffer a different type of humiliation. Rather than risking such a fate, she might as well see if Zu An had any other ideas to get them out of this predicament first.

"Going for a walk?" That elder was skeptical. "A walk in pitch darkness?"

"Sir, you're clearly inexperienced at this. This is called setting the mood," Zu An said with a chuckle.

Qin Wanru tried her best not to roll her eyes.

The elder looked around them, then asked in a seemingly casual manner, "Since you two are out on a stroll, did you two see or hear anything strange?"

Zu An suddenly turned into a warmhearted neighbor, eager to help. "Now that you mention it, I think someone's fighting over there. It sounded really bad! We ran away as soon as we noticed that

something was off, and were just about to head on home. Sir, you must be careful, and stay away from that area. You might just run into some bad people if you went there.”

Qin Wanru was impressed. Even though this kid was really, really annoying, he had some decent acting chops. He had completely assumed the role of an enthusiastic youngster.

“Bad people, you say? Do you perhaps know who these bad people are?” The elder removed his hands from his pockets as he said this. His long fingernails looked incredibly sharp, as if they could easily pierce through flesh.

Zu An pretended not to notice his killing intent. “I have no idea,” he replied. “It’s pitch black out there. How could I possibly be brave enough to check out what was going on? You all really should leave as soon as you can. It would be trouble if you ran into those bad people.”

“I’ll have to beg your assistance to report this to the authorities, then. They should move quickly to investigate these bad people,” The elder said with a chuckle.

Qin Wanru immediately tensed up when she sensed his killing intent. If a seventh rank expert decided to attack at such close range, she had no idea if she could even protect herself, let alone protect Zu An.

The elderly man looked at her suspiciously, as if sensing her nervousness.

Zu An stood in front of her and said with an embarrassed laugh, “Sir, this woman of mine is somewhat afraid of strangers. She’s a little scared of all of you.”

The elder laughed. “Young man, your wife had a good figure. But the two of you don’t seem like husband and wife at all. In fact, you seem quite unfamiliar with each other.”

Zu An immediately wrapped an arm round Qin Wanru’s waist. Her waist felt slightly softer and more well-rounded than that of a young lady’s. “Haha, my wife is quite shy. Sir, I really can’t chat with you anymore. We’ll all be finished if those bad people find us!”

Qin Wanru couldn’t contain her shock or her anger as she felt his arm wrap around her waist. Her face immediately grew entirely red. This only made her look even more like a bashful young wife in the eyes of others.

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 813 Rage points!

“Madam, please calm down! Please calm down! This is all for the sake of the Chu clan! We are trying to save father-in-law here!” Zu An frantically said via ki transmission. He hid his mouth behind Qin Wanru’s body, afraid that the old man would notice.

Qin Wanru’s chest heaved. However, after taking a few deep breaths, she remained mercifully silent.

“Young man, you are quite blessed.” The old man looked over Qin Wanru’s voluptuous curves. Even though this woman’s face was ordinary, her figure was exceptional. Together with her radiant eyes, it lent her a graceful charm.

If he were ten years younger, he would have surely spent a good three days and nights with this woman, even if he did have pressing matters to take care of. It would have been even better if her husband were tied up and forced to watch from the side.

It was a pity that he was already an old man. He had the will, but not the way.

“Haha, thank you so much for your praise, kind sir. I also think my luck is pretty good,” Zu An said as he led Qin Wanru away to a side alley.

Just as they were about to turn the corner, a female voice rang out. “Elder!”

Qin Wanru’s entire body went rigid. She recognized this voice. It belonged to the woman she had fought with earlier on!