Farmhouse 1061

Chapter 1061: The Bandit’s Rules

"If we overcharge and the merchants stop using this route, what then?"

They obviously didn’t feel frightened, so the figure they quoted must have been acceptable to everyone.

A middle-aged man with a long scar dragged across his face reined in his horse, dismounted in one swift motion, and, with a fierce grin, clasped his hands towards the merchants, "Shopkeeper Yun, Shopkeeper Qiao, Madam Luo... Long time no see, I’ve really missed you all. May I know what big business brings you all the way to Xining this time?"

Another middle-aged man returned the greeting with a smile, "You flatter us, Yu. We’re just small-timers. Those big Store Managers doing big business wouldn’t go through the trouble of such a long and arduous journey."

The Yu-named bandit looked fierce but was actually quite reasonable.

He said, "Yu knows that business isn’t easy for you all. I’m not asking for much, just enough to feed my men. I won’t be rough as long as you Shopkeepers are generous enough."

"Exactly, exactly..." The middle-aged man took out a box and handed it to the Yu-named bandit.

The Yu-named bandit opened the box, glanced at the contents with satisfaction, closed the lid, and passed it to a young bandit behind him.

Soon, everyone had made their intentions clear. Shopkeeper Qiao had brought less than the others, which caused the Yu-named bandit’s expression to darken.

"Shopkeeper Qiao, are you treating me like a beggar?"

Shopkeeper Qiao replied with a forced smile, "The thing is, Yu, business has been tough lately. The Silver I've taken out is all I've scraped together from my emergency fund. Perhaps you could let it slide this time? Once I make some Silvers, I will certainly make it up to you."

The Yu-named bandit's face darkened as he drew his knife and shouted angrily, "I'm a bandit, not a businessman. I don't haggle. If you think I'm asking too much, Shopkeeper Qiao, you're welcome to take your chances passing through Tiger Head Mountain. Let's see how much Old Thunder Tiger will charge you."

Shopkeeper Qiao turned deathly pale with fear and hastily replied, "No, no, that's not what I meant. It's just that I've really lost Silvers in business recently and..."

The Yu-named bandit cut him off with a cold laugh, "Haven't you already dipped into your coffin fund? Would you rather bring out a little more for me, or should I return this beggar's change to you so you can save it for your coffin?"

"Ah, no... I didn't mean..." Shopkeeper Qiao stuttered.

Others tried to persuade him, "Shopkeeper Qiao, just pay up. You can always earn more Silver later, but if you lose your life, what good is all the Silver?"

"Yes, Shopkeeper Qiao, please just pay quickly."

With a distressed face, Shopkeeper Qiao could only grit his teeth and take out two more ingots of Silver.

He retreated back into the crowd feeling defeated and complained to the others, "I'm really at a loss in business. I'm so strapped for cash! This Silver was meant for buying stock, what am I supposed to do now?"

The bandits didn't care about his troubles. Shopkeeper Qiao looked pale and helpless.

Everyone had paid a sufficient amount of Silver, until it was Miss Du's turn.

Before arriving, she had no idea of the situation on the road and didn't have much cash on hand. Observing the Silver the other Shopkeepers had provided, her own appeared insufficient. Therefore, she reluctantly took out some silver notes.

"Yu, I do not carry much Silver with me. Would you accept these silver notes? They're issued by Changsheng Bank."

"Silver notes?" The Yu-named bandit raised an eyebrow and squinted as he studied the delicate face beneath the cloak.

"Which Shopkeeper's family do you belong to? I've never seen you before."

Chapter 1062: Abducted to Become the Bandit Chief's Wife

Miss Du slightly bent her knees in a curtsy and said, "I am Miss Du, the Shopkeeper of Manxiu Building. It's my first time taking this road, and I am not quite acquainted with the local customs. I ask for understanding from Shopkeeper Yu."

Being born a young lady of noble repute, every gesture and movement of Miss Du exuded a distinct aura that set her apart from ordinary people, which provoked wild thoughts among the bandits.

"Your first time, eh?" Shopkeeper Yu said with a smile that did not quite reach his eyes, lowering his voice in a manner that, combined with the scar on his face, seemed lecherous and vulgar.

He snatched the silver note from Miss Du's hand and, without even looking at it, stuffed it into the hands of a bandit behind him. He then addressed Miss Du, "Everyone has a first time, Miss Du. Business isn't easy, and making money is a man's job. You, a delicate lady, should instead stay home, tend to your husband, and teach your children. I happen to be lacking a lady to manage my stronghold—why don't you join me in the mountains, Miss Du? You'll certainly not lack for exotic delicacies and wearing gold and silver!"

Miss Du's face turned pale instantly as she took several steps back, exclaiming, "You shameless cur!"

Cuiya, loyal to her mistress, immediately stepped in front of Miss Du, saying, "Audacious bandits, dare not be disrespectful to my mistress!"

The bandits laughed instead of getting angry, eyeing the maid and her mistress with mocking laughter.

Shopkeeper Yu said, "This maid has quite the spicy temper; brothers, it seems we have stumbled upon a treasure this time."

Other shopkeepers who had paid their silver were too scared to object and hastily moved to the side, minding their own business.

Madam Luo, who had developed a friendly relationship with Miss Du along the way, hesitated for a while but then spoke up for Miss Du.

"Shopkeeper Yu, you gentlemen live by a code. Since you have taken Miss Du's silver note, why don't you show some mercy and let her go?"

Shopkeeper Yu put away his lecherous smile and said, "Madam Luo, I have always respected you as a woman of valor. Please don't be foolish at this moment. It's better if you refrain from interfering in matters that aren't your concern. Otherwise... hmm, don't blame me for turning my back on you and forgetting the years of camaraderie."

Madam Luo wanted to say more but was held back by the other shopkeepers and retreated to the side.

"Madam Luo, you've had it tough too. Better not meddle in others' affairs. Miss Du is just unlucky, happening upon Shopkeeper Yu taking charge of this route today."

Most bandits do have principles, seeking only wealth, but Shopkeeper Yu was different; he was also lecherous.

A beauty like Miss Du was unfortunate to fall into his hands.

"Beauty, come with me. I will take good care of you," he said, his disgusting gaze returning to Miss Du as Madam Luo stepped aside.

Miss Du’s complexion turned deathly pale, fear making her retreat.

The bandits laughed scornfully, as if watching a dying animal struggle.

The house servants accompanying Miss Du drew their knives but, seeing the overwhelming number of fierce bandits, none dared to step forward.

Cuiya cried like a tearful statue, pleading incessantly.

"Bandit leader, please spare my mistress. Whatever you want to do, do it to me instead. I promise not to resist."

Shopkeeper Yu said, "Such a loyal maid. Take her too; my beauty could use a caring person to attend to her."

...

Another merchant caravan arrived at this desolate gully and was astonished to see the other merchants ahead with furrowed brows, anxiously discussing something.

The young man leading the caravan moved forward and asked, "What’s the matter with everyone? What are you all discussing?"

Chapter 1063: Bad Premonition

Madam Luo’s eyes reddened slightly, and she appeared extremely anxious as she said, "We’ve encountered bandits before and like in the past, we handed over silver, but unexpectedly, the bandits took an interest in a female shopkeeper among us and kidnapped her and her maid, intending to make her his chief wife."

"Indeed, two house servants who came with her resisted, and were killed on the spot." Shopkeeper Qiao pointed not far away and said, "We all helped to bury those two loyal servants. Fearing more innocents might get hurt, the female shopkeeper told the other servants to stop, and then she was taken away by the bandits.

The remaining servants have already gone back to report the news; we are still in shock and were just about to leave after some rest. Alas! We still have such a long way to go, and who knows what will happen next?"

"Are there many bandits on this road?" The young man asked, furrowing his brows.

"Not a few," said Shopkeeper Qiao, "but most of them are after wealth; it's rare they kill and abduct like this time. Alas! It's only Miss Du's bad luck. And she really should have, given her beauty, stayed hidden and let a servant come out to handle things."

"Miss Du?" the young man jumped, asking quickly, "Which family's Miss Du?"

Madam Luo said, "It's the manager of Manxiu Building, Miss Du herself!"

The young man's face turned deathly pale, and he almost couldn't stand steady.

Miss Du, manager of Manxiu Building?

He grabbed Shopkeeper Qiao urgently and asked, "Where are those bandits? Which direction did they go?"

Shopkeeper Qiao, startled by the young man's sudden change, hesitantly pointed in a direction and stuttered, "Over... over there!"

The young man released Shopkeeper Qiao and suddenly pulled a long sword from the goods he was dragging behind his horse, shouting loudly to the convoy behind him, "Everyone, follow orders, chase the bandits!"

"General, should we..."

Someone disagreed with his action, but the young man had already ridden off quickly, and they had no choice but to follow.

Madam Luo and the others were stunned as they watched the disguised individuals ride off swiftly.

"Are they from the Governor’s Office?"

"It doesn’t seem like it; they look more like soldiers who fight on battlefields."

"Yes, that man is a general."

"Ah, wonderful! Finally, the Imperial Court must be taking measures to curb the nearby bandits, sending military personnel to eliminate them."

"But aren’t there too few of them? Only a few dozen, while the bandit group led by Mr. Yu numbers over a hundred."

"No problem, bandits are just a disorderly mob, with only a few genuine threats. How could they withstand the trained military?"

People discussed fervently, still filled with hope for this bandit suppression.

No matter what, someone was finally dealing with these bandits, Shopkeeper Qiao even thought, if this general could eliminate the bandits, would he possibly get his silver back?

That would really be saving his own life!

...

Gu Youyou, while creating a new clothing design, accidentally pricked her finger with a needle.

She winced in pain, quickly lifting her blood-beading finger to inspect.

Jin Zijin, hearing the sound, put down his military book, looked up at her, and asked, "What happened?"

Feeling somewhat panicked and distracted, Gu Youyou said, "It’s... it’s nothing, I just pricked my hand by accident."

Jin Zijin stood up, walked over to her, took her hand, and gently sucked the wound.

Releasing it after a moment, he asked, "How can you be so careless?"

Gu Youyou said, "I suddenly felt a bit uneasy. By the way, is the region around Xining safe? With Xining preparing to fight the Imperial Court, won’t they involve the merchants near Beijing?"

Chapter 1064: A Village Full of Bandits

Jin Zijin said, "Jin Mocong is also a member of the Jin Royal Family, and he is not a foreigner. His wars are for imperial power and have nothing to do with the common people, so it naturally won’t involve ordinary folks."

Gu Youyou sighed with relief, "That’s reassuring."

But even so, the sense of panic within her did not subside, rather it intensified.

Jin Zijin looked at her, furrowing his brows gently, and said, "However, there are quite a few bandits along that road, but don’t worry, most merchants are accustomed to dealing with them. A bit of silver can usually take care of it."

Hearing the word ’bandits’, Gu Youyou grew anxious; she was unaware of the bandit issue and asked in surprise, "There are bandits too? Do they often hijack passing merchants?"

Jin Zijin frowned deeply, speaking in a low voice, "Yes, every day. Is there something important at stake for you?"

Gu Youyou felt her heart grow cold at such a response and said, "There is an important matter. Miss Du has gone to Xining. With war looming, the business in Xining must be handled by Miss Du or myself in person. I couldn’t go, so I sent her."

Gu Youyou thought of bandits and Miss Du, turning pale with anxiety. She grabbed Jin Zijin’s sleeve urgently, "You must send someone after her quickly. We cannot allow Miss Du to run into trouble on the road to Xining."

Jin Zijin spoke softly trying to comfort her, "Don’t panic. Although there are many bandits on that road, they usually coexist peacefully with the merchants. The worst-case scenario is a loss of money, nothing major."

"That’s not good enough, something feels off. Please, just send someone!"

"All right, all right, don’t worry. I’ll send someone now."

Gu Youyou had the color drained from her face, wearing an expression as if she had messed up badly. Doing business these days was difficult, especially for women, and even more so amid rampant banditry. One moment of carelessness could lead to losing both money and people.

...

Miss Du and Cuiya were captured and taken into a village.

From the outside, the village looked like any ordinary village where people farmed and labored and greeted returning bandits like familiar, plain villagers might.

"Little Yu, how was the harvest today?"

Yu Dangjia responded warmly to the elderly man’s question, "Uncle Li, the harvest was good today. I’ve picked myself up a bride."

Uncle Li turned to look at the two young women with striking features standing behind Yu Dangjia.

He said, "Little Yu, why did you resort to kidnapping? Doesn’t that break the rules of our line of work?"

Yu Dangjia’s expression darkened. His smile was gone, replaced by a look of anger as he said, "How does it break the rules? She didn’t pay silver. My brothers didn’t kill her, which counts as lenient. Taking her back to be my bride is honoring her."

With that, Uncle Li had nothing more to say.

Being bandits, they couldn’t always be so agreeable. If they let go today because one person claimed poverty, what about tomorrow? Would they even be able to continue as bandits?

Thus, when encountering such people, they’d normally loot all their goods. And if looting wasn’t enough, they would kill them.

Only by doing so could they ensure the merchants wouldn’t dare to cheat them, guaranteeing the delivery of silver without deceit.

Hearing Yu Dangjia’s reasoning, the villagers offered him a chorus of congratulations, "Little Yu, congratulations! You finally decided to take a bride. Are you serious about this one? Not going to play around for a few days and then discard her, are you?"

"Haha, thank you, thank you. Such a beautiful bride this time, of course, I am serious. Tonight, I invite everyone to share wedding drinks with me. Good wine and meat in abundance, everyone must honor me with your presence."

Chapter 1065: How to Deal with Them

"Definitely, if there’s booze and meat, we’ll surely come."

Miss Du and Cuiya were both gagged with white cloth. Cuiya made muffled cries, while Miss Du’s face was ashen, like that of a corpse.

Yuda, the bandit chief, grinned lewdly and pinched Miss Du’s face. The callouses on his hand brushed against her tender skin, sending waves of pleasure through him.

Yuda swallowed his saliva eagerly and said, "Hurry, bring my bride to my room."

This village was a den of thieves, so whoever was the bandit leader also served as the village head.

Today, the village head’s wedding was a grand affair.

Several old women stripped Miss Du naked, then dressed her in a bright red wedding gown, and splotched cheap makeup onto her face. Pressed down by the women, gagged, Miss Du’s eyes brimmed with tears.

She had thought it was just a simple trip to Xining, never anticipating such a disaster.

Given Miss Du’s character, she would rather die than yield to a disgusting bandit.

While the old crones were doing her hair, she suddenly stood up from the stool, forcefully pushing away the crones in front of her, and charged headfirst at the wall.

But the expected pain didn’t come; instead, she crashed into a wall of flesh.

Yuda, grimacing with pain, pushed Miss Du away and clutched his belly.

He cursed furiously, "That little bitch wants to kill me! And all of you, keep a closer watch! If she tries to off herself, I won’t let you off easy."

The crones, infuriated by Miss Du’s actions, said through clenched teeth, "Don’t worry, boss, this little cheap wench won’t die. We were negligent just now. This time, we won’t give her another chance to seek death."

Yuda gave a satisfied nod, his face contorted with a vile grin, "Seems like she’s got a fiery spirit. After the ceremony, make sure she drinks the soup. I like a woman who’s feisty in the bridal chamber."

The crones smirked and teased, "That’s right, boss, you like them with spirit. A woman, you see, just sleep with her for one night, and she won’t need any soup; she’ll beg to sleep with you."

Darkness soon fell, and the village was alive with celebration. Villagers lit bonfires, roasted lamb, and sang mountain songs while feasting on the meat.

The bride and groom completed the wedding ceremony under the congregation’s crowd, and the bandits’ laughter echoed throughout the village.

Cuiya was locked in the firewood shed, pounding on the door with all her might.

A young bandit brought her food. Enticed by the sight of a woman more delicate than those in the village, he couldn’t resist the urge to lay hands on her.

The old guard huffed coldly, saying, "You can’t touch this girl. The boss has ordered that she’s the new madam’s personal maid. If you want her, you’d have to ask the new madam."

The young bandit sneered, "Old Hu, what new madam? She’s just another woman our boss has taken. Once the boss is done with her, he might even let us all have a go. This woman is no different from her mistress; they’re all meant for our amusement, what difference does it make whether it’s sooner or later?"

Cuiya, upon hearing these words, was petrified with fear and huddled in a corner, clasping her clothes tightly.

Old Hu glanced at Cuiya and, feeling a twinge of sympathy for the frightened girl, said, "The boss has to agree to it, though. He said we’re not to lay a hand on her for now, so we won’t."

The young bandit, frustrated, tossed the food basket to the ground and huffed at Cuiya, "Then I’ll spare you for now, but sooner or later, I’ll have you beneath me to ravish!"

...

Chapter 1066: The Bandit Gets Married

Xining’s domain was vast and sparsely populated, and after chasing throughout the afternoon until dusk, they finally saw a sizable village.

The soldiers dressed as a trade caravan showed puzzled looks, with one remarking, "The place ahead looks like an ordinary village, could it be related to the bandits?"

Another said, "It’s dark yet still so lively, quite rare indeed. Ordinary folks should be resting after laboring during the day. They wouldn’t usually be so cheerful this late at night. Could it be those people?"

"There are no stockades nearby; it’s very likely. General, why not let me go and inquire?"

The young man waved his hand, his eyes ablaze with crimson, and said, "No need. If you go, you’d only scare them off. This is the place, no mistake."

Gazing from afar, red lanterns and people’s cheers signaled a wedding. But who would get married in the middle of the night? The auspicious time is usually at noon, so there is no doubt, this is the place.

"Get everyone ready; tonight we’ll flatten this stronghold, and anyone who dares to resist with weapons in hand shall be shown no mercy!"

The soldiers felt uneasy, yet none voiced any complaint, each gripping their weapon tightly.

This small unit, disguised as a trade caravan, was the vanguard dispatched by the commanding officer. Their original mission was to enter Xining under the guise of merchants to penetrate deep into the enemy’s ranks and ascertain their strengths and weaknesses.

When necessary, they could even coordinate from inside to catch the enemy off guard and attack.

Unexpectedly, their leading General changed plans midway and led them to eradicate bandits instead.

Military orders were as immovable as mountains. Everyone knew that this action would disrupt the Great General's plans, and that issuing such an order would result in military punishment.

However, after stealing glances at the man with the bloodshot eyes, no one dared to speak out.

He was determined to wipe out this band of bandits, but for what reason?

Their General's expression made it seem as if the bandits had stolen his bride and dishonored his mother.

On the outside, the place appeared to be a simple little village. The peasantry had hung out their dried crops at their doorsteps, and grains that hadn't yet been dried were also piled up at their entrances. The village was filled with laughter and joy, children frolicking, and men and women dancing and singing.

A man with a scarred face, dressed in a groom's attire, was pushed by the crowd into the door adorned with a big red happiness character. Soon after, two matrons came out, winking and gesturing at him, "Master, everything is ready. The bride's arms and legs are tied with red silk, just waiting for you to lift her veil."

Elated, Scarface rubbed his hands and quickly took out two pieces of broken Silver to give to the two matrons, saying, "Granny Wang, Granny Li, the head of the household thanks you both greatly!"

"Hey, there's no need for thanks, you're too polite. Just hurry on in, the bride is feeling uncomfortable. Don't leave the poor girl struggling for too long."

While they spoke politely, the two matrons unceremoniously accepted the silver pieces, bit them with their teeth to check authenticity, and then joyfully tucked them into their clothes.

Scarface entered the bridal chamber and immediately closed the door behind him.

Seeing the alluring woman tied spread-eagled on the bed ignited a blazing fire in his heart, and he could no longer control himself. He quickly tore off his clothes and lifted the veil from the woman’s face.

Miss Du lay flat on the bed, her body already aroused by a burning passion, looking even more seductive and charming. The beads of sweat on her forehead and her dazed eyes were bewitching as silk.

Only because they feared she might bite her tongue and commit suicide, they didn’t dare to remove the white cloth stuffed in her mouth.

Chapter 1067: Advance into the Village

Not being able to kiss those delicate and enticingly soft lips would diminish much of the joy," grumbled the bandit leader, coursing with feverish desire, as he whispered to her, "Beautiful, if I remove the cloth from your mouth, you must not bite your own tongue, can you?"

Miss Du, clinging to her last thread of sanity, nodded slightly.

The bandit leader, thrilled, drew his robust and naked upper body close to Miss Du.

The sight of the ugly scars covering his body nearly made Miss Du vomit. She resolved to seek death rather than let this disgusting bandit defile her by any means.

The bandit leader’s face, with its ugly knife scars, looked even more ferocious and nauseating as he smiled, approaching Miss Du from above and reaching out his hand toward her.

Suddenly, a terrified scream from outside caused his outstretched hand to jerk back in alarm.

"What’s going on? What happened outside?" bellowed the bandit leader toward the door.

After a moment, a voice from outside responded, "Boss, it’s an ambush! All tough fighters."

The bandit leader’s expression froze, then twisted into a visage of vicious anger as he roared, "Damn it, who dares to cause trouble on my goddamn wedding day?"

While cursing, he hurriedly put his clothes back on.

Miss Du, sweating profusely, felt a wave of relief as the revolting man walked away.

But the bowl of soup she had been forced to drink contained a large dose of drugs, causing an intense heat to rise in her body.

She knew she had been drugged, but her consciousness was fading away.

Her body was growing weaker and weaker, desperately in need of a cool body to reduce her burning temperature.

At the same time, she understood what this meant.

She was the daughter of the Du family, educated since childhood in the ways of an exemplary lady of standing. She had memorized the Four Books for Women and, before coming to Xining, the farthest she had been was Manxiu City. Whether in Beijing or Manxiu City, Miss Du's reputation was spotless, with no one daring to harm her. She had never imagined she would face this day.

The ingrained ideals from her upbringing made it impossible for her to endure the disgrace she was experiencing; once she opened her eyes again, that would be the moment she would take her own life.

...

The tranquil village erupted into chaos, with the joyous laughter turning into screams of terror.

Children's cries, the wails of elders, women, and the blood spraying across the bright red lanterns hanging in front of houses made for a particularly gruesome scene.

The soldiers' surprise attack caught the bandits completely off guard, as tonight was their leader's big wedding celebration with everyone heartily eating meat and drinking wine—most of those drinking

were the able-bodied bandit men, many drunk to the point of stupor. Thus, the slaughter was practically a one-sided massacre.

A young man’s eyes were bloodshot with rage as he wielded a long sword thirsting for blood.

The bandit chieftain emerged disheveled, brandishing a large saber, seeing his companions moaning on the ground and shouting in panic, "Which gang are you from? Today is my happy wedding day, fine fellows! Sit down and have a drink with me, why start this bloodbath?"

A bandit, arm severed by a machete, clung to the bandit leader’s leg, saying, "Boss, their clothes look like ordinary merchants, but these men..."

Merchants?

The bandit leader immediately thought of the bride he had captured that day.

Could she have brought this on?

At that moment, a woman’s cry reached their ears.

Chapter 1068: Deep Affection between Children

Someone had rescued Cuiya, who was locked in the woodshed. Cuiya stumbled toward the young man, crying out, "Second Young Master, please save my miss, she is in this room."

To bandits, it had always been all or nothing. By now, if he hadn’t understood, then he was a fool.

Xining, the bandit leader, was shocked and had no time for anything else. He immediately raised his big knife and charged at Jie Zhonglin.

Jie Zhonglin didn’t need to lift a finger, as several soldiers had already surrounded Xining. Jie Zhonglin himself kicked open the room adorned with the character "happiness."

Under the flickering candlelight, pained noises came from the woman's throat as she writhed incessantly. But her hands and feet were all bound with red cloth, leaving her pale wrists with blue and purple marks, still unable to break free.

Cuiya had already thrown herself over in tears. Jie Zhonglin, however, seemed to be frozen, unable to move a step.

"Miss, what's wrong with you?" Cuiya said through her own sobs as she pulled the white cloth from her miss's mouth.

Miss Du was already delirious, the sounds from her mouth mere pained moans.

Yet, those same moans caused a delicate chemical reaction in the man's ears. Jie Zhonglin's Adam's apple bobbed as he spoke hoarsely.

"Cuiya, go find some warm water."

Usually nimble, Cuiya was now too distraught to untie the ropes on Miss Du's wrists and, in her haste, only tightened them further. Only after hearing Jie Zhonglin's command did she stumble outside to get water.

The bandits who had dared to resist were now under the soldiers' blades, their souls departed, and the weak and women were locked in a large room, now guarded by a few soldiers.

Jie Zhonglin took a deep breath and approached the bed draped in red curtains. Looking at the person on the bed, he felt a rush of both heartache and fury.

How dare those bandits treat her like this?

It had been a long time since he had seen her, and she seemed to have gained a bit of weight, yet she was still thinner than most.

He hesitated for a moment but eventually sat at the bedside and took her hand. Her wrist was tied with a red cord, the other end fastened to a pillar of the bed.

The red cord had already cut into her wrist, drawing blood. Jie Zhonglin extracted his sword and deftly cut the rope binding Miss Du's hands and feet.

The soldiers outside dealt with the bandit leader and then entered the room.

At that moment, Miss Du, freed from her restraints, suddenly sat up and clung to Jie Zhonglin.

Jie Zhonglin's entire body stiffened; a warm, soft body was now in his arms. Immediately, he felt a hot rush of blood from his feet to his crown, and for a moment, he didn't know where to put his hands.

The first few soldiers who entered the room were stained with blood, weapons of murder still in their hands, and they too were stunned by the sight.

They were the men who always followed Jie Zhonglin, and they knew he was Jie Zhongsen's younger brother. Jie Zhongsen's prestige in the Dongzhou military was second only to General Che. However, he had never cut his younger brother any slack, instead offering special attention.

He tasked him with the most grueling assignments, subjected him to the most intense devilish training, and involved him in the most dangerous operations.

For example, this time they had chosen a fearless squad to disguise as merchants to scout the situation in Xining, and Jie Zhonglin was the first one chosen.

But even the soldiers who had been by his side the longest had never seen him show such tenderness.

They thought he was a maniac, driven only by a zeal for fighting, who would never understand romantic affairs.

Chapter 1069: The Buried Truth

"Zhonglin..."

As everyone stood around in a daze, this soft, bone-deep voice sent a shudder through everyone.

At the same time, Jie Zhonglin snapped back to his senses and barked at the bewildered group at the door, "Get out!"

Startled, everyone shook, hurried out of the room, and thoughtfully closed the door behind them.

"Xintong, do you recognize me?" Jie Zhonglin asked, overwhelmed with excitement.

It was fortunate that he had come.

Originally, he had been reluctant to lead this dangerous team deep into enemy territory as his brother had ordered. Although he feared nothing, he also did not wish to perish before showing his valor on the battlefield.

As a general, he believed he should die on the battlefield, not in an ambiguous death in some foreign land.

If they, disguised as merchants, were to be killed, he might amount to nothing.

But now, he was profoundly grateful for his brother’s tyrannical dictates. If not for him, he would not have come here today, seen her, saved her.

"Zhonglin..." Miss Du clung to him tighter, her body soft as a pool of Qingshui, her gaze still hazy. Jie Zhonglin hesitated before realizing with a start that she was calling out his name unconsciously, not recognizing him.

This left him somewhat disappointed, but an instant later, he was brimming with surprise.

Why would she call out his name under such circumstances?

She used to love him; that much he had always known—she had insisted on fulfilling their marriage agreement.

But later, she had let go. After repeated hurt, she had released her attachment, a fact he was equally aware of. Now, however, listening to her soft murmurs, something long dormant within him reignited.

"Xintong, do you still think of me, is that it?"

"I’m so hot!" Miss Du tore at her own clothes and rubbed her burning skin against his cool flesh, burrowing into his chest.

Jie Zhonglin watched her, his mouth going dry.

But he was lucid now; she had taken something, an aphrodisiac; otherwise, she would never act like this. She was a well-educated maiden of a reputable family.

Jie Zhonglin pushed Miss Du away, saying in a low voice, "Hang in there, the water will be here soon."

Where had Cuiya gone to fetch water? Why had she not returned?

But to his surprise, Miss Du, whom he had just pushed onto the bed, clung to him again, a tear trailing down the corner of her eye.

"Don’t push me away, give me a chance, please. I will treat you well, better than Wanqing ever did..."

She clung to him tenderly, her eyes filled with years of sadness for her unrequited longing.

She pleaded with him pitifully, a posture as low as dust.

Once upon a time, she had been just that—gazing up from the dust at him, hoping for a backward glance. But such waiting ended in utter despair until their connection faded entirely.

By the time he turned back, she no longer had the strength to wait.

Perhaps the drug had dredged her deepest yearnings from within her heart, laying them bleeding before him.

If Miss Du had ever harbored a ’sexual’ fantasy in her life, it was solely of Jie Zhonglin.

Under the strong influence of the drug, her mind was consumed by him, the sealed memories, the truth she never wished to face in her life.

Jie Zhonglin was stunned, his heart aching so intensely that he could hardly breathe.

Those years when he had never noticed her—how lowly she was and how cruel he was—he had despised her as much as she was miserable.

Chapter 1070: X Hate a Little More

She endured in silence those years, and what he gave her, aside from hurt, was nothing more.

"Don’t push me away..." she pleaded with him in a low voice once again.

Jie Zhonglin hugged her back with a reversed hand, preventing her from falling due to weakness.

He leaned close to her ear, his voice hoarse, "I’ve treated you so badly, and you hate me so much. When you wake up, I’m afraid you’ll hate me even more."

The woman in his arms didn’t respond, perhaps she couldn’t even hear what he was saying; she only knew her body felt desperately empty and needed him.

After a while, he felt her bite hard onto his chest.

Jie Zhonglin groaned softly as his chest became warm and wet—he touched it and found his hand covered in blood.

She was still biting down hard, without letting go, making muffled noises with her mouth, seemingly crying.

Jie Zhonglin, oh Jie Zhonglin, the depth of her hatred for him equaled the depth of her love. As much as she wanted him, she similarly wanted to bite him to death.

Such love and hate, only by swallowing him whole could she ease the bitter pain in her heart.

Gradually, the pain Jie Zhonglin felt became numb, and he stopped feeling it altogether, letting her vent on his body.

So this was how much she hated him. If only she had bitten his neck, that would be good; the debt he owed her might only be settled by his death.

Her body grew hotter and more agitated, and aside from continuously gnawing on him, she seemed to find no other way to vent.

But merely this was like quenching thirst with poison—it would not alleviate the increasingly severe poison in her body.

He had never truly possessed her in this life. If he failed in his task this time, he would regret it for the rest of his life.

He said, "Even if you hate me, I can never repay you in this lifetime. Perhaps in the next life, I owe you, and you can claim it all back from me."

...

The Empress was determined to arrange for Jin Zijin to take a few more concubines. One reason was to take this opportunity to plant spies in Jin Zijin's residence, and another was to add to Gu Youyou's troubles.

Nowadays, Gu Youyou's reputation was boundless. The Empress had intended to use Gu Youyou's humble origins to mock her, but unexpectedly, her fame continued to grow—Divine Doctor, exceptional merchant, glass inventor, creator of a new type of vital medicine.

The sign of the shop she opened was written by her own hand, and thus, her peerless, master-level calligraphy became another of her strengths.

Under so many halos, who would care about her once ordinary background?

She was a phoenix, no matter if she had flown from a phoenix tree or escaped from a chicken coop, it would not change her inherent nature as a phoenix.