

Immortal 361

Chapter 361: What Do You Want?

She had caught up to them. They were definitely going to be exposed.

Qin Wanru panicked. She prepared to grab Zu An and run. Even though she knew that she couldn't escape from a seventh rank expert, they had to at least give it a try.

Sensing her reaction, Zu An immediately stopped her. "Madam, don't do anything rash!"

Qin Wanru was confused. They practically had blades against their necks! They still had a sliver of hope if they tried to run now, but there would be no chance at all once that woman exposed them.

"Trust me. I believe everything will turn out fine." Inside, Zu An was actually extremely nervous. After all, he was gambling as well.

"Hm? Why did you come back here?" The old man asked when he saw the black-clothed Qiu Honglei. At the same time, he gave the slowly-departing duo a look. His killing intent only dropped fractionally when he saw that they didn't turn around.

"I was chasing after someone. One of our opponents fled the scene," replied Qiu Honglei.

Hearing this, Qin Wanru felt a shudder run through her entire body. She gave Zu An a fierce pinch. This kid had advised against running away. Now, it was already too late.

Zu An hissed in pain. Why did women love to pinch people so much?

"You were chasing after someone?" That elder voiced his surprise. He pointed at Zu An and Qin Wanru. "Was it them?"

Qiu Honglei studied the two of them, a pensive look on her face. The corners of her lips curved upwards when she saw Zu An's hand around that woman's hips.

Qin Wanru's body suddenly straightened, almost as if she had felt her gaze.

Even Zu An's nervousness grew. Even though he had already cast his bet, this woman's thoughts were truly unfathomable. He had no clue what choice she would make in the end.

After a brief moment, Qiu Honglei shook her head. "It's not them. I was chasing after a single person."

Qin Wanru was bowled over by this statement. She gave Zu An a confused look. Even though she didn't say anything, her meaning was clear: Why would that woman lie?

Zu An sighed in relief. He smiled, but didn't explain further. He wanted to take Qin Wanru away from this place first.

"Does that person have a high level of cultivation? How did he manage to escape, even from you?" That elder didn't doubt her words. After all, he didn't see any reason for Qiu Honglei to lie.

Qiu Honglei shook her head. "His cultivation is slightly higher than mine, but he's extremely crafty. However, I managed to strike him with my palm, so he's already guaranteed to die."

Qin Wanru had been listening in carefully. This woman had clearly misled her own companions, and even helped to forestall any future attempts against them.

The old man nodded. "Anyone who suffers a strike from you in a vital area doesn't have much of a chance at survival. However, you cannot lower your guard. Men, send someone to search the surroundings for any suspicious and wounded individuals."

A group of subordinates detached themselves from the main group to carry out this order. The old man carried on, "Right, where's Gu Yueyi?"

"Senior brother is back there. He's currently facing off against Sang Qian," Qiu Honglei replied.

The elder snorted. "Gu Yueyi probably cannot match Sang Qian. Let's move! We're heading over to help him!"

As he said this, he dashed in the general direction of the fight, as fast as a large bird.

Qiu Honglei turned around to glance in the direction that Zu An and Qin Wanru had disappeared off to. "You owe me one," she muttered.

Turning back around, she followed the old man.

After establishing that the group of them had left, Qin Wanru finally relaxed as they turned the next corner. However, she was still confused. "Why did that woman let us go?"

Zu An shook his head. "I don't know either. Perhaps there's some infighting among the ranks, and she didn't want us to fall into the old man's hands."

Qiu Honglei had just saved him, after all. There was no way he would sell her out right after that.

Qin Wanru was a duchess, after all, and had a vast amount of resources at her disposal. After experiencing such a humiliating loss, she would surely send soldiers to the Immortal Abode to investigate the organization behind those black-clad men. What would Qiu Honglei do then?

"Is that so?" Qin Wanru was doubtful. "I get the sense that the two of you know each other, though. Why else would you have dared to stay?"

"Really?" Zu An feigned ignorance. "I felt it would be too obvious if we ran. It was a gamble. Thank goodness luck was on my side. It seems like my gambling luck is always reliable."

"The Chu clan forbids gambling!" Qin Wanru scoffed. However, she knew full well that this fellow had won seven-and-a-half million taels of silver from Silverhook Casino, and another million from the Clans Tournament. He even bet correctly in such a perilous situation! She really couldn't find it within her to lecture him.

She suddenly sensed something amiss. She scowled at him. "How much longer are you going to hold on to me?!"

Only now did Zu An realize that he was still holding her. Cold sweat poured down his face. He jumped away at once. "Madam, please don't take offense! The situation was dire, and that was the only thing I could do!"

Qin Wanru wore a sullen expression as she listened to his endless excuses. She remained silent throughout.

Zu An really was a little scared. He might have offended her badly this time.

The customs governing male and female interactions in this world weren't as strict as those in ancient China, but they were hardly relaxed enough to allow a son-in-law to casually wrap his arm around his mother-in-law.

However, he really had no choice back then. Besides, he'd transmigrated from the modern world, and lacked the sensitivity towards such matters. That was why he had instinctively done such an outrageous thing.

Qin Wanru was silent for a long time. Finally, she said, "The salt permits. Where are they?"

"The situation was pretty tense. I had to hide them away. I'll bring them to you tomorrow," replied Zu An.

The Brilliant Glass Bead was too great of a secret. Mi Li had told him before that she had never even seen such huge spatial storage before, and that he absolutely could not tell anyone else about it. To do so would be to invite a huge disaster upon himself.

Qin Wanru's expression finally eased. "I'll disregard your disrespectful actions today, out of respect for your contributions to the Chu clan. However, this is the last time!"

"Of course, of course! It won't happen again." Zu An snorted inwardly. Do you really think I'm tired of living? Like hell I'd do it again. "Oh, right. Madam, since I did so much for the clan today, is there a reward for me?"

"You dare ask me for a reward?!" Qin Wanru's eyes widened. This fellow is outrageously shameless! I just let you get away with your disrespectful actions, and yet you have the gall to ask for a reward immediately after that?

Apart from her husband Chu Zhongtian, no other man had ever been allowed to touch her. If any man dared do such a thing, she had the authority to throw him straight into prison. If the offence was serious enough, even ordering an execution was in accordance with the court's laws.

However, Zu An didn't know any of this. He sulked and said, "Of course I want a reward! The Chu clan is in charge of so many people. Isn't the proper dispensation of reward and punishment a basic part of governance? I was the one who brought the salt permits back. That's a huge achievement, no matter what you say. If I don't even get a reward for this, who would ever want to do anything for the Chu clan anymore? Should we find someone else to judge who is right or wrong? I've made such huge contributions to the Chu clan. I've bled for the Chu clan..."

"Shut up!" Qin Wanru looked around her guiltily. Fortunately, no one else was around to hear his rambling. "What kind of reward do you want?"

"I want..." Zu An was stunned before he had barely begun his sentence. Wait, what do I want?

Money?

The Chu clan might be even poorer than he was right now.

Besides, past a certain point, money was only a number.

Authority?

He wasn't interested.

Sex?

Hmm.... That seems pretty good. But I should probably forget about this one. Bringing this up in front of her is just begging to get my ass beaten.

"Rewards are for outsiders. You're already one of us, so what reward is there to speak of? Besides, you already have Chuyan. Do you really still want something else?" Qin Wanru snorted. She turned around to leave. Further discussion was beneath her.

Zu An could only laugh helplessly and follow in her wake.

He never expected Qin Wanru to stop suddenly. Zu An was caught off-guard, and almost bumped into her.

Seeing his sorry appearance, Qin Wanru said coldly, "By the way, you cannot tell anyone what happened today. Not even Chuyan."

Zu An grunted in acknowledgment. "Can I tell father-in-law about it, then?" He suddenly asked.

Chapter 362: A Huge Surprise

Qin Wanru just stared at him.

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 666 Rage points!

How can someone so irritating exist in this world?!

She really wanted to grind his head against the ground and then stomp on it a few times.

She turned and walked off with a loud snort. She doubted she would be able to hold herself back if he said another word.

She deliberately set a quick pace to lose that annoying fellow, but each time she turned around, she saw him following behind her in a carefree manner.

Even though this kid's cultivation isn't anything special, he really moves fast. Qin Wanru was slightly surprised, but then she suddenly remembered what Chu Chuyan had told her before she left. Qin Wanru had to admit that her daughter seemed to be better at judging people than she was.

The two of them quickly returned to the Chu Estate.

Zu An wanted to give her the salt permits right away, but felt it would seem a little strange if he suddenly pulled them out of thin air.

As such, he returned to his own residence to get some rest first. He wanted to sleep in the Unvoiced Residence, since Chu Chuyan's fragrant sheets were a billion times better than the ones in his own doghouse. However, he quickly dismissed this idea. He didn't want to give Old Mi any chance to realize the truth about him.

He already had a good idea of the old gardener's identity. Old Mi was most likely a court eunuch. This old man was always so attached to him, and acted so weirdly. He might even have some mental perversion.

Zu An had yet to tell him about his recovery.

His mind turned to the night's events. Qiu Honglei had actually let him go this time. Seems like this girl still has some loyalty to me. I should find an opportunity to pay her a visit and thank her...

Exhausted by the day's exertions and these random thoughts, he quickly entered dreamland.

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The next morning, Zu An went looking for Qin Wanru.

He had no desire to wake up this early, but he was sure that Qin Wanru was worried about the salt permits.

She had been too angry to ask him for them the day before, but what would he do if she asked him for them early in the morning? Would he make them appear out of thin air for her?

He ran to the Unvoiced Residence first and removed the large chests from the Brilliant Glass Bead. Then, he went to find Qin Wanru.

He saw her hurry out of her own residence as soon as he arrived. There weren't even any maids following her.

She hadn't put on much makeup. Compared to her usual extravagance, her appearance held an elegant simplicity.

Unfortunately, her countenance was still slightly sallow. She probably hadn't slept well the night before.

She was surprised to see Zu An. "I was just about to go looking for you. I've been fretting over the salt permits the whole night. Where did you put them?"

Zu An thanked the heavens that he'd come early. "I was just about to give you a report," he said quickly.

He brought her over to the Unvoiced Residence and pointed at the chests. "They're all here."

Qin Wanru rushed over to check the contents. When she saw the orderly stacks of salt permits, the tension finally drained out of her. "These are the exact salt permits that had been stolen. The Chu clan is saved. Zhongtian is saved..."

She turned to Zu An. "Ah Zu, thank you," she said sincerely.

Zu An smiled. "It was my duty, after all."

Qin Wanru opened her mouth. She recalled their conversation the night before, and was just wondering what to give him as a reward. However, she couldn't actually think of anything to reward him with. He didn't lack money, and he even had her precious daughter. There was no way she was going to give Huanzhao to him as well!

"Oh, right, I forgot to return this mask to you." She quickly changed topics to cover her awkwardness. "This is a rare treasure. You need to take good care of it."

"Thank you for your reminder, Madam." Zu An put away the thin mask. "By the way, since we have the salt permits back, can't we just ask Chuyan to come back?"

Qin Wanru shook her head. "The Sang clan is already dead set on dealing with us. There's no point in remaining on the defensive. We should use this chance to deal with any future problems once and for all. However, we can still let Chuyan know. That would help to ease her mind."

"How do we contact her? Carrier pigeons?" Zu An stared blankly at her.

Qin Wanru rolled her eyes. She produced a mirror from within her sleeves, then poured some soul ki into it. Soon afterwards, the surface of the mirror rippled, and a layer of mist appeared.

Zu An eyes widened. The face in the mirror was Chu Chuyan's!

"Mom, what's happened at home? Why did you use this mirror to contact me?" Chu Chuyan's voice was clouded with worry.

Qin Wanru said quickly, "Chuyan, there's no need to feel anxious. I actually wanted to share some good news with you. We've found the salt permits that Chen Xuan stole from us."

As she spoke, she turned the mirror to face the chests of salt permits.

Zu An was completely stupefied. Wasn't this equivalent to a video call from his previous world?

After arriving in this world, he'd discovered that many of the things that were done using technology in his previous world could be done through cultivation and the use of runes in this world.

"Really? How did you find them?!" Chu Chuyan's voice was full of surprise.

"It was obviously all because of your talented, brave, awesome, and suave husband!" Zu An moved over and smiled towards the mirror.

Chu Chuyan blushed immediately. "Can you show some restraint, please? Mother is still here."

Qin Wanru smiled. "Ah Zu is right. He was the one who found them. You were right about him."

Zu An gave her a look of surprise. Did the sun rise in the west today? Did I just hear words of praise from her?

"Oh man, that feels so good. Madam, can you please compliment me a few more times?" Zu An said, laughing.

Qin Wanru sighed and narrowed her eyes at him.

Chu Chuyan buried her face in her palm as well. She clearly couldn't handle his shamelessness either.

Qin Wanru couldn't be bothered with him anymore. She addressed her daughter instead. "Chuyan, let's proceed as planned. We only wanted to tell you this to help ease your worry, and to let you know that you don't have to take too many risks."

Chu Chuyan nodded. "Understood! Thank Ah Zu for me."

Qin Wanru gave her acknowledgement. Chu Chuyan's image rippled a few times, and the surface of the mirror reverted to its original appearance.

Zu An was startled. "I still had things to say to Chuyan! Why did you cut the connection?"

Qin Wanru was clearly annoyed. "Each use of this mirror consumes a large amount of ki stones. We need to wait a full month before it can be used again, and the duration of each use is limited. We only use this for the most urgent matters. How can I let you use it for idle chatter?"

Zu An was full of disappointment. "Tsk. I've overestimated you guys. This world still lags far behind."

His tone irked her further. "I won't blame you for saying that, since it's the first time you've seen something as precious as this. Perhaps you'll understand how precious it is in the future. This might be the only one in all of Brightmoon City! It was something that the ancestors of the Chu clan obtained through a fortuitous opportunity."

"Only you guys would treat that dumb toy like a treasure." Zu An curled his lips in a sneer. "In my hometown, everyone had one, and we could all chat for as long as we wanted."

"Hah! You really know nothing."

Zu An pressed his lips together.

Sigh, life is lonely and desolate, like a barren field of snow. No one ever believes me.

Qin Wanru instructed him to keep the salt permits a secret for now. She had yet to come up with a way to use them to their greatest effect.

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Zu An was overjoyed and at peace, now that such a huge matter had been settled. His mind and spirit were completely relaxed.

He headed to the academy as usual. He teased Huanzhao a little, and played around with the female teachers. His days were peaceful and comfortable.

There was only one regret. He'd gone to the Immortal Abode to thank Qiu Honglei, but when he got there, the staff informed him that she had already left.

As for where she had gone, no one knew.

He hadn't expected that night to be their final meeting. He didn't know if they would ever meet again. He thought about the time they spent together, and he couldn't help his feelings of disappointment and frustration.

However, soon afterwards, Zu An found out the reason why she had left. One day, Qin Wanru sought out Zu An privately. She had a grave expression on her face. "Those black-clad men were both mysterious and ruthless. They didn't even hold back when dealing with Sang Qian," she said.

"He's dead?" Zu An was shocked by her statement.

"They didn't go that far," Qin Wanru said, "but his injuries are extremely grave. Sang Hong even invited Ji Dengtu to examine his injuries. The divine physician could only keep him alive for now. Whether or not he will remain in critical condition or recover, it's an even chance either way."

"I'm sure he'll be fine, especially since Divine Physician Ji visited him personally." Zu An was still in a daze. What in the world was Qiu Honglei's organization up to? How could they even dare to do such a thing?

Did they take their anger out on Sang Qian because they lost the salt permits?

"There's no guarantee. The Sang clan plans to bring forward his marriage to Zheng Dan, to ward away bad luck. This means that they aren't optimistic about his situation at all," Qin Wanru said.

Zu An suddenly shot up. "What?!"

Chapter 363: A Gift

"Why are you getting all worked up over someone else's marriage?" Qin Wanru said in annoyance. She was clearly taken aback by his reaction.

Zu An also realized that his actions seemed very out of place. He smiled in embarrassment and said, "I just didn't expect the glorious Sang clan to be so superstitious."

"Chasing away bad luck with a marriage is indeed a little detached from reality, but it's always better to have a good omen. Either way, they're already engaged. It's all the same if they get married earlier or later," Qin Wanru said.

"How could this be happening?" Zu An grew nervous. Zheng Dan had told him before that the engagement period would last about a year. He should have still had a year to grow stronger! By then, he would have already gained the confidence to snatch her back.

But if they got married now... he understood his own limits. There was no way he could go against the Sang clan with his current strength.

Qin Wanru gave him a strange look. His actions were totally unexpected. She couldn't understand why he was so concerned with this matter at all. After all, there was no way she could imagine what his relationship with Zheng Dan was like, no matter how rich her imagination was.

"Let's leave aside this matter for now. There's something else more worrying." Qin Wanru's anxiety was clearly visible. "That night, Sang Qian was attacked by those black-clad men because of the salt permits he was escorting. Now, the salt permits are back in our hands. Won't Sang Hong come to the mistaken conclusion that we were the ones who attacked his son? When that happens, our clans would surely end up at each other's throats."

Zu An now understood why there had been no news of Chu Zhongtian's release, even after so many days. This was where the issue lay. "Haven't we figured out who those black-clad men were yet? Didn't we investigate these black marketeers?"

"Of course we did!" Qin Wanru exclaimed. "But none of the guests at the black market auction stopped Sang Qian from bringing the goods away. They didn't resist at all. They also declared that they knew absolutely nothing about the matter. Even though Sang Hong captured some individuals, none of them knew anything important. Clearly, these black market dealers were well prepared."

Zu An was reminded of Qiu Honglei's disappearance as well. Clearly, the most important figures had all withdrawn into the shadows. There was no way Sang Hong would be able to find anything.

"What does Madam plan to do now?" Zu An asked.

Qin Wanru replied, "We were slightly hesitant at first, but we've already notified Sang Hong about the salt permits through our channels. This erases Zhongtian's crimes, and he should be allowed to walk free. As for Sang Hong's suspicions, I don't think he will come to the conclusion that our Chu clan is somehow connected to the black market."

"I doubt things will go that smoothly..." Zu An still had his concerns. However, he understood that Qin Wanru wanted to save Chu Zhongtian as soon as possible. She couldn't bear to see him suffer imprisonment any longer.

Having already decided on the course of action, Qin Wanru gathered her trusted aides to discuss the exact details of Chu Zhongtian's release.

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Zu An was worried about Zheng Dan, but it would be inappropriate for him to head over to the Zheng clan just to meet her. His only option was to go to the academy, and pray that she was also there.

When he reached the academy, there was a crowd gathered around Zheng Dan. From the looks of it, they were most likely congratulating her.

The two maids behind her already bore an armload of gifts each.

"Thank you fellow students. I didn't expect to receive so many gifts." Zheng Dan had a beautiful smile on her face, without the slightest touch of gloom.

Zu An couldn't help but call out to her. "Student Zheng."

Zheng Dan turned around to look at him. She smiled and said, "Student Zu, this is most likely going to be the last day I will be attending the academy before my marriage. I hope you do not mind if I do not address you as a teacher."

Zu An couldn't hold himself back. "You seem pretty happy."

"I'm about to get married. Why wouldn't I be happy?" Zheng Dan said with a strange expression.

Zu An was speechless for a moment.

However, he couldn't break character, not with so many people watching. "Then I'll offer my congratulations to miss Zheng."

Zheng Dan presented her fine white palm to him. "I don't sense any sincerity from you. Have you prepared a gift?"

Zu An was stunned for a moment.

"I was in too much of a hurry to get here, so I didn't have time to prepare anything."

Zheng Dan smiled. "That's okay. I was the one who was being rude."

Everyone praised her for her etiquette and grace. At the same time, they looked down on Zu An's stinginess.

Zu An grew sulky. However, he couldn't really say anything in front of all of these people, so he could only pretend to leave.

Zheng Dan continued to bid her farewells to the other students, and then she walked out of the academy with a large pile of gifts.

She told the two maids to help her sort out the gifts near the entrance. "There's something else that I've forgotten to deal with. Wait for me outside."

"Understood, miss Zheng." The two maids acknowledged respectfully. They left quickly, carrying the gifts with them.

Zheng Dan turned around and walked towards a side path, well shaded by trees. Following the path, she soon arrived at a remote place.

"Hm? How did you know that I was waiting for you here?" Zu An said as he appeared from behind a tree.

Zheng Dan snorted. "For better or for worse, I still have five ranks of cultivation! Besides, weren't you constantly dropping hints earlier?"

"I thought that you might not meet with me," Zu An couldn't help but say.

"There were so many people out there. What could I do?" Zheng Dan sighed.

"Are you really happy about your marriage?" Zu An asked her.

"What, are you jealous?" Zheng Dan grinned.

Zu An felt a flame ignite within him. He pulled her over and pressed his knee against her.

"Ah..." A sweet sound escaped her throat. Her eyes immediately became watery. "Not here, it will be trouble if we're seen! Let's go to your staff residence..."

Zu An's heart pounded like a drum. This girl really was a natural temptress!

However, he still remembered his reason for meeting her. He walked by her side, his expression growing serious. "How are Sang Qian's injuries? Are they really so bad that he needs this marriage to drive off bad luck?"

Worry creased Zheng Dan's brow. "It doesn't look good. I might become a widow soon after marriage."

"Doesn't this mean that the Sang clan has decided to throw you under the carriage as well?" Zu An grew anxious. "Is the Zheng clan only going to watch from the sidelines?"

"The Zheng clan?" Zheng Dan's laugh was full of self-pity. "I'm nothing more than a chess piece used to join the two clans through marriage. They only need me to tie them to the Sang clan. They couldn't care less if my husband was tall or short, fat or skinny, alive or dead. They are far more afraid of Sang Qian dying before he has ratified our marriage."

"Those students who gave me gifts spoke pleasant words, but they could very well have been laughing and mocking me inside."

Her sorrowful expression was like a dagger through his heart. "What if you just don't marry him?" he blurted out. "What if I claimed you instead?"

Zheng Dan looked at him in shock. Her expression grew more tender. "What is this? Are you going to bring emotions into our relationship?"

Zu An frowned. "There's no need for you to deceive yourself like that. I refuse to believe that you don't feel anything."

Zheng Dan blushed. "Whatever the case, knowing that your heart feels this way makes all that I've given to you during this period worth it... Nonetheless, I was raised in the Zheng clan. I've enjoyed a comfortable life, and have been provided with abundant cultivation resources. Now that it's my turn to give something back to them, I cannot possibly run away."

Zu An wanted to say something, but he stopped himself. They'd already talked about this many times, so he knew that it was meaningless to try to change her mind.

Zheng Dan grabbed his hand and flashed him a big smile. "I'm about to get married. Can you give me a present to serve as a memento?"

Zu An's expression grew melancholy. "Like hell I'd be willing to give you something! Not when you're getting married to another man."

"I'm sure this is a present you'll definitely be willing to give me." Zheng Dan noticed that the two of them were already approaching the staff residences. She got up on her toes and whispered in his ear, "Give me a child."

Zu An's heart pounded. How could he possibly hold back any longer? He dragged her into his room.

Perhaps because they believed this would be the last time, or that there was no future for them, the two of them immersed themselves even more deeply. In the privacy of the room, they twined around each other ever more tightly.

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Meanwhile, in the Sang clan estate, Sang Hong was currently entertaining a guest dressed all in green. That man clasped his fist respectfully and asked, "How is the young master doing?"

"Whether or not he'll be able to make it through this difficulty depends solely on him." Sang Hong seemed to have aged considerably during this period.

The green-clothed man said, "The heavens help the worthy. The young master will surely make it through safely."

Clearly, Sang Hong was already numb to these words. He waved his hand impatiently. "I called you over this time to discuss the Chu clan. Qin Wanru managed to get her hands on a bunch of official salt permits somehow. I could only detain Chu Zhongtian temporarily, but I won't be able to hold him here for much longer. That is why you have to seize control of the Chu clan before that happens."

The green-clothed man's face darkened. "That won't be easy."

"That's something for you to worry about," Sang Hong sneered. "I refuse to believe that you have nothing up your sleeves after scheming for so many years. However, do not worry. I'll offer you any help you need. This is truly the final chance. If we miss this one, we won't have another."

A few different expressions crossed the green-clothed man's face. Finally, he steeled himself and said resolutely, "Fine!"

Chapter 364: Something Bad Has Happened

"Then again..." The green-clothed man grew hesitant. "Even if I can find a way to bring the Chu clan under my control, there's no way I can deal with Chu Zhongtian once he returns."

Chu Zhongtian was a powerful eighth-ranked expert! Schemes and trickery were useless in the face of absolute strength.

"You don't need to worry about that," Sang Hong said seriously. "As long as you can seize full control over the Chu clan, there wouldn't be a need to return Chu Zhongtian."

The green-clad man was shocked. "Esteemed governor actually plans to..."

Sang Hong stopped him from saying any more. "I've already presented you with this chance. Whether or not you can seize it will be up to you."

A flicker of joy flashed across the eyes of the green-clothed man. "Fine, let's do it!"

Sang Hong walked over to the window and looked in the direction of the Chu Estate. "Are you certain that the Chu clan has nothing to do with the black market?" he asked in a serious tone.

The green clothed man shook his head. "Even after so many years, I've never heard of any connection between the two. You know full well that Chu Zhongtian is a noble and virtuous person. He wouldn't go near these dishonest businesses. Of course, there's a chance that all of this is fake and that he's had some private dealings with them. However, the odds of that are pretty low."

"Then how did Qin Wanru get her hands on those salt permits?" A vicious look flashed across Sang Hong's eyes. The thought made him even more furious. The salt permits she'd obtained were the same salt permits that those black-clad individuals had wrestled out of his son's hands. It was difficult for him to believe that the two groups had absolutely no relationship with each other.

Therefore, he had to deal with the Chu clan, whether publicly or privately. His only son lay in critical condition, which served only to fuel his anger further. Now was the time to employ his most extreme methods.

"I... do not know either." The green-clothed man scratched his head. "The rest of the Chu clan members are also baffled over this matter. When they asked Qin Wanru about it, she insisted that this important matter be kept private."

"Heh, she'll croak sooner or later." Sang Hong snorted coldly. "I'll lend you a helping hand today. After this, you should..."

The green clothed man moved closer. He nodded repeatedly when he heard what Sang Hong said. Joy filled his eyes. "Esteemed governor truly has great vision!"

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Meanwhile, back in his staff residence, Zu An was busy with Zheng Dan. Suddenly, an urgent knocking came from the entrance, followed by Chu Huanzhao's voice. "Huh? Why isn't the key working? Brother-in-law, brother-in-law, open the door for me already!"

The sudden voice scared Zheng Dan out of her wits. She latched tightly onto Zu An, her body shaking uncontrollably.

The sudden stimulation was just too much for Zu An...

"Brother-in-law, brother-in-law, what the heck are you doing? Come out here at once! Something bad has happened!" The pounding grew more frantic. Chu Huanzhao's voice was full of panic.

A while later, Zu An cracked open the door halfway, standing in front of the entrance to block it. "What's wrong? What are you hollering for?" he said.

"Why can't I open the door with my key anymore?" Chu Huanzhao pouted in anger.

You have successfully trolled Chu Huanzhao for 233 Rage points!

Zu An laughed awkwardly. "Something happened to the defensive formations around this residence a while back. The academy changed the locks for me."

"Really? Why is your face so red? Is that sweat I see on your forehead?" Chu Huanzhao stood on her tiptoes and peered inside skeptically. "Are you doing something bad inside?"

Zu An's heart pounded in nervousness, but there wasn't a hint of it visible on his face. "I was just working out. Wow, I worked up quite a bit of a sweat!" Zheng Dan, who was hiding behind the door, snorted. What do you mean, 'working out'? You were clearly working away at my body just now...

Zu An was afraid that Chu Huanzhao wouldn't drop the issue, so he asked a question of his own instead. "Huanzhao, why did you come looking for me in such a panic? You were saying that something bad happened?"

Chu Huanzhao finally remembered that she had something important to tell Zu An. "Yes! Something bad has happened at home. Follow me home."

She grabbed his hand and began to run.

"Wait, tell me what happened first!" Zu An said as he tossed Zheng Dan the keys. Clearly, he was telling her to get some proper rest.

Zheng Dan's face went red. I still have maids waiting for me by the gate. How can I possibly stay here?

She quickly straightened out her clothes. She had only taken a single step when her eyebrows suddenly came together in a frown. She clasped her legs together and leaned against the door. It took her a long while to catch her breath again.

Why does he always leave me like this...

...

Zu An listened to Chu Huanzhao's explanation along the way.

A large group of soldiers had marched over to search the Chu Estate. The people in the estate had quickly sent men to the academy to contact the second miss and young master.

They located the second miss easily, but they couldn't find the young master at all.

Chu Huanzhao suspected that he might have been in his dorm, so she volunteered to go look for him. As a result, she almost discovered his affair with Zheng Dan.

Zu An counted his blessings. He was so glad that he'd made the smart decision to change the locks after learning from his previous lesson.

"Why would anyone dare to search the estate of a respected duke?" Zu An was shocked. Even though Chu Zhongtian had been detained over the issue of the salt permits, that hardly explained why soldiers would be allowed to search the estate as well.

"I heard that Sang Hong led the men over personally," Chu Huanzhao said, her voice clouded with worry.

"Sang Hong?" Zu An was stunned. Were they going to be openly hostile from now on? "What pretext did they use?"

"I think they said that they were hunting down a fugitive," replied Chu Huanzhao.

"A fugitive?" Zu An was stunned.

By this time, they had already arrived at the gates to the academy. Overhearing his questions, a Chu clan guard answered him, "Sang Hong came carrying an imperial order, and he was accompanied by military officials of the River Patrol Army. Their soldiers were attacked in the middle of the street, and even Commander Sang almost lost his life. This is definitely a huge case, and every lead needs to be

investigated. The governor has used this as a reason to search every clan. Our Chu clan was only one of them.”

Another guard agreed with his explanation. “I heard that the City Lord took the initiative, and let the governor examine his own estate first. Besides him, the Zheng clan and Yuan clan have also cooperated with their inspection.”

Zu An snorted. “Sang Hong might look like he’s treating everyone equally on the surface, but he’s actually targeting the Chu clan specifically.”

The Zheng clan and Yuan clan were on good terms with the Sang clan to begin with. There was no doubt that they would cooperate with his request.

As for the Xie clan, Xie Yi was a cunning man. He probably wanted to use Sang Hong to drive the Chu clan further into a corner. That way, they would have no choice but to stand with King Qi.

When their group returned to the Chu clan, they discovered that Sang Hong had already begun a search of the Chu Estate. When Zu An saw how they had overturned and made a mess of everything in their search, he secretly thanked the heavens. It was a blessing that he’d already stored most of his stuff into the Brilliant Glass Bead. It would have been hard to explain himself if they had been discovered.

“Mom!” Chu Huanzhao caught sight of Qin Wanru, and ran into her embrace.

“Good girl, Huanzhao...” Qin Wanru gently patted her daughter’s back. Then, she gave Sang Hong a cold look. “Lord Sang, have you completed your search?”

“The Chu Estate is comparatively large, so it will take a little longer. I hope Madam doesn’t mind,” Sang Hong said with an apologetic expression.

Qin Wanru’s face grew colder. “Lord Sang, I hope you’re not bullying this woman while her husband isn’t home.”

“How can Madam say such a thing? We are tracking down a great criminal, so we have to search every clan. Your clan isn’t the only one,” Sang Hong replied in a natural manner.

However, the more he behaved this way, the more angry Qin Wanru became. “Fine! I’ll remember this transgression.”

Sang Hong smiled, but offered no further defense. To him, he was clearly severing any relationship to the Chu clan. There was no need for such superficial padding anymore.

Just then, a clamor came from the rear courtyard. “What happened? Did you guys find something?” Sang Hong asked in a serious tone.

A subordinate came to offer a report. “Sir! We’ve searched all of the other areas, but we aren’t being allowed to search three areas.”

The guards of the Chu clan spoke up immediately. “These are the rooms of Master and Madam, and the chambers of the First and Second Miss. How can we allow these men to enter?”

Qin Wanru was furious. “Lord Sang, aren’t you going a little too far?”

Sang Hong smiled. "This is merely a formality, and it is for your own safety as well. If a criminal just happens to be hiding among you, wouldn't that bring harm to you all? Besides, we've already conducted a thorough examination of the other clan estates. If we don't conduct a full investigation, wouldn't I be bending the law for you?"

Qin Wanru was both furious and anxious. However, if this man persisted with using his official duty as an excuse, there wasn't much else she could say in rebuttal.

Zu An stepped forward and asked, "Sir Sang, if I may ask, are you looking for a person, or an object?"

Sang Hong frowned. "A person, of course."

"In that case... I saw many rooms which have been completely trashed in your search. Nothing has been spared, not even the places where it's obvious no one can hide in." Zu An chuckled and said, "Those who don't know better might think that Lord Sang is using this search for criminals as an excuse to look for something else. For example... an account book?"

Sang Hong's expression twitched slightly. Everyone in the Chu Estate looked at him with even more suspicion.

Sensing the tension mounting, Sang Hong laughed and said, "I didn't expect to cause such a misunderstanding today. Forget it, then. I reckon the Chu Estate's security has always been tight, so these criminals wouldn't have been able to enter anyway. There's no need to search the remaining places. Call our men back."

He could only carry out a search in the duke's estate because he had a righteous reason to do so. The smallest flaw in this reasoning would give the Chu clan an excuse to retaliate. He certainly didn't want to take that risk. Either way, he had more or less achieved his objective for the day. The account book could only be hidden in those three places.

He would leave the rest of it up to that individual.

Chapter 365: Exposed

Qin Wanru was furious. These two-faced officials really were so shameless that they could twist words in any way to benefit themselves.

His reason for searching their estate had sounded so morally upright, and he was now using a different yet equally lofty reason to justify stopping the search. Utterly disgusting!

Even though she always complained that Chu Zhongtian was too square and lacked the slyness of his more worldly counterparts, she would be the first one to implode if he transformed into one of these wily old foxes himself.

However, given how matters stood right now, she could only endure this current situation. "You have my thanks, Lord Sang," she said coldly.

Sang Hong was completely unfazed by the sarcasm evident in her voice. Instead, he looked at Zu An and said, "Madam has found a good son-in-law."

Zu An was stunned. He didn't know why in the world this man would suddenly praise him, but there was no way his intentions were good. As such, he replied, "Lord Sang has also found a good daughter-in-law."

Sang Hong was flabbergasted. He felt rage boiling within him. The other party was clearly mocking his son for still wishing to get married despite being at death's door!

You have successfully trolled Sang Hong for 399 Rage points!

"Youngsters shouldn't be too arrogant," Sang Hong shot back. He stormed off in a huff. This kid won't be able to act smug for much longer anyway. I'll slowly settle things with him in the future!

Zu An noticed the Rage points coming in. I was congratulating him on finding a good daughter-in-law, and he still got angry with me! What a petty man.

To be honest though, Zheng Dan really is a fine woman. I've even given her a try myself. I'm not some blind critic—every aspect of her really is spectacular.

Chu Huanzhao ran over and grabbed Zu An's arm as Sang Hong and his men took their leave. "You were so cool today, brother-in-law! You even chased away the governor!"

Qin Wanru also sighed in gratitude. It really was nice to have a man around the house. Just as she was about to praise Zu An, she noticed the intimate way in which her second daughter had latched onto him, and her brow furrowed instinctively. However, this fellow had done them a great favor today, so she couldn't bring herself to scold him. Her only option was to pretend that she hadn't seen anything.

Of course, others saw this scene quite differently. Cheng Shouping gave Jiao Shanhe and the others a smug look. I told you so!

Jiao Shanhe and the others weren't too depressed, as they had pretty much resigned themselves to their fate. Instead, they only felt sincere happiness for their young master.

Zu An smiled at this time. "How could someone like me possibly scare off the governor? Surely they only left out of fear of the Chu clan and Madam. I'm just a lowly fox, relying on the power of these tigers behind me to chase him away."

"Look at how humble you are all of a sudden! I can't get used to this side of you at all!" Qin Wanru couldn't help but exclaim.

"When have I ever not been humble? I'm just always misunderstood by everyone else," Zu An said with a straight face.

"Enough, enough. I already know what kind of person you are," Qin Wanru said snidely. "By the way, were you implying that I'm a tigress?"

Zu An stared blankly. He really hadn't intended that at all! However, he didn't see any Rage points from her, which implied that she wasn't actually angry. That emboldened him to say, "How can that be? I've never seen such a pretty tigress before."

Qin Wanru's face went red. She gave him an annoyed look. "Impudent!" With that, she turned around and left.

The guards were all stupefied. Clearly, they had still underestimated the young master! He even dared to tease their Madam!

Even more shocking, Madam—who was usually so fierce and strict—hadn't gotten mad at him!

It seems like the young master has already fully established himself in the Chu clan.

After the events of the day, the Chu clan quickly returned to a more peaceful state. The estate's servants went about tidying up all the areas that had been messed up during the search. Soon, night fell.

Qin Wanru convened a meeting with butler Hong Zhong and the other trusted Chu clan aides to deal with all the important matters that had piled up, and also to discuss their plans going forward. She even called Zu An to attend the meeting as well.

After having him around for a while, she discovered that Zu An wasn't as useless as she had first thought him to be. On the contrary, he was quite the talent.

She decided to use this opportunity to take him under her wing. This way, he could shoulder some of Chuyan's burdens, and help the Chu clan as well.

Unfortunately, when they launched into a discussion of the Chu clan's complicated business matters, he began to yawn at once. Soon afterwards, he fell asleep on the table.

Qin Wanru frowned. She was disappointed, but she couldn't scold him in front of everyone. She had no choice but to let him be.

While they were inside the meeting hall, a man dressed in black sneaked into Qin Wanru and Chu Zhongtian's room.

He seemed extremely familiar with how the security had been laid out, and navigated through it with ease.

Once he had broken in, he rummaged through all the possible locations where something could be kept.

Sang Hong's men had already searched most of the estate during the day. The only places he hadn't been able to search were this room and the rooms of the two daughters.

Everyone knew what kind of personality Chu Huanzhao had. There was no way the account book would be hidden in her room.

The Unvoiced Residence was a possibility, but Chu Chuyan still hadn't returned. With the residence vacant, the Chu clan probably wouldn't keep something so important there.

That left the clan master's residence. This was the most logical deduction!

He had already thought about the possible places within the residence that this account book could be stored. However, his long and arduous search remained unsuccessful.

He began to panic. This account book was too important! Sang Hong's support hinged on this, and it was also the foundation that would enable him to control the Chu clan in the future. Without this account book, things would become much, much more difficult.

He went through the rooms again, looking through every single nook and cranny. However, he still turned up empty-handed.

Why, why?!

He roared internally. Had he schemed for so many years, just to be defeated like this?

However, he couldn't change reality no matter how he vented his frustrations.

It was time to leave!

He realized that time was almost up. However, leaving now without finding what he'd come for was just too disappointing!

He turned around and looked at the bed. Suddenly, a thought flashed into his mind. He hopped over to the bed and lay down.

Qin Wanru probably sleeps here just like this.

That Chu Zhongtian sure is a lucky bastard. He gets to sleep with such a ravishing woman every night! If I were him, I wouldn't even want to get out of bed in the morning!

He sniffed the sheets. Qin Wanru's unique scent lingered on them. He was completely entranced.

He greedily took in the smell of the bedcovers. It was as if the goddess of his dreams was right on top of him.

He would never again have a chance to smell her scent from so up close. He hugged her pillow to his face as though his life depended on it.

As he sniffed the pillow, something occurred to him. He quickly got up and fumbled about the pillow. Eventually, he found a hidden compartment, and drew out a small booklet. When he saw the words 'account book', he flipped through it rapidly and saw the lines of records inside. Wasn't this precisely what he'd been looking for?!

"Ha ha ha! I've finally found it! My time has come at last!" The man laughed crazily. He felt as if even the heavens were on his side.

"Name yourself!" A shout suddenly interrupted him.

His heart gave a sudden start. He raised his head and saw Qin Wanru staring at him from close by.

Damn it! I wasted too much time lying on the bed!

Qin Wanru glimpsed what was in his hand. Her complexion paled. "Thief! How dare you!"

There was no time to say anything else. She rushed towards the man.

The black-clothed man moved as well. He took a frantic leap towards the window.

However, he was just a step too late. He was blocked by Qin Wanru just as he reached the window.

Qin Wanru was still at the sixth rank, after all. With the account book in jeopardy, there was no way she would show the slightest hesitation.

In a flash, the two of them exchanged a dozen blows.

With one hand holding the account book, the black-clothed individual was at a clear disadvantage. Eventually, a blow slipped through his defenses. Qin Wanru tore off his mask.

She was stunned when she saw his face. “You?”

Chapter 366: Multiple Choice Question

Qin Wanru was astounded. She had never expected it to be this person.

The other party seized this chance to whip out a bamboo pipe. He blew out a blast of pink mist into her face.

Even though Qin Wanru instantly held her breath, it was still too late. She smelled a sweet scent, and instantly became dizzy. She backed away from him in a few quick steps. “What sort of drug did you use?!”

That person wasn’t in a hurry to leave either. Instead, he slowly walked over to her from the window, his face lit by the moonlight and the soft glow of the candles.

The two dark circles ringing his eyes were especially clear. He was the head of the Chu clan’s second branch, Chu Tiesheng!

“The name of the drug is Bull’s Cream. It gets its name from the fact that only the milk of a bull can neutralize its effects.” Chu Tiesheng’s breathing grew ragged. He hadn’t expected to reveal all of his cards at once, and he couldn’t contain his anxiety as well.

“What rubbish is that? How can you obtain milk from a bull?!” Qin Wanru deliberately raised her voice. She began to wonder why no guards had appeared, despite all the noise.

Chu Tiesheng laughed. “Indeed, bulls cannot be milked. As such, there is no antidote for this drug. Only the joining of a man and woman can eliminate its effects.”

“An aphrodisiac!” Qin Wanru’s face immediately paled. “Chu Tiesheng, I never knew you harbored such shameless thoughts towards me!”

“Shameless?” Chu Tiesheng’s expression became cold. “How can this be shameless? A beautiful woman belongs to a noble man, after all. I refuse to believe that you’ve never sensed my intentions after all these years!”

Qin Wanru roared in fury. “Absolutely disgraceful! I am your sister-in-law! It’s normal for feelings to develop between men and women, but you should know when to show restraint!”

“Sister-in-law?” Chu Tiesheng sneered. “There’s a common saying—nothing is tastier than dumplings, and nothing is more fun than a sister-in-law.”

Qin Wanru stared at him in horror.

"Have you gone mad? The Chu clan is currently facing an unprecedented crisis. We cannot afford an internal conflict right now! I can pretend that nothing happened if you apologize and admit your wrongdoing immediately!" Qin Wanru was so angry that her entire body was shaking. However, her rational mind told her that it would be unwise for her to make a move right then.

Chu Tiesheng laughed. "Isn't the Chu clan in its current predicament precisely because of Chu Zhongtian's stubbornness? If the Chu clan continues under his leadership, it'll only be a matter of time before the Chu clan meets its end! Everything I am doing is for the sake of rescuing the Chu clan!"

Qin Wanru's heart sank. It dawned on her that things were definitely not as simple as she thought. "Are you planning to rebel?"

"The seat of clan master of the Chu clan should obviously belong to the most competent person. Since Chu Zhongtian is leading the clan towards a collapse, why shouldn't I take his place?" Chu Tiesheng was in no rush. The longer he stalled, the more the poison would spread through her body.

Qin Wanru was at the sixth rank, after all. If they fought on even terms, he might not be able to win.

"Just how many people are in on this? Did you incite the third branch to rebel as well?" Qin Wanru demanded. She wanted to find out just how bad this rebellion was right now. She wanted to know if this was a rebellion by a single party, or if the second and third branches were conspiring together.

Chu Tiesheng snickered. "At least you have some self-awareness. You know that you've let down the other branches, which is why you have such a guilty conscience."

Qin Wanru felt her body heating up. She couldn't help but loosen her collar. She knew that remaining here wasn't a sensible choice, but she needed to know more. "Hmph! The two of you have always harbored uncontrollable ambitions. Anyone could see that!"

"How can a human being not have ambition?" Chu Tiesheng walked towards her slowly, one step at a time. "Wanru, could it be that you still want to save Chu Zhongtian? There is no harm in telling you this. He won't be coming back."

Qin Wanru was stunned. She wasn't stupid—she picked up on his meaning immediately. "You colluded with Sang Hong?"

Chu Tiesheng brought his palms together. "Lord Sang is working for the emperor. I am merely going along with the flow by cooperating with him. How can this be called collusion?"

"Not even the slickest tongue can hide your despicable nature." Qin Wanru rubbed her forehead. Her temperature was climbing, and she was starting to feel dizzy. She didn't know how much longer she could hold out for.

"The winner is the one who is right. I won't argue pointlessly with you anymore." Chu Tiesheng fished out a bottle from an inner pocket. His expression grew more and more malicious. "Sister-in-law, do you know how much I've thought about you, every day and night? Yet, I could never obtain you. I had no choice but to seek out other methods.

"This is something I found a while back. It's called 'Worries-Be-Gone'. Take this, and you'll forget everything that has happened within several hours. When I first got this, I planned to find a chance to

overpower you, knowing that everything would be back to normal the day after. You wouldn't remember a thing... The next time I wanted you, I'd make you use it again. This way, you'll be all mine, and we'd even be able to keep it quiet."

Qin Wanru's countenance changed drastically when she heard his deranged murmurings. How could such a vile drug exist in this world? There was no way she would be able to die in peace if she was given such a drug.

"In the end, I couldn't bring myself to do it. It wouldn't have been any fun if I was the only one who remembered what happened. I didn't want you to continue being so proud and arrogant, looking at me with those eyes filled with scorn. I want you to remember every single detail about what happens between us!" Chu Tiesheng's eyes grew slightly bloodshot. His breathing hastened. "That's why I continued searching, and I eventually found this 'Bull's Cream'. This is a miraculous drug, on par with the 'Eighteen Spring Winds'! It can turn even a virgin into an absolute slut, and only the milk of a bull can neutralize its effects. But where would you get milk from a bull? You know what other white substance is needed."

"Shameless!" Qin Wanru didn't dare remain any longer. His words were becoming more and more despicable, and her condition was deteriorating. She yelled out a curse and charged towards the exit. However, Chu Tiesheng was already prepared for this. He moved to block her path.

Qin Wanru seemed to have become weaker after being exposed to the drug. Her speed had decreased dramatically, and she couldn't get past him at all.

Her only option was to retreat further into the room. She was worried that he would force her to the ground.

"You were the one who was trying to prevent my escape just now. Who would've thought that the tides would turn so quickly?" Chu Tiesheng had a smug smile on his face. "What's the rush? I still have so many good things to show you."

He began to remove his clothes.

Qin Wanru was appalled. What disgusting thing was he taking out this time?

She felt a strong urge to turn her face away and shield her eyes. However, she was also worried that, if she did so, he would seize the chance to restrain her. She was at a loss as to what to do.

Chu Tiesheng finally removed an item from inside his pants. It was black and round. "This is a recording stone that I obtained with great difficulty. It will be able to record everything that happens here. I can replay the recording at any time in the future.

"Say, if Chu Zhongtian saw me toying with his wife in his own room, in his own bed, do you think he might drop dead from anger right then?"

"You're disgusting!" Qin Wanru's entire body was trembling. Rage was building up inside her, and she was about to explode.

She lost her patience. She charged at him, hoping to kill the disgusting brute in front of her before the drug could spread through her body fully.

Chu Tiesheng was hoping that her anger would overcome her. It merely served to speed up the effects of the drug. He easily dodged her attacks. "Sister-in-law, don't be in such a rush! There are actually two paths you can choose from. The first is exactly what I described. If you oppose me, I'll use force to acquire you. Then, I'll show Chu Zhongtian everything.

"The second path is this: serve me and accompany me, and I won't tell anyone what happened. I will even agree to help you safeguard Chu Zhongtian's life. You can continue to be a duchess, but only on the condition that you accompany me wherever I go. This is quite a favorable deal for you, don't you think?

"You don't have to be in such a hurry to reject me either. Outsiders might not know about the issues within the Chu clan, but how could I not know? The two of you have always desperately wanted a son, and yet you've only managed to give birth to daughters after all these years. In the last ten years, the two of you haven't even been able to give birth to another daughter. I've struggled so hard to understand why this would be. A beautiful wife like you shouldn't be cast aside until you've had a whole litter of children!

"After many years of observation, I now know that Chu Zhongtian's body has long since lost its virility. You're in the prime of your life, yet you've been neglected for so many years. Surely you have your own needs and desires as well?"

Chapter 367: An Unforeseen Event

Qin Wanru was lost in a daze. Chu Tiesheng's words were like knives that cut deeply into her heart again and again.

When she was younger, she had fallen in love with Chu Zhongtian the first time she laid eyes on him. The two of them developed feelings for each other, and their wedding was one filled with happiness and bliss. This continued until he suffered a serious injury more than ten years ago...

She loved her husband deeply. Compared to her love for him, such an issue wasn't a big deal at all.

It had still been bearable at first. However, she was a woman, and a mature woman at that.

From time to time, she would lie awake in the dead of night. However, she was afraid of expressing herself, as she did not want to hurt her husband's feelings.

Such extreme and opposing feelings caused her temper to grow much hotter over the years. There were many instances in which she knew she could not act out, yet sometimes, she just couldn't control her emotions.

If there really was a chance that she could somehow, secretly... And if it was never found out, perhaps it wouldn't be completely unacceptable...

Qin Wanru was horrified as soon as this thought appeared in her head, and she strangled it immediately. She knew that the drug in her body had begun to take serious effect, and that it was even starting to affect her thoughts and judgment.

However, she knew that there was no way she could overpower Chu Tiesheng in her current state. She could only pretend to play along.

She brushed the strands of hair away from her cheeks and tucked them behind her ear. This simple movement was enough to make Chu Tiesheng's eyes widen, his mouth feel dry, and his heartbeat accelerate. If he hadn't been afraid that she would retaliate, he might have already pounced on her.

The desire in his eyes filled Qin Wanru with disgust. However, she maintained her composure and said, "How can I be sure that you won't tell anyone in the future?"

"What?" Chu Tiesheng was stunned, momentarily unable to react. He thought that he'd somehow heard her wrongly.

Qin Wanru endured the terrible feeling surging within her. She deliberately made her tone sweeter as she said, "I'm asking you this: if I do obey you, how would I know that you won't just go against our agreement and secretly let others know? Wouldn't that completely destroy me?"

"So that was what you were worried about." Chu Tiesheng finally understood. The goddess that he'd been yearning for day and night was finally loosening up. Ecstasy surged within him. "Don't worry! I will never tell anyone about this!"

Qin Wanru scoffed. "The mouths of men are the most unreliable. Why would I trust your empty promises? That's why... that's why you cannot use the recording stone to record... record our deeds."

Chu Tiesheng's little brother saluted immediately when he heard this. Her tone clearly implied that she was agreeing to his request!

He quickly acceded to this. "Sure, sure, sure! I won't use the recording stone!"

If Qin Wanru really agreed to be by his side, then recording the deed wouldn't matter anymore.

The whole point of the recording stone was to be able to relive the experience of this one night, after all.

However, if Qin Wanru agreed to his conditions, he could just seek her out whenever he wanted her in the future.

Besides, once they'd done the deed a few times and became completely familiar with each other, she might not even refuse his advances anymore. After all, she had much to worry about right now.

"Then... you have to be a man of your word." Qin Wanru said sweetly.

"Of course! Let the heavens strike me down with lightning if I go back on my word!" Chu Tiesheng said. "Sister-in-law, the only thing I've ever wanted is you... Since you've already agreed to my request, why would I still take such risks? Chu Zhongtian is practically finished, so I don't mind taking you as my nominal wife. This will surely make things even more exciting for the two of us in the future."

He couldn't hold himself back anymore. He threw himself at her. "Sister-in-law, you don't know how many years I yearned for this day..."

A small part of him still suspected her, since Qin Wanru seemed to be acting far too differently all of a sudden. However, lust had already overtaken him. Besides, she had already been afflicted with the 'Bull's Cream'. He let go of his lingering doubts and decided to believe her.

Seeing her lovely face and thinking about how this stunning, well-endowed body would soon be in his embrace made Chu Tiesheng so excited, he felt like he was about to explode. Clearly, he'd made the right choice this time.

While Qin Wanru may have looked coy on the outside, she was still ice-cold inside.

Just as Chu Tiesheng was about to embrace her, she sent her palm out, striking him in the middle of his chest. All of her pent-up rage was completely focused into this one strike.

"Ah..." Chu Tiesheng squealed miserably as he fell backwards. He hadn't expected this beautiful flower, which seemed all ready to be plucked, to suddenly turn into a man-eating plant.

Qin Wanru's heart was full of regret. If she'd been in peak condition, her strike would have surely crippled him, if it hadn't killed him outright.

However, her strength and speed had been reduced by the effects of the drug. That was why her palm strike only dealt a moderate amount of damage.

She was just about to seize this opportunity to end his life, but a wave of heat surged through her as soon as she took a single step, and her entire body grew limp.

"Damn it!" She steadied herself by leaning on the pillar next to her. If she had waited any longer, she might have actually been defiled by that disgusting man.

She'd lost her window of opportunity to kill her opponent, so she didn't dare linger any longer. She quickly smashed a window and jumped through.

She looked around in confusion as she landed on the ground outside her room. There had been such a huge disturbance in the room—the guards should have rushed over immediately!

However, not a single guard was in sight. There wasn't even a single servant.

She was shocked. It seemed Chu Tiesheng's scheme ran deep. How many people in Chu Estate had he bribed?

She didn't dare waste any more time. She ran straight towards Hong Zhong's residence.

There were two people Qin Wanru and her husband trusted the most in the Chu Estate: the butler Hong Zhong, and Commander Yue Shan. Yue Shan had been transferred away to investigate some matters recently.

Now that she thought about it, this distraction was likely a part of Chu Tiesheng's scheme. He might have stirred things up precisely to draw Yue Shan away.

Thank goodness she still had Hong Zhong!

Without Yue Shan, the only one left in whom she had absolute trust was Hong Zhong.

While others might betray her husband or her, Hong Zhong definitely would not.

It wasn't just because he had already served the Chu clan for many generations. She also had a clear understanding of his nature after so many years of interacting with him.

He was old, wise, and extremely meticulous. His character was upright and unwavering.

She sprinted frantically in the direction of his residence, stumbling several times along the way.

Strange feelings—familiar, yet unfamiliar—surged continuously within her, making her feel both ashamed and furious. The only thing on her mind right now was finding Hong Zhong and asking for his help. The Chu clan was facing a severe tribulation.

She ran straight into the courtyard and pounded on the door. “Elder Hong, Elder Hong!”

The door opened quickly. Hong Zhong walked out, a confused look on his face. “Madam, why are you here?”

“I don’t have time to explain. Chu Tiesheng has rebelled. I don’t know how many people have colluded with him. You need to quickly gather some men to arrest him...” Her eyes widened in shock, and she trailed off before she could finish. Hong Zhong’s hand flashed out swiftly, striking her acupoints with deadly accuracy. She could no longer move.

Chapter 368: The Path of No Return

“Why?” Qin Wanru was in a state of complete shock as she stared at the old man with his meticulously-combed hair. He looked the same as he always did, yet he suddenly seemed so unfamiliar.

Hong Zhong sighed. “I truly must apologize. Madam, the one thing you should never have done was to run to me.”

“Why?” Qin Wanru stared at him. Her eyes were filled with anger. Countless possibilities had crossed her mind, but she had never expected that Hong Zhong would betray her.

She was completely baffled. Why would Hong Zhong do such a thing?

She had been drugged by Chu Tiesheng, and her acupoints had now been sealed as well. It was all over. The only thing on her mind right now was a desire to know why.

“I had no choice either...” Hong Zhong shook his head. “It’s meaningless to talk about these things now.”

“But I want to know!” Qin Wanru said coldly. “The Chu clan has always treated you well. My husband and I have always considered you our friend. What could you possibly gain from siding with Chu Tiesheng? Was what he offered you more than everything we’ve ever given to you?”

“Chu Tiesheng...” A mocking smile graced the corners of Hong Zhong’s lips. “That fellow is quite unreliable. If I hadn’t transferred the guards away from your residence, the whole estate would’ve already learned about what he did to you in your room.”

“So it was you!” The truth struck Qin Wanru like a hammer. No wonder no one had rushed to her aid, even though such a huge commotion had broken out. “If it wasn’t Chu Tiesheng, then was it Sang Hong who bribed you? I still don’t understand! We can match anything that Sang Hong could possibly offer you. From what I know about you, I can’t possibly imagine anything that could tempt you!”

As she continued to speak, her eyes suddenly lit up. A name came to her mind. “Hong Xingying!”

A trace of bitterness appeared between Hong Zhong's brows. "Madam, you know that I am already in my later years. There aren't many things in this life that I am fond of either. The only thing I cannot let go of is that disappointing son of mine."

Qin Wanru couldn't help but say, "Hong Xingying is quite an excellent child! He has done much for the Chu clan over these years, and the Chu clan has always treated him well. What could possibly make you give up a lifetime of honorable service?"

Hong Zhong sighed. "Could it be that the Madam is truly completely unaware? Why did Hong Xingying do so much for the Chu clan all these years? I believe Madam should have a good idea why."

Qin Wanru bit her lower lip. "I know that he's been attracted to Chuyan ever since he was little. I was quite fond of that child as well, and even planned to take him in as a son-in-law. But Chuyan herself chose Zu An. What could I have done?"

She paused for a moment. Then, she said, "It seems like Chuyan's eyes had been far clearer than mine back then."

"You are a great beauty yourself, and the first miss is no exception." Hong Zhong seemed to be reliving certain painful memories. "Xingying likes the first miss, but he could only watch as his beloved girl married another man.

"It would have been one thing if she'd ended up marrying someone more outstanding than him. However, she ended up marrying someone who was inferior to him in every way, which mentally unsettled him. At that point, all it took was a single taunt to drive him to commit an unworthy act. Many times, a single wrong step is all it takes to lead one down a path of no return."

"What was this wrong step that prevented him from turning back?" Qin Wanru was shocked. "Was he the one who defiled the spiritual creek?"

Too many things had happened since that night. First, the spiritual creek was destroyed, and then Zu An had been discovered in Chu Huanzhao's bed on the night of his wedding. A thief had even broken into Chu Estate shortly after. It had been a complete disaster.

The chaos caused by the defilement of the spiritual creek was the source of all of this.

Hong Zhong's voice was grave. "There was no way he would allow the first miss to truly consummate her marriage with Zu An. To prevent that, he sought a way to destroy everything. Of course, he wasn't the only one who came up with the idea to defile the spiritual creek. He just happened to be at the right place at the right time."

Qin Wanru wanted to ask him who it was that masterminded the defilement of the spiritual creek. However, given her current situation, she knew that this was already no longer important. "Even if we found out he had destroyed the spiritual creek, we would still have been lenient with him, out of respect for all of your contributions to the clan. Was this the only thing that made it impossible for him to turn back?"

Hong Zhong shook his head. "Many times, once something occurs, it tends to happen again. Does Madam remember the time one of our caravans was suddenly attacked?"

Qin Wanru was shocked. “Don’t tell me that was also Hong Xingying’s doing...”

Hong Zhong’s expression grew pained. “Indeed. Someone incited him to cause that disturbance, suggesting that it could help him bait out the first miss, and give him a chance to interact with the first miss alone... How could that silly child possibly have known that he’d waltzed right into their trap? Once the guards of the caravan had been wiped out, he crossed the point of no return.”

Qin Wanru was speechless. Chu Zhongtian has always been a kindhearted and forgiving person, but there were a few family rules that he strictly enforced. One of them was that selling out the lives of others in the clan was punishable by death.

Even though the defilement of the spiritual creek was a serious matter, they would have been willing to drop it, considering the Hong clan’s contributions. However, with the deaths of so many clan members during the attack on the caravan, all the Hong clan’s contributions would have counted for nought.

Hong Zhong looked at her, his eyes burning with emotion. “I’m already so old, and it’s only at this late stage of my life that I’ve managed to produce a son. His mother died in a difficult birth. How could I stand aside and watch him destroy himself like that? Can Madam understand my sorrows?”

Qin Wanru resisted the strange feelings within her body. With the last burst of mental clarity, she said, “It’s meaningless to tell me all of this now. All I know is that my husband and I have placed our trust in the wrong person.”

At this time, Hong Zhong noticed that something was wrong with her body. His voice grew somber. “Madam has been afflicted with ‘Bull’s Cream’. This drug is extremely sinister. In light of all Master and Madam have done for me, I’ll see Madam off myself. I will not let you be defiled by someone like Chu Tiesheng.”

A small, relieved smile spread across Qin Wanru’s reddened face. “Thank you!”

She knew that she had already lost completely. Dying with dignity would be the best she could hope for.

...

While all of this was happening, Zu An was busy cultivating in his own room. Suddenly, a figure appeared in the room.

He didn’t know how this person had come in, but had long grown accustomed to his sudden appearances. He immediately clasped his fist and said, “Elder!”

“I didn’t expect a slippery brat like you to actually be so hardworking in private.” Old Mi nodded in satisfaction. “What rank have you cultivated the Phoenix Nirvana Sutra up to?”

“Around the third rank, I believe.” Zu An felt his heart leap into his throat. He knew that it was nearly impossible to hide anything from him, considering the huge gap in cultivation between them.

However, another voice inside him whispered that he couldn’t reveal his true level of cultivation to the other party. It would be too dangerous.

He couldn’t explain where this thought had come from—it was just intuition. He had always been a cautious person, and it was always better to be safe than sorry.

Fortunately, he was able to hide his aura with the Mirror Mirage technique that Qiu Honglei had taught him, and it was worth a gamble.

Old Mi sighed in amazement. "I didn't expect a brat like you to be a cultivation genius! You've managed to cultivate to this level in such a short amount of time! It seems like it's almost time."

"Almost time for what?" Zu An was stunned.

"Nothing." Old Mi smiled. "Leaving your cultivation aside, I'm much happier about the fact that you haven't deceived me."

Zu An shivered inside. He immediately smiled and said, "Elder has shown me such kindness. How could I dare to hide anything from you?"

Thank heavens this Mirror Mirage is so reliable! I really have to shower Qiu Honglei with kisses the next time I see her as thanks!

"Good, very good." Old Mi nodded in satisfaction. "I'll give you another chance to do a good deed."

"What chance are we talking about?" Zu An said curiously.

Old Mi looked off towards a certain direction within the Chu Estate. "Something has happened to Qin Wanru. You should rush over to help her right now."

He planned to seize Zu An's body and take over his existence. If Chu Tiesheng successfully seized power, what status would Zu An have left?

He would be chased out of the clan immediately.

If that happened, then all his plans to become the Chu clan's young master, enjoy a beautiful wife, and obtain endless glory and splendor would all go up in smoke.

He obviously couldn't allow something like that to happen!

However, Wei Dan was in Brightmoon City right now, so there was no way he could reveal himself. His only option was to send Zu An.

Once he dealt with this uprising, Zu An's position in the clan would strengthen tremendously.

Zu An's glory was his glory, and Zu An's wife was his wife. Everything of Zu An's would be his!

Zu An had no clue about all of this. To him, Old Mi was just staring at him weirdly.

However, once he heard that something had happened to Qin Wanru, he knew that there wasn't a second to waste. He rushed off at once.

Chapter 369: The Cooked Duck has Flown Away

Qin Wanru had already resigned herself to her fate. She even felt a dash of gratitude that she wouldn't have to be humiliated by Chu Tiesheng.

A scream echoed from close by. "Traitor! You dare?!"

This voice seemed slightly familiar to Qin Wanru. However, the drug had already spread through her entire body, and she had begun to lose her grip on her consciousness. She couldn't identify the owner of this voice at all.

Hong Zhong was startled. He quickly turned towards the source of the scream, but saw a large rock flying towards him instead.

He smashed the rock to pieces with a single punch, then turned quickly back towards Qin Wanru. A man was now standing at her side.

Zu An noticed the seal on her body, and quickly unraveled it. Fortunately, Hong Zhong hadn't employed any special technique, so it wasn't too difficult.

Qin Wanru had completely succumbed to the effects of the 'Bull's Cream'. Once her acupoints were unsealed, her legs immediately gave out.

"Madam, be careful!" Zu An immediately reached out to support her.

The masculine aura of a man's embrace threw her mind into absolute chaos. She wanted to struggle free, yet she found that she couldn't move at all. However, she immediately relaxed when she saw who it was. "Ah Zu, it's you..."

After all the deceit and betrayal she had experienced today, she had truly come to believe that there was no one left that she could trust.

However, as she lay in Zu An's embrace, she felt a mysterious and unexplainable sense of ease.

Perhaps it was what her daughter had said before she left, or perhaps it was the camaraderie they had shared on their adventure that night.

Her heart was full of regret. If, instead of seeking out Hong Zhong, she'd sought out Zu An first, things might not have turned out this way.

Zu An could spare no time to talk to her. Even though he was usually lackadaisical in nature, he was still an intelligent person.

Hong Zhong was the Chu clan's butler, which meant that he was at least at the pinnacle of sixth rank. There was even a chance that he was at the seventh rank.

Hong Zhong was also a traitor, so there was no way he would hold back in a fight. It would be a death sentence if Zu An challenged him head on.

Instead, he instantly used Grandgale to carry Qin Wanru away.

"Huh? Why is your body so hot?" Qin Wanru's body felt extremely strange. Not only was she soft like cotton, her body was heating up and giving off a rich fragrance. Zu An was puzzled, but this wasn't the time to be worrying about something like this.

Hong Zhong was thrown off by the sudden rescue. "Where do you think you are going?!" He immediately gave chase. If Zu An successfully rescued Qin Wanru, it would mess up the entire scheme.

Even though Zu An's instantaneous movement was fast, the distance he could cover with each use was limited, and there was a limit to the number of times he could activate it. Not only that, but he was carrying someone as well. Slowly but surely, Hong Zhong was closing the gap.

Soon Zu An's back came into range of his attack. A flash of hesitation crossed Hong Zhong's face.

He wasn't malicious by nature, so killing an innocent person still pained him. Not only that, these two were individuals that he had served diligently as well.

Just then, a fierce shout came from off to the side. "Hong Zhong, what are you standing around for?!"

Apparently, Chu Tiesheng had already rushed over as well. He had been so horny earlier that he'd let his guard down, and Qin Wanru had almost taken his life.

His injuries weren't slight, and it had taken him a while to catch his breath. He had rushed over just in time to see this scene play out in front of him.

His voice shook Hong Zhong out of his daze. Zu An was the reason why his son had begun walking this path to hell.

Allowing Qin Wanru to escape would also mean more trouble for them.

A vicious glint flashed across his eyes, and he directed a punch towards Zu An's back.

As his arm moved, a projection of a fist materialized in the air ahead of him, flying towards Zu An's back.

Zu An had seen that there was still some distance between them, and he was completely focused on running. He had yet to realize that he was already in danger.

However, Qin Wanru saw all of this. "Be careful!" she cried out in alarm.

She didn't know where she found the strength to do so, but she managed to move around behind Zu An with great difficulty. She blocked the strike with her own back.

She didn't know why she did this either. Perhaps it was because of how dismally everything had turned out for her so far—subconsciously, she believed that it was probably better to exchange her own life for Zu An's safety.

That way, someone else would still know the truth about what had happened.

If Zu An died from this punch, then her helpless, drugged-up self would be subjected to an even worse fate.

Even if Zu An somehow managed to save her, she had already been poisoned by such a vile drug. It was already hard for her to control her own impulses, and her mental faculties were in tatters. If something really happened with him afterwards, she would take bitter regret with her to her grave and beyond.

"Pfft!" Qin Wanru felt a huge impact batter her body. Blood sprayed out of her mouth, robbing her of the rest of her strength. Her body was powerless, like a leaf swirling in the air, buffeted by a gust of wind.

“Madam!” Blood splattered over Zu An’s cheeks. He couldn’t be bothered to wipe it off right now. Even his heart was shaking.

Hong Zhong and Chu Tiesheng were about to catch up. Suddenly, a massive tree fell, blocking their path. Instinctively, they dodged the falling tree. By the time they recovered, Zu An was already nowhere to be seen.

“We need to catch him!” Chu Tiesheng said in a panic. He wanted to keep running.

Hong Zhong held him back. “Stop chasing them!”

“Why?” Chu Tiesheng was confused. Even his eyes had begun to turn red. The only thing on his mind right then was that Qin Wanru needed his treatment.

If he didn’t catch them, wouldn’t he have only ended up helping Zu An?

“Are you deaf? The estate is in an uproar right now!” Hong Zhong snarled. “The guards of the Chu Estate guards have been mobilized thanks to the sudden activity. We have to think about how to deal with this situation! Where do we have the time to satisfy that thing in your pants?!”

Chu Tiesheng turned around. Sure enough, he saw a smattering of lights bobbing about. A considerable number of people were hurrying in their direction.

His face grew dark. However, he knew that he had to deal with the current situation in the Chu Estate, and he was under pressure from Sang Hong as well. He had to give up the chase. “If we let Qin Wanru go now, wouldn’t whatever we say count for nothing when she returns?”

Hong Zhong shook his head. “Don’t worry. Madam cannot possibly survive my blow.”

A flicker of sadness flashed across his eyes. He had wanted to avoid this if he could, but it had been the only choice left.

Chu Tiesheng’s expression changed immediately. As a member of the Chu clan, how could he not know about the formidable power behind Hong Zhong’s Heart-smashing Fist?

If she had been in her usual state, Qin Wanru might still have had a chance of surviving the strike.

However, in her weakened state, there was practically no chance of survival if his blow had landed on a vital area.

“Sigh, what a pity.” Chu Tiesheng looked miserable. Why had he been so obsessed earlier? He’d ended up allowing this cooked duck to fly away...

Hong Zhong snorted. “How do you still have the nerve to say that? If it hadn’t been for your muddle-headedness, there wouldn’t have been so many mishaps!”

Chu Tiesheng felt a flash of resentment. This guy had no qualms about embarrassing him in the open!

He made a mental note to himself. Hong Zhong simply held too much prestige in the Chu clan. He had to find a way to get rid of him once he rose to the position of clan master. He wouldn’t be truly in command until that happened.

Neither of them noticed the old man hiding in the shadows, silently watching everything play out. Satisfied that they were not giving chase, the old men turned and left.

Old Mi frowned in Zu An's direction. If he had known things would turn out like this, he would have interfered earlier.

The fallen tree had been his work.

A weak voice came from behind Zu An. "Don't bother with me anymore. Let me down. You should try to escape by yourself."

Zu An said gravely, "You are Chuyan and Huanzhao's mother. How can I give up on Madam's life?! You even sacrificed yourself to save me. Wouldn't I be considered less than a beast if I abandoned you now?"

Qin Wanru shook her head weakly. "You don't understand... I've been drugged... death is already the best form of release."

"Drugged?" Zu An was stunned. He stopped to take a look at her.

Qin Wanru's face was flushed with an unnatural redness. "Chu Tiesheng, that despicable man, used 'Bull's Cream' on me. It's a powerful... aphrodisiac. No medicine can eliminate its effects—the only way to neutralize it is by joining with a man. That is why I would rather die."

"Doesn't that mean that we just need to find father-in-law? What's so hard about that?" Zu An replied. At the same time, he cursed that shameless Chu Tiesheng. He remembered the looks of desire that the man had directed towards Qin Wanru in secret, but he never expected him to be so daring to do such a thing to her.

Qin Wanru was furious. "You know nothing!"

You have successfully trolled Qin Wanru for 233 Rage points!

Zu An was stunned. Why did she suddenly get mad at him?

"You won't be able to get far if you carry me with you. I'm already doomed. Instead of dying together, it would be better if you escaped first. You can still expose their plot! With that, I wouldn't have died for nothing," Qin Wanru said anxiously.

Zu An refused. "I have no status at all. How could I hope to overcome the prestige that Hong Zhong and Chu Tiesheng hold? No one would believe me even if I told them."

Qin Wanru was stunned. She realized that what he'd said was the truth. "You can at least tell Chuyan. She will definitely believe you."

Zu An picked her up again. "The best outcome would be for you to personally expose their schemes. Don't worry, I know someone who can definitely get rid of your poison."

After saying this, he sped off in another direction.

Chapter 370: Slander

Qin Wanru panicked when she heard what he said. “No! I don’t want to get rid of the poison, I don’t want...”

“Relax, I’m not going to use the method you’re thinking of,” Zu An explained.

Soon, however, even his own expression grew strange. Qin Wanru kept squirming around in his arms, which made him start to burn up as well.

Zu An shivered. He put her firmly out of his mind and stopped looking at her anymore. He focused all of his attention on heading to his destination.

...

The Chu Estate was in complete chaos. All of the important members of the Chu clan had gathered together.

Chu Hongcai led a detachment of guards to secure the area. Chu Yuepo was still the same chubby, harmless-looking man. However, he lacked his characteristic smile, which had been replaced by a slightly serious expression.

He tried to talk to Chu Tiesheng several times, but the latter merely shook his head and stopped him.

“Brother-in-law isn’t here either!” Chu Huanzhao ran over in panic. She had been resting in her room when the chaos in the estate had awakened her. Frightened, she had gone looking for her mother. When she couldn’t find her mother, she looked for Zu An instead, but he wasn’t in his room either. She even saw a bunch of guards searching his room thoroughly, making a mess.

She ran to Hong Zhong and Chu Tiesheng and demanded, “What happened? Where did my mom go? Why are you all searching brother-in-law’s room?”

Chu Tiesheng’s expression was ashen. “I am about to tell everyone a great secret that you absolutely cannot reveal to anyone outside the clan. Otherwise, our Chu clan will be embroiled in a huge scandal.”

Even Chu Yuepo gave him a curious look when he heard how serious he was. He tried to guess what the matter was.

From nowhere, an ominous feeling began to grow within Chu Huanzhao.

When he saw everyone quiet down, Chu Tiesheng continued with a grave expression, “Zu An, that brute, was actually despicable enough to use that sort of drug on sister-in-law. He wanted to defile sister-in-law!”

A great uproar broke out when everyone gathered there heard these words.

Chu Yucheng and his father Chu Yuepo exchanged looks of doubt and astonishment. Chu Yucheng was about to ask his father about it, when he caught a glimpse of something deep within the other’s eyes. He swallowed the words he had been about to say.

Chu Hongcai’s head whipped around. His many interactions with Zu An had led him to believe that the man was all sorts of strange, but he never expected that he would ever do something as brazen as this.

Before he could say anything, Chu Huanzhao cried out, "Nonsense! That's impossible!"

There was no way she would believe that her beloved mother and brother-in-law would ever engage in something like that. There was absolutely no way.

"Huanzhao, I know you are close to Zu An, so it's hard for you to accept this. However, this is the truth," Chu Tiesheng said, his voice full of sorrow. "There are maids here who have personally witnessed it. When Zu An realized that he had been exposed, he grabbed sister-in-law and ran. Unfortunately, none of the maids are cultivators, so they couldn't stop that brute. Several of them were even ruthlessly dispatched by him. You can ask her if you don't believe me."

"Qiu Ju, is what he says true?" Chu Huanzhao immediately directed her gaze at a servant girl nearby, who was visibly shaking. Everyone knew that this girl served in her mother's residence.

"True... it's true..." That servant girl—Qiu Ju—trembled violently. Chu Tiesheng had rounded up all the maids in the residence and ordered them to say this. The others were unwilling to do this, so he killed them all. She was the only one who buckled under the pressure and agreed.

Chu Huanzhao's face paled instantly. She tottered backwards weakly, and her entire body fell limply into a chair. "How is this possible..." she muttered to herself.

At that moment, Feng Daniu and the other guards came to Zu An's defense. "That's impossible! The young master would never do such a thing!"

They had followed Zu An around for so long. Aside from Chu Huanzhao, they were probably the ones who were in the most disbelief over this matter.

Chu Tiesheng was furious. "Are you all accusing me of lying? Even Qiu Ju has provided her testimony!"

Feng Daniu and the others look at each other in dismay. They didn't know what to say.

Hong Zhong coughed softly and stepped forward. "Actually, quite a few people saw Zu An heading westward with Madam."

"Indeed, we saw Zu An carrying... carrying Madam fleeing in that direction in a panic," several guards offered hesitantly.

Feng Daniu and the others knew that these brothers guarded the western gate of the Chu Estate. They had served together as guards in the Chu Estate for so many years, and they were all familiar with each others' personalities. These brothers would never lie. Zu An's supporters grew conflicted.

Hong Zhong twitched his eye, and a servant girl said weakly, "Actually, I saw the young master seek out Madam a few days ago, early in the morning. Madam had woken up earlier than usual that day."

Another servant girl said, "I remember seeing Madam leaving the estate with Zu An a few days ago too..."

Before she could finish, Hong Zhong cut her off. "What nonsense are you all spouting? Zu An clearly tried to force himself on Madam today, and then kidnapped her. The top priority right now should be catching this despicable scum. Do not discuss anything else. Do you understand me?!"

"We understand!" Everyone shivered when they saw the threatening look in his eyes. They agreed at once.

However, there was still a strange disquiet in each of their hearts. Based on what that servant girl had said, it seemed as though Madam and the young master were having an affair.

The young master was quite handsome—the first miss wouldn't have fallen for him otherwise. Now that both Master and First Miss were away, it wasn't entirely impossible that the two of them had started something out of loneliness.

No wonder the Madam had begun to treat the young master better recently! This was clearly the reason why.

Man's imagination was boundless, and so was his desire for gossip. Hong Zhong looked as though he was trying to hide the truth as well, which only gave more credibility to their thoughts.

Feng Daniu and the others panicked. However, at that moment, Cheng Shouping tugged their sleeves and gave them each a warning glance.

Hong Zhong and Chu Tiesheng began sending men out to capture Zu An. They even gave the order to kill him on the spot if he tried to resist.

When those tasked with this order had left, Feng Daniu and the others rounded on Cheng Shouping with cold looks. "Cheng brat, I believe the young master has always treated you quite well. Now that things have gone south for him, not only did you not help him, you even stopped us from speaking up for him! What is the meaning of this?!"

"You too, Jiao Shanhe! You're always blabbering about something—why are you freezing up when it matters? You're gutless!"

Cheng Shouping replied, "Didn't you guys notice? Hong Zhong was acting all buddy-buddy with Second Master. If you had continued arguing, it would have cost you your life!"

Feng Daniu and Zhou Lujun both sneered. "You might be scared of death, but we're not!"

Cheng Shouping panicked. "It's not a matter of fear. We need to bear in mind that the young master escaped in a panic! He definitely needs help, now that so many people are after him. He only has enemies around him right now. Who will be around to help him if we die as well?"

Only then did the expressions of Feng Daniu and the others ease up. What he'd said made sense to them.

Jiao Shanhe sounded surprised. "Not bad, little Ping! You've shown us a whole new side of you today! That was exactly what I wanted to say."

"But of course! Do you think I'm dumb?" Cheng Shouping rubbed his own chin, a smug look on his face. "Wait, are you making fun of me?"

Jiao Shanhe laughed. "Of course not! First, we need to locate young master. We don't even know where he is right now."

...

Zu An hurried into a courtyard, Qin Wanru in his arms. Someone had just come out from inside, and they ended up bumping into each other.

“Ah!” A clear and delicate cry rang out.