

Indulgence 351

Chapter 351: Meeting

Was he a refined young noble, or a bookish fool who had read himself silly?

As Yun Zihan walked along, she saw a handsome man in fine clothes approaching. Knowing he wasn't the one she was looking for, she immediately stepped aside.

"Miss Yun?" Weng Jianrui called out softly.

Her brows furrowed slightly.

Because he felt Yun Zihan had an air of pettiness, and the fabric of her clothes seemed ordinary. Dressed like that, could she really have a generous dowry?

Hearing him, Yun Zihan couldn't hide and had to come forward with a slight bow, "My respects to the young master, I shall take my leave!"

Weng Jianrui's brow furrowed.

Her appearance was passable, but her manners were lacking.

Didn't she know that he was waiting for her here? Besides, hadn't she come from the Yun Family's monastery? Wasn't she a Miss Yun?

"Mmm!" Weng Jianrui responded with a muffled grunt, letting Yun Zihan leave.

After walking a good distance away, Yun Zihan finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"Miss!" Duoduo called out softly.

"Hm?" Yun Zihan responded, looking at Duoduo.

"Miss, I feel like the man we just met is Marquess Weng!"

Yun Zihan nodded, "That's him!"

If he was really such a person, Yun Zihan could assure that her elder sister wouldn't have good days after marrying into his family.

Because the man's gaze was far too cold and harsh.

Not to mention there was an air of vulgarity about him, as if he wasn't looking at a woman, but rather assessing how much silver she was worth.

"Ah..."

With a startled cry from Duoduo, Yun Zihan looked at her calmly, rendering her mute right away.

"Let's go, let's continue to look around!"

Hoping to see him.

At least to meet him once, or speak a few words, to understand a bit more.

Meanwhile, Yun MUYOU also left the monastery after speaking with Mrs. He, wandering around with her maid.

Seeing a scholarly young man in green standing with the wind in his favor, radiating a sense of scholarly gentleness, Yun MUYOU suddenly wondered if it could be Marquess Weng.

She hurried ahead, and Liao Shijie, sensing her approach, also turned around.

Yun Muyou looked charming and lovely, dressed in a pink outfit that was gentle and appealing. She was dressed to dazzle with luster and luxury.

Liao Shijie mistook her for Yun Zihan and offered a warm smile.

Yet Yun Muyou recognized it was Liao Shijie and snorted coldly, "So it's just a sour Scholar!"

And with that, she turned and walked away.

Liao Shijie was puzzled.

Had she found him unappealing?

Liao Shijie could only smile wryly and resign himself to the fact that it wasn't his concern—after all, she clearly wasn't interested in him!

Turning around, he headed back to his own monastery, planning to have his servant pack up and prepare to leave for Capital City early the next day. He also intended to report to General Weiyuan that the second Miss Yun wasn't interested in him and that the marriage could be called off.

But on his way, he came across a woman in light purple attire.

She was modestly made up with a swath of hair elegantly draped in the back and pearl earrings adorning her ears—she walked with a demure and refined grace. When she saw him, her face instantly blushed, the already delicate features now suffused with a dazzling bloom of color.

She seemed shy, quickly lowering her head, then sneakily raising it again to look at him.

Liao Shijie was no fool and immediately understood that he had been mistaken earlier; this woman was the true second Miss Yun.

He stepped forward with his hands clasped in overture, "Miss Yun, my respects!"

Yun Zihan's face flushed as she bowed to Liao Shijie and called softly, "My respects to you, Scholar Liao!"

Though he had an average appearance, he was clean and fresh, could be considered handsome and refined, with an air of scholarship. He spoke with cultured gentleness, his voice neither high nor low.

Her little sister knew her heart well, understanding her fondness for scholars.

Thinking this, Yun Zihan stole another glance at Liao Shijie, only to be caught in the act, her face turning beet red.

Her eyes were moist, her cheeks flushed with color, and her lips tender and pink, like a ripe peach tempting to be plucked.

Liao Shijie found his heart stirred at the sight.

Chapter 352: Flirtation

Liao Shijie slightly restrained his thoughts and invited with a faint voice, "Miss Yun Zihan, shall we take a walk?"

"Alright!"

Yun Zihan responded softly, following by Liao Shijie's side.

Heading toward a pavilion.

"Miss Yun Zihan, please take a seat!"

"After you, Mr. Liao!"

They both sat down, and Yun Zihan then looked at Liao Shijie.

Liao Shijie could tell from the look in Yun Zihan's eyes that she was pleased with him.

He was somewhat surprised. After all, dressed unremarkably and not handsome, she took a liking to him.

She wasn't just superficial or perhaps she trusted her younger sister who had arranged their meeting?

Remembering the lady he had seen that day, though still very young and in men's attire, she was indeed beautiful, every feature fine and exquisite.

Reportedly unmatched in medical skills, and with a voice so soft and gentle, no wonder Prince Rui kept such a close eye on her.

"The fourth young miss and her party stayed in my house when they were in Tortoiseshell City!"

Filled with joy upon hearing this, Yun Zihan said, "Really? How is my younger sister?"

"She's doing quite well!"

"As long as she's fine!"

Yun Zihan didn't ask why Yun Jinnian was in Tortoiseshell City, because she knew there were some matters she wasn't privy to.

Liao Shijie then inquired about other topics, such as what Yun Zihan liked, and talked about his own preferences. Gradually, they became less reserved. Yun Zihan also opened up more, and the rapport between them grew.

And so did their satisfaction with each other.

Meanwhile

Weng Jianrui eventually encountered Yun Muyou.

Upon seeing the resplendent Yun Muyou, Weng Jianrui's eyes lit up; his entire demeanor changed.

He stepped forward to greet her with a clasped fist bow, "Are you Miss Yun?"

Yun Muyou had naturally also noticed Weng Jianrui.

In person, he was much more handsome than in his portraits.

Her heart beat fiercely, and her cheeks flushed red.

"Youyou has seen Marquess Weng!"

"Youyou, no need for such formalities!" As Weng Jianrui spoke, he reached out to support Yun Muyou, his hand accidentally brushing her small one.

Very smooth.

Yun Muyou shuddered, her face reddening even more.

"Youyou, let's take a walk and chat," suggested Weng Jianrui.

Yun Muiyou naturally agreed, "Alright!"

Accompanied by their maids and attendants, they walked leisurely, with Weng Jianrui intentionally leading Yun Muiyou towards the back mountain.

At the back mountain where few ventured, and where the monks seldom returned, even if they did something risky, no one would discover it.

As Weng Jianrui thought about this, he glanced at Yun Muiyou beside him.

Yun Muiyou was quite attractive, dressed appropriately, and smelled wonderful. His recent touch had confirmed her skin was smooth; she took good care of herself.

Weng Jianrui, well-acquainted with the ways of love, naturally desired this ripe fruit that was Yun Muiyou.

Weng Jianrui was eloquent, and for Yun Muiyou, who had never seen much of the world nor had contact with men, his company was fascinating. She followed him to the back mountain, unaware that her maid and attendant had lagged behind.

"Youyou!" called Weng Jianrui softly.

Blushing, Yun Muiyou glanced at Weng Jianrui, "Hmm?"

"This hairpin is for you!" As he spoke, Weng Jianrui pulled out a hairpin from his sleeve and offered it to Yun Muiyou.

A golden gem-encrusted butterfly hairpin, shimmering brightly.

"So beautiful!"

"Let me put it on for you," said Weng Jianrui, as he began to attach the hairpin to Yun Muiyou's hair.

But his hand gently caressed Yun Muiyou's ear.

Then stroked her neck.

"Youyou!"

Weng Jianrui murmured tenderly.

"Hmm?" Yun Muiyou responded faintly, feeling as though she could barely stand.

Seizing the moment, Weng Jianrui wrapped an arm around Yun Muiyou's waist, leaning in close to whisper in her ear, "Truly beautiful!"

Chapter 353: Scheming

Yun Muiyou felt her heart bloom with joy when she heard the words.

She was delighted to be called beautiful by Weng Jianrui, feeling a surge of happiness.

Her impression of him improved significantly.

Blushing profusely, she still lifted her head to glance at Weng Jianrui, only to have him gently pinch her chin and then kiss her lips.

Yun Muiyou was so startled that her body stiffened, not knowing what to do, only allowing Weng Jianrui to kiss her senseless, losing all sense of direction.

It wasn't until Weng Jianrui felt it was enough that he released her.

Only then did Yun Muiyou snap back to reality and try to escape.

Weng Jianrui reached out to pull her into his embrace, "Youyou, seeing you so beautiful and charming, I simply couldn't control myself!"

Yun Muiyou couldn't make a sound, feeling both happy and a bit aggrieved, with her eyes slightly reddening.

"Good Youyou, it's all my fault, all my fault. I will never do it again, punish me, okay? Don't be angry, alright?" Weng Jianrui coaxed softly.

Yun Muiyou actually wasn't very angry to begin with, so she forgave Weng Jianrui.

They talked for a while longer, and Weng Jianrui didn't make any further moves. Yun Muiyou breathed a sigh of relief, yet also felt a tinge of disappointment. But for their first encounter, she really liked Weng Jianrui's eloquence and tenderness.

She never dug deeper into his intentions, thinking if he hadn't been through numerous experiences, how could he know these tricks of persuasion.

She also failed to notice the contempt, greed, and determination in Weng Jianrui's eyes.

When Yun Muiyou returned to the hermitage, Yun Zihan had been back for a long time. Seeing Yun Muiyou's flushed face, Yun Zihan was taken aback.

When she arrived back, Mrs. He had asked her about her impression of Liao Shijie. Yun Zihan nodded, effectively agreeing to the marriage.

Mrs. He didn't care whether Yun Zihan really fancied him or not, she waved her hand to dismiss Yun Zihan and spoke with Yun Muiyou, "Did you meet the Marquess?"

"Yes!"

Yun Muiyou replied shyly and timidly.

Mrs. He, who had been through it all, understood instantly what her daughter's demeanor meant, "Are you willing?"

Yun Muiyou looked up, glanced quickly at Mrs. He, and nodded slightly.

Mrs. He smiled, "Then you don't have to worry about the rest. I heard that the Marchioness is also in the temple, I'll meet with her first!"

The husband is important, but the mother-in-law is just as crucial; you wouldn't want to deal with someone unreasonable and without principles like the old lady.

"I'll listen to you, mother!"

Liao Shijie was very satisfied with Yun Zihan, so he took his servant and left Huguo Temple to return to Capital City in the midst of the night to prepare. Although he couldn't bring too many betrothal gifts, he didn't want to undersell Yun Zihan. Moreover, Liao Shijie planned to keep several rare items, intending to give them to her after she was married and had come to stay with him.

He didn't want those gifts to be intercepted by her birth mother once delivered.

Upon returning to the hermitage, Weng Jianrui's grandmother asked, "How did it go?"

Even though she was a grandmother, she was fairly young, looking to be only in her forties.

"Eighty percent sure!"

Weng Jianrui took the tea that the maid handed to him and drank a sip before continuing, "She must be pampered at home, so the dowry should be generous!"

The Marquis Residence was in a situation with little income and heavy expenditures, living beyond its means; it was imperative to marry a wealthy bride to uphold the household for a while.

After all, you need capital to do business.

Weng Jianrui's grandmother nodded, "Then I can rest assured!"

Seeing Weng Jianrui silent, she asked again, "Is she pretty?"

When Weng Jianrui heard the question, he thought of Yun Muyou blushing, her skin soft because she hadn't done hard labour, wearing fine rouge and spices, easily stirring emotions.

Thinking this, Weng Jianrui's body tensed as he said in a gruff voice, "Quite good!"

Chapter 354: Appropriate

Seeing her son like this, the Elder Mrs. Wu understood everything. With a slight turn of her thoughts, she smiled and said, "She has a good appearance, so that the children she bears in the future will be handsome and beautiful!"

Therefore, when she met with Mrs. He, Elder Mrs. Wu was very enthusiastic, and they quickly reached an understanding. The two families exchanged tokens of betrothal, only waiting for the Marquis Residence to formally propose marriage.

On the twenty-second of August, Liao Shijie called for a matchmaker and took the butler, along with the betrothal gifts, to the Yun Residence to propose marriage. Mrs. He didn't make it difficult and immediately agreed. The two sides exchanged marital appointment letters and also set the wedding date for Yun Zihan, on the eighteenth of the twelfth lunar month—less than two months away.

This clearly showed Mrs. He's lack of sorrow over Yun Zihan's marriage.

Upon learning of this, Lady Cui was both angry and resentful, yet dared not speak out. She thought that with Yun Zihan finally getting married and moving into a three-story mansion in the inner city as the butler's wife, things would be slightly more bearable for her.

On the twenty-sixth of August, the Marquess Yuanshen Residence came to propose marriage. Mrs. He was elated as they exchanged marital appointment letters, and the wedding was set for the eighth day of the second lunar month the following year.

As for the betrothal gifts, Mrs. He selfishly took the best of what the Liao Family had sent and gave it to Yun Muyou, and then took the lesser gifts from the Marquis Residence to make up Zihan's dowry.

She thought nobody knew, but she forgot that she wasn't the only lady of the Yun Family, and there were itemized lists for the betrothal gifts.

Because of this, Ladies Su and Hua, seeing their daughters growing up, no longer dared to trouble Mrs. Han. They only stayed in their own courtyards, focusing on educating their own daughters.

But after all, a concubine is a concubine, how well could they educate their children?

On the twenty-ninth of August, Hu Shuiling of Count Xuanping Residence married into the Hang Family of Jiangnan. To show their respect, the head matron of the Hang Family personally came to fetch the bride with her two sisters-in-law and Young Master Hang, and they consummated the marriage upon their arrival in Jiangnan.

Mrs. Han sent two sets of bridal adornments, one on behalf of Yun Jinnian, and one from herself. Since Yun Jinnian was not present, Hu Shuiling clung to Mrs. Han, her eyes turning red.

"When you return from Jiangnan next year, and Jinnian is back as well, just invite her to your home for a visit," Mrs. Han consoled her.

Upon hearing this, Hu Shuiling finally smiled.

In the blink of an eye, September arrived. The Emperor had brought forward the date for the imperial examination. After three days of grueling testing, all the candidates emerged from the examination hall.

When Feng Wushuang came out, he had lost quite a bit of weight. Old Lady Feng stepped forward and took his hand, "How did it go?"

"I leave it to fate. If it's mine, it will come to me despite the twists and turns. If it's not, no amount of striving will make it mine," he said.

On the fifteenth of September, the results were posted, and Feng Wushuang topped the list.

The Capital City went wild.

Nobody knew who this Feng Wushuang was, nor whose disciple he was.

Various families sent people to inquire about him, hoping to win him over.

But Feng Wushuang lived a reclusive life, immersing himself in his artwork, striving to create the most beautiful paintings to please the girl in his heart.

On the first day of October, the palace examination took place.

Feng Wushuang spoke eloquently, answering the Emperor's several challenging questions with pearls of wisdom, filled with literary grace, and found the solutions. He was bestowed the title of top scholar.

The second-ranked candidate was a young man from a Prestigious Family with the surname Tang, and the Third Place Scholar was a fifty-year-old man surnamed Li.

"Congratulations, Top Scholar Feng!"

"Congratulations to us all, congratulations to us all!"

Yet people still noticed that this newly-crowned top scholar was particularly warm when he met with the second young master of the Yun Family.

Could it be that he was acquainted with Yun Qi?

Yun Qi thought the same, but for the life of him, he couldn't recall where he had met Feng Wushuang.

It was puzzling indeed.

The Emperor had already intended to make great use of Feng Wushuang and would create momentum for him by bestowing a grand residence, servants, farmland, and numerous rewards. He was granted an official post at the Hanlin Academy and the rank of a fourth-grade official!

Chapter 355: Miscalculation

For a time, Feng Wushuang was truly the center of attention, with numerous matchmakers knocking on his door, all from prominent families eager to marry off their legitimate or illegitimate daughters to him.

Mrs. Feng had long since been instructed by Feng Wushuang that he had someone in mind and did not wish to marry so early.

Over the years, Mrs. Feng had grown accustomed to abiding by Feng Wushuang's decisions. Therefore, whenever matchmakers visited, she would decline to see them, citing ill health as the reason.

Feng Wushuang, when socializing outside, was also very tactful. No matter what anyone said, he never loosened his lips to agree to a marriage.

The person he wanted to propose to, Yun Jinnian, had never even discussed the prospect of betrothal with him. On the surface, Feng Wushuang appeared calm, but inside, he was desperately anxious.

On several occasions, while dining with Yun Qi, others would drop hints now and then, but Yun Qi never mentioned it outright.

Feng Wushuang thought there might be two possibilities: either Yun Qi was too protective of his daughter, or Yun Qi didn't have the final say in the matter.

He thus abandoned the idea of initiating the proposal through Yun Qi and decided to start with Mrs. Han instead.

Mid-October in Nanjiang was still quite warm, but on the Tian Mountain, snow had already begun to fall, making the mountain roads difficult to traverse.

Chu Yu and Yuwen Ya had already led several expeditions into the snowy mountains and had yet to find the Snow Lotus of Tian Mountain.

Before long, it was the middle of November.

Madam Qian and the others didn't voice their concerns, but they were indeed very anxious, especially since Yun Jinnian spent all his time reading and researching herbs.

Seeing Yun Jinnian had also invited several physicians over to learn and discuss with them, they didn't dare to say much.

When Chu Yu and his party returned once again, it was said they had lost twenty-one men and still hadn't found the Snow Lotus of Tian Mountain.

Chu Yu, alone, shut himself in a room drinking sullenly, while Yun Jinnian had someone prepare a sobering soup and carried it into Chu Yu's room.

"Get out!"

Not lifting his head, Chu Yu mistook the visitor for Yuwen Ya.

But smelling the faint, elegant fragrance, he knew it was Yun Jinnian. He lifted his gaze to her and asked, "Why have you come?"

Yun Jinnian placed the sobering soup on the table, "I brought you sobering soup!"

"I'm not drunk!" Chu Yu said, sitting up straight.

"I know you're not drunk, but you've had quite a few jars of wine. It's not good for your health. Drink the sobering soup first, I have something to discuss with you," Yun Jinnian urged, lifting the lid for Chu Yu to drink.

If it were anyone else, Chu Yu would have certainly thrown them out, but this was Yun Jinnian, and he couldn't.

He grudgingly gulped down the sobering soup and then asked seriously, "What do you need to discuss?"

"Let me accompany you into the mountains. When it comes to herbs, my nose is more sensitive than most. Perhaps I could be of help!"

"The mountains are dangerous!"

Without a second thought, Chu Yu refused.

"Even if it's dangerous, I am not afraid. Your Highness, I'm not a sheltered delicate flower. Besides, once we find the Snow Lotus of Tian Mountain, I still need to go into the mountains to cultivate them. Why not let me get used to it first? The sooner we find the Snow Lotus of Tian Mountain, the sooner we can cultivate the Blood Lotus, and the greater the chance for Prince Yanjun to survive. I didn't dare to tell the Prince or Your Highness, but Prince Yanjun's hearing has deteriorated significantly recently!"

"But..."

Thinking of Prince Yanjun, Chu Yu found he couldn't bring himself to utter a refusal.

"There are no 'buts'. There's also Madam Qian and the others. With such a group of highly skilled martial artists at our disposal, it would be a shame not to make use of them," Yun Jinnian spoke with conviction.

Chu Yu actually began to laugh, "They were sent by the Emperor!"

"I'm aware of that, but no one said the poison afflicting the Emperor doesn't require the Blood Lotus. We're working our hardest, not just for Prince Yanjun, but for the Emperor as well!"

Chu Yu fell into contemplation, hesitating whether to bring Yun Jinnian into the mountains or not...

Chapter 356: Meticulous

On each venture into the mountains, some people were lost, and although the compensation was generous, those were lives and innocent citizens at that.

Yun Jinnian, although wealthy with ample Silver, hoped that he could lead these people into the mountains and also bring them back out safely.

"Your Highness, don't hesitate any longer, take me with you!"

"It's very cold in the mountains!"

"I can wear more clothes, and besides, you get used to the cold of the mountains after a while!"

Having failed to find the Snow Lotus on several trips, Chu Yu was also anxious.

"Fine, when the time comes, stay close to me!"

"Okay!"

When Han Tianci heard that Yun Jinnian was also going into the mountains, he said, "Sister, I want to go too!"

Yun Jinnian shook her head slightly, "Tianci, wait until we find the Snow Lotus, then you can enter the mountains. I'll teach you how to cultivate the Snow Lotus then, but you can't follow us up the mountain now!"

"But..."

Yun Jinnian ruffled Han Tianci's hair, "Listen to me, wait for your sister to come back!"

In the end, Han Tianci agreed to stay behind with Prince Yanjun, and Han Zhong also stayed to look after Tianci. Yun Jinnian brought only Hemei and Henuan, originally she did not plan to bring them, but there were some things she only trusted Hemei and Henuan to do.

So, before venturing into the mountains, Yun Jinnian had Qian Mama come over, "Assign four people to protect Hemei and Henuan. I don't want them to suffer the slightest mishap!"

Qian Mama immediately appointed a male and a female guard to protect Hemei, and another male and female guard for Henuan, with the rest protecting Yun Jinnian.

The preparations for this mountain journey were quite thorough.

Cotton clothes, cotton-padded jackets, blankets as well as charcoal, kerosene, and Yun Jinnian's medicine chest.

A total of fifty people.

Among them were ten men brought by Hu Lao San, and the rest were Chu Yu's and Yuwen Ya's men.

The group still followed the orders of Chu Yu and Hu Lao San. Yun Jinnian dressed very warmly, even her shoes were waterproof for the snow. Upon reaching mid-mountain, the horses were kept in hastily built sheds.

They could only walk by foot further up the mountain.

Yun Jinnian, not knowing Martial Arts, was carried in turns by three female guards.

Mid-mountain was exceedingly cold, especially after nightfall when it was easy to get lost. Generally, people would find a place to rest. Fortunately, Chu Yu and his men had been here a few times before and quickly entered a previously discovered cave, where they set up a stand and cooked a pot of meat and bones to eat with steamed buns. Yun Jinnian sat on a stone cushioned with a wool blanket, sipping hot soup in small sips.

Chu Yu sat beside Yun Jinnian, also sipping soup, and said softly, "You can sleep by the fire later, rest assured, I will watch over you!"

Yun Jinnian nodded slightly, "You should also rest for a while, just have people take turns patrolling."

"Okay!"

Chu Yu felt joy in his heart from Yun Jinnian's concern.

After drinking the meat soup, Chu Yu said, "The further we go up the mountain, the colder and harder the journey becomes. Tomorrow, I will carry you."

"You are our guide, how can I ask you to carry me!"

"I'm not really the guide. Hu Lao San and his people are. Plus, Yuwen Ya has also been here several times, he knows the way. Although Qian Mama and her group are highly skilled in Martial Arts, they are not familiar with the mountains, as it's their first time here. It's safer for me to carry you!"

Yun Jinnian thought for a long while before finally nodding in agreement.

Focusing on drinking her meat soup.

Undoubtedly, Chu Yu was meticulous, fearing that Yun Jinnian, being a woman, would find it difficult to relieve herself in the mountains, he even prepared a potty. After hastily setting up a cover, Yun Jinnian used it for a quick relief, while he sent the men far away and guarded the spot where he could still see, leaving Qian Mama and several others to protect her.

Yun Jinnian was extremely grateful and touched.

So, when it was time to sleep at night, Yun Jinnian arranged for Hemei and Henuan to sleep beside her, close to the fire for warmth.

Chu Yu looked at Yun Jinnian, who was only showing her head, and smiled softly.

The tension from not finding the Snow Lotus finally began to ease a bit.

Chapter 357: A Line of People

Madam Qian's group huddled around one pile, Chu Yu's men around another, and Old Hu's gang yet another, forming three separate parties who kept to themselves, neither interfering with nor provoking each other.

After all, the remuneration Chu Yu offered was indeed generous.

The overt payment was meant to maintain order, while the private rewards given by Chu Yu left nothing to be said.

Voices came from outside the cave, "Who's there?"

Chu Yu rose quickly and walked towards the entrance of the cave.

Observing the line of people holding torches, his brows furrowed slightly.

So late at night? Are there still people moving about in the snowy mountains? Do they not value their lives?

Or perhaps the newcomers meant trouble.

Chu Yu called out in a low voice toward the inside of the cave, "Someone's coming!"

Old Hu immediately gathered his clothes and got up to head outside, while Madam Qian promptly woke Hemei and Henuan.

Despite being tired, the two servant girls quickly became alert and hastily straightened their clothes, standing guard around Yun Jinnian.

Old Hu, noticing the newcomers drawing closer, frowned and said, "They're locals from Nanjiang!"

Chu Yu quickly grasped some understanding, "Everyone, be on your guard!"

They had entered Tian Mountain numerous times but never found the item; however, this time, with Yun Jinnian with them, there was a persistent feeling that they might find the Tian Mountain Snow Lotus.

And now, these people finally could not stay silent any longer.

Madam Qian also lifted Yun Jinnian into her embrace, concealing her face with a large cloak.

"Madam Qian?" Yun Jinnian whispered.

"Go back to sleep, it's nothing," Madam Qian replied gently.

Although there were complaints against Yun Jinnian, after all, she was only twelve years old, still a child, and Madam Qian's anger subsided soon after it flared up.

It wasn't worth holding a grudge against a child for too long, as that would be embarrassing.

"Madam Qian, let me fix my hair, and I've smelled a hint of blood; please remind everyone to be careful!" Yun Jinnian said while feeling for the small cauldron inside her waist pouch.

For some inexplicable reason, she had brought it with her this time.

"Alright!"

After Madam Qian had helped Yun Jinnian tie up her hair and reminded everyone to stay cautious, she once again wrapped Yun Jinnian with the cloak, covering her face.

Hemei and Henuan also sat aside, their hands on the soft swords tied to their waists.

Outside the cave, the torches came closer, and Old Hu shouted in the Nanjiang dialect, "Who are you?"

"We're searching for the Tian Mountain Snow Lotus, and since it got dark before we could find a cave to rest in, we saw a fire here and dared to disturb you!"

Old Hu said a few words to Chu Yu, who nodded in agreement.

Then Old Hu said, "Our master invites you to rest inside the cave and we'll even cook a pot of meat soup to satisfy your hunger!"

The people from Nanjiang appeared utterly astonished.

But they still entered the cave.

The cave was spacious, and even with the addition of this group of twenty Nanjiang people, it did not feel crowded. Old Hu took charge of hosting, ordering his men to cook the meat soup and distributing steamed buns to everyone, being polite, thorough, and attentive.

They were treated with great courtesy.

The Nanjiang people went deeper into the cave and looked around.

In the cave were three fire pits; beside one, an old nurse sat holding a child in her arms, flanked by two children, while five women and ten men stood guard behind her, each holding a Precious Sword, clearly there to protect the child in the old woman's embrace.

Another fire pit was surrounded by more than twenty men, their Precious Swords also at hand.

Those assisting with the soup were Old Hu's men.

One of the Nanjiang people quietly opened a jade bottle at his waist, intending to pour the insects inside onto the ground, but the insects hid inside the bottle, refusing to come out.

In his haste, he shook it a few times, and although the insect fell out, it quickly crawled to his foot and then fearfully onto his body.

"..."

Chapter 358: Accident

What's going on here?

The Nanjiang man Amdo found it incomprehensible.

This was the first time his poisonous insects seemed to be afraid of something, not daring to bite people.

They didn't even dare to leave his side.

"?"

Amdo looked around but didn't notice anything amiss.

By the time the meat soup was ready, Amdo took a sip and found it quite fragrant, but he could never have dreamed that the soup had already been tampered with.

And Amdo and his people felt at ease, as they were in Nanjiang, their territory, where they had nothing to fear.

Only Yun Jinnian, leaning into Nanny Qian's embrace, hooked his lips into a cold smirk.

The soup was indeed delicious; with steamed buns, it was both warming and filling. Amdo drank two large bowls of soup, thanked Hu Lao San, and then the group nestled down to sleep together.

Waiting to act in the latter half of the night.

But then there came a noise from outside, and Hu Lao San went out again.

The newcomers were a party of fifteen, the leader was heavily clothed, only his eyes showing, and the men beside him each held a sword and carried something on their backs.

"Big brother, we came to the mountains looking for herbs and it's our first time here; we're not familiar with the terrain. Seeing the firelight here, we wondered if we could stay for the night!" Teng Fei asked.

He and Chu Yu had met once before, so seeing Chu Yu, he knew Yun Jinnian must be there too and quickly glanced at his own master.

Hu Lao San hurriedly said, "Please come in!"

It wasn't his cave; it was first come, first served. The newcomers were just being polite.

Zhou Yunshen and his people entered the cave.

They sat down separately.

Zhou Yunshen glanced towards Nanny Qian and saw that she was cradling someone in her arms, guessing it was Yun Jinnian, and he allowed a gentle smile to show.

After Teng Fei and Teng Mu helped him take off his cloak and found a place for him to sit, Teng Fei then approached Hu Lao San, "Big brother, do you mind if we start a fire to roast something to fill our stomachs? We caught a wild boar at the foot of the mountain, and it's already been cleaned!"

"Be my guest!"

Chu Yu was also sizing up Zhou Yunshen.

He wasn't as good-looking, as tall, as distinguished, nor as healthy as Chu Yu.

There was no need to consider him important, but there was one thing, Zhou Yunshen was the Crown Prince of the Great Zhou Kingdom, the future Emperor, which infuriated Chu Yu.

But seeing that Yun Jinnian had not spoken from beginning to end, seemingly unwilling to speak with Zhou Yunshen, Chu Yu was slightly relieved.

Zhou Yunshen also wasn't in a hurry, sizing up Chu Yu.

He glanced again in Yun Jinnian's direction and sat quietly, waiting for the roasted boar.

A pot of hot noodle soup, a roasted wild boar.

The roasted wild boar was especially fragrant; in an instant, the cave was filled with the smell of meat. Chu Yu's party had eaten earlier and seemed to be getting hungry again from the smell.

Teng Fei also roasted a few chickens and rabbits, tantalizingly sour to the senses.

But from beginning to end, Yun Jinnian didn't move at all, as if asleep.

Zhou Yunshen's smile deepened on his face.

A wild boar, along with roasted chicken and rabbit, was simply too much to eat. Teng Fei offered the leftovers to Hu Lao San and Amdo, and Hu Lao San graciously accepted.

Seeing Hu Lao San accept, Amdo followed suit and took some as well.

Hu Lao San didn't eat, instead, he stored the food away, planning to have it for breakfast the next morning. Amdo also kept the food for later.

For a time, in the cave, it was difficult to say who was friend or foe among the three parties; but there was one thing they all had in common: they were all there to seek the Tian Mountain Snow Lotus.

But with such a vast mountain range, where to search, and whether one could find it, was a matter of personal ability.

At midnight, everyone seemed to have fallen asleep.

Amdo opened another porcelain bottle, letting the insect inside come out. He had thought the insect would be afraid, but once it hit the ground, it changed color and quickly scurried in Yun Jinnian's direction...

Chapter 359: Unexpected Gains

Amdo was overjoyed at the sight.

But he waited a long time, and the insect never came back.

At this moment, beneath the wide cape, it so happened that Yun Jinnian could see the insect, and the insect stared back at Yun Jinnian.

One person, one insect—they looked at each other, eyes locked.

Yun Jinnian knew that the insects of Nanjiang were no ordinary creatures; they were very spiritual. Seeing that the insect changed several colors upon noticing Yun Jinnian's gaze and then rolled around on the ground.

It seemed to be courting Yun Jinnian's favor.

Yun Jinnian was momentarily taken aback, then gently reached out to the insect, which immediately lay down on the ground as though waiting for Yun Jinnian to touch it.

As soon as Yun Jinnian moved, many people woke up.

But since she made no significant movements, they all pretended to be asleep, and no one stirred.

Yun Jinnian hesitated for a long time before finally pressing her finger on the insect's head.

Withdrawing her hand, the insect quickly rolled around several times, then buried its head low, once again awaiting Yun Jinnian's touch.

Only after several back-and-forth exchanges did the insect stick out its tongue at Yun Jinnian and lick around its mouth.

Yun Jinnian suddenly remembered that the insects of Nanjiang were bloodsuckers.

She drew a silver needle from the bracelet on her wrist, pricked her finger gently, and squeezed out a drop of blood.

The insect immediately widened its eyes at the sight, waiting for the blood to fall, and quickly sucked it up.

Then, satisfied, it collapsed on the ground, motionless.

Yun Jinnian found it amusing and reached out to the insect again; it leaped into her palm and looked up at her expectantly.

Yun Jinnian fed it another drop of blood, and this time, after eating it, the insect thoroughly fell asleep.

Yun Jinnian poked it; there was no response.

She poked it again; still no response.

Yun Jinnian thought for a moment, wrapped it in a handkerchief, and placed it inside the pouch containing the small cauldron.

Everyone in the cave knew Yun Jinnian had moved, but they did not know what she did.

Amdo waited a long time without seeing the insect return. At first, he could remain calm, but as he waited without any sign of the insect, he began to grow anxious and sweat formed on his brow.

That was the sect's only Spiritual Poisonous Insect.

Heading out this time, the elder had charged him with the insect that could find the Snow Lotus of Tian Mountain; if it were lost...

Not daring to ponder deeply, Amdo swiftly pricked his own finger, hoping to lure it back with the scent of blood.

However, no matter how long he waited, the Spiritual Poisonous Insect did not return. Little did Amdo know that the insect had eaten Yun Jinnian's blood and, being placed next to the small cauldron, had long since escaped from the handkerchief and burrowed into the cauldron to sleep.

Even the Heavenly King himself wouldn't be able to coax it out now!

Amdo became both anxious and panicked, tumbling out several Poisonous Insects that the Spiritual Poisonous Insect liked to eat the most. As soon as these Poisonous Insects hit the ground, they panicked and scrambled onto Amdo's body, with two of them even convulsing a few times and dying from fright.

Amdo did not understand what was happening, but dared not make any more rash moves.

Yun Jinnian, on the other hand, quickly fell back asleep, a smile curling up at the corners of her mouth as she thought of the insect.

Money Mama knew that Yun Jinnian had woken up, but having spent days together, she felt a hint of pity for Yun Jinnian. Therefore, she closed her eyes as if asleep and, seeing that Yun Jinnian had gone back to sleep, she too drifted off.

At the break of dawn, the men in the cave rose first, went outside to relieve themselves, then set up a pot to melt snow into water before they each freshened up simply.

The female guards also washed up very simply.

Yun Jinnian awoke faintly, her eyes still moist and slightly dazed.

Zhou Yunshen looked at her, his eyes deepening, but then he saw Chu Yu quickly walk in front of Yun Jinnian, blocking his view.

Chapter 360: Hostility

"Awake?" Chu Yu asked gently and softly.

Yun Jinnian nodded.

Chu Yu stretched out his hand, and after a moment of hesitation, Yun Jinnian placed her small hand in Chu Yu's larger one, allowing him to help her up, "Did you sleep well last night?"

"Fairly well!"

Hemei and Henuan helped Yun Jinnian straighten her clothes, then quickly brought over some hot water, a small silver basin, and a clean cloth.

After Yun Jinnian freshened up, she was escorted by Hemei, Henuan, and five female guards to relieve herself, while Chu Yu once again stood at a distance, guarding the place where he could see Yun Jinnian.

Such behavior would make anyone realize that Yun Jinnian was actually a woman.

Amdo was rummaging through the cave, searching here and there.

Perplexed, Hu Laosan asked, "Brother, what are you looking for?"

"My pet has gone missing!"

Hu Laosan immediately understood that Amdo's Poisonous Insect had escaped.

But aren't Poisonous Insects not supposed to easily leave their owners?

It was strange indeed.

After Yun Jinnian had finished and come back, she washed up once more before Zhou Yunshen came forward to greet her, "Young Master Han, we meet again!"

As Yun Jinnian was dressed as a man, Zhou Yunshen's address was appropriate.

"Master Zhou is too kind!" Yun Jinnian said, giving Zhou Yunshen a fist-in-palm salute.

Because of the cold, her little face was rosy, her eyes bright and large, with delicate features and beautiful red lips, astonishingly beautiful and beyond compare.

"Young Master Han, no need for such courtesy. I thank you for your hospitality last night," Zhou Yunshen said.

Yun Jinnian shook her head slightly, "Last night it was Big Brother Chu who offered you shelter, not me. If you want to thank someone, you should thank Big Brother Chu!"

No sooner had Yun Jinnian finished speaking than Chu Yu quickly approached, "Exactly, it was I who gave you shelter last night. If you're to thank anyone, it should be me. My young Han has nothing to do with it!"

After speaking, Chu Yu playfully ruffled Yun Jinnian's hair, "The meat soup is ready. Go have a bowl to warm up. We'll be setting off soon!"

Yun Jinnian nodded, not at all annoyed by Chu Yu ruffling her hair, and after giving Zhou Yunshen another salute, she turned and left.

Halfway there, she reached up to smooth her hair, as if something occurred to her, and gently shook her head.

Although Yun Jinnian's expression was unseen, one could sense that she was certainly annoyed yet resigned in an adorable way.

Watching Zhou Yunshen, Chu Yu felt in high spirits.

"Your Highness, Crown Prince Zhou, greetings!" Chu Yu said as he gave a slight fist-in-palm salute.

For a fleeting moment, Zhou Yunshen felt jealous.

The day he met Yun Jinnian, he had been impressed by her composure, serenity, and beauty, feeling a stir of mundane desire.

Now seeing the clear difference in how Yun Jinnian treated him compared to Chu Yu, he felt jealous.

"Greetings to Your Highness, Prince Rui!" Zhou Yunshen responded, returning the salute.

The two men, at the same time, deeply disliked each other.

Yet they had to maintain a facade of cordiality.

Silence.

Chu Yu remained silent, and Zhou Yunshen said nothing.

It was only when their respective subordinates came to announce that breakfast was ready that they quietly went their separate ways.

At the other side, Chu Yu sat next to Yun Jinnian, talking continuously, while Yun Jinnian just smiled shallowly. Then she secretly whispered something into Chu Yu's ear, which made him suddenly widen his eyes.

Yun Jinnian nodded tenderly.

Zhou Yunshen watched this scene, gripping his chopsticks tightly.

"Teng Fei!"

"Yes?"

"Prepare some meat dishes; I'll take them to Young Master Han myself."

Teng Fei quickly prepared a large plate of meat dishes and followed behind Zhou Yunshen.

"Young Master Han!"

Yun Jinnian looked up, puzzled at Zhou Yunshen, "Is there something you need, Master Zhou?"

"I've brought some meat dishes for you!" As Zhou Yunshen finished speaking, Teng Fei immediately presented the meat dishes.

Yun Jinnian actually wanted to say that she didn't really like meat.

Moreover, her breakfast usually consisted of just a bowl of meat soup and a steamed bun, without any meat.

Just as she was about to reach out and take it, Chu Yu spoke indifferently, "Young Han does not like to eat meat; Master Zhou, you may as well take the meat back!"