

## **Seller 741**

### Chapter 741: Prince Zetian and Shang Jiao

"Why were you two fighting so early in the morning?" Mark continued calmly. "That level of intensity wasn't just casual sparring. You were calling him things like 'shameless hypocrite.' That doesn't sound friendly. Did you two fight about something? Did he act rudely or inappropriately around you? If it is, then tell me. You don't have to worry that he is some imperial prince."

Shang Jiao's face flushed again.

She turned her head to the side, clearly avoiding his gaze. For a few seconds, she said nothing. Then she spoke in a quieter voice.

"It really isn't anything important."

Mark raised an eyebrow but waited.

She hesitated, then continued, her words coming out a little faster. "He commented on my fighting style. Said I relied too much on my staff. Said my growth would stagnate. It annoyed me."

"That alone wouldn't push you this far," Mark replied.

Shang Jiao bit her lip.

"He also said," she added softly, "that unless someone keeps pushing me, I'll never truly improve. That I'm strong only because I haven't met enough rivals."

She clenched her fist. "I know he wasn't completely wrong. But hearing it from him... it felt irritating."

Mark nodded slowly.

"That's still not enough to explain the hostility," he said.

She was silent again.

After a moment, she sighed and spoke honestly. "He kept looking down on me at first. Not openly, but... it was there. Like he was testing me. I wanted to prove that I wasn't just a mage hiding behind power."

Mark chuckled softly.

"So you decided to prove it by almost draining yourself dry before breakfast."

Shang Jiao shot him an annoyed look. "You're not helping."

He smiled wider. "I'm not scolding you either."

Her expression softened slightly.

Mark walked closer and placed a hand lightly on her shoulder. "You did well. You pushed yourself, and you forced him to reveal his limits. That alone means you gained something today."

She looked up at him. "Really?"

"Yes," he said with a firm nod.

Mark then straightened and looked toward the palace. "Go rest. Eat something. Your ether reserves are nearly empty."

Shang Jiao glanced once more in the direction Zetian had been taken, then finally turned to leave.

As she walked away, Mark remained standing on the platform, his eyes thoughtful.

Later;

The healing ward was quiet, filled with the soft glow of restorative formations etched into the walls. The air carried a faint medicinal scent meant to calm the mind and body.

Zetian lay on the bed, his half mask still covering the left side of his face. Sweat soaked his hair and collar as his chest rose and fell unevenly.

In his dream, he stood frozen in place.

He saw his mother kneeling on cold stone, her white fox tail trembling as she begged. Her voice cracked as she pleaded with his father to spare her, to spare the child clinging to her robes. Then came the flash of a blade, ruthless and final. Blood stained the floor. Her body collapsed, lifeless.

A younger Zetian screamed.

The prince jolted awake with a sharp gasp.

He sat upright abruptly, his breathing heavy, his heart pounding as if it would burst from his chest. For a few seconds, he stared blankly ahead before reality slowly returned. He grabbed a towel from the bedside and wiped the sweat from his face, his hands trembling slightly.

"Again," he muttered under his breath.

As he lowered the towel, the door creaked open.

Shang Jiao stepped inside.

Zetian froze.

For a split second, he stared at her in shock, the mask still off his face. His golden-blue eyes widened slightly before he hurriedly reached for the mask and pressed it back into place.

Shang Jiao blinked, clearly surprised. "Whoa..."

Zetian stiffened. "You saw that?"

She walked closer, tilting her head slightly as she looked at him. "I thought you had burns or scars on that side of your face or something," she said honestly. "It looks completely normal."

He paused, then exhaled slowly. "Is that all you thought?"

Shang Jiao blinked. "What else?"

Zetian shook his head, then spoke carefully. "I possess the Baihu constitution. If I expose my face and eyes to the opposite gender for too long, it amplifies emotions. Those who already feel goodwill toward me may fall in love. Those who dislike me may grow extreme hatred. It works similarly to hypnosis... but without my control."

Shang Jiao frowned slightly. "That sounds troublesome."

"It is," he replied quietly. "That's why I keep the mask on."

She crossed her arms and looked at him calmly. "Relax. It won't work on me."

Zetian looked at her sharply. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "I'm immune to mental interference. Illusions, charm, hypnosis. All useless to me."

He stared at her for a moment, clearly conflicted. "Are you really sure?" he asked again, his voice lower. "Because if something goes wrong... the Patriarch will kill me."

Shang Jiao snorted softly. "My brother isn't the monster you think he is."

She pulled a chair closer and sat down, her tone easing. "And even if something did happen, I can handle myself. You don't need to be so tense. Just take off the mask"

Zetian hesitated for a long moment.

His fingers rested on the edge of the half mask, tightening slightly as if it weighed more than it should. He glanced at Shang Jiao once, then away, then back again. Finally, as if making up his mind, he exhaled slowly and lifted the mask from his face.

The moment it came off, his eyes changed.

The pupils narrowed into vertical slits, glowing faintly with a pale gold light. His features sharpened subtly, as if every line of his face had been refined by something ancient and inhuman. There was a strange harmony to it, an unsettling beauty that did not feel purely human.

Shang Jiao froze.

Her eyes widened, her body going still as she stared at him without blinking. For a heartbeat, the room seemed to quiet completely.

"Oh my god..." she said softly. "You have such a beautiful face..."

Zetian's heart dropped. "What?"

She leaned forward slightly, her gaze unfocused, almost dazed. "I feel like I'm looking at the most handsome person I've ever seen..."

His face went pale.

"Oh, shit," he blurted out. "No—no, no, no—"

He scrambled for the mask, panic flashing across his eyes. "I told you not to look," he cursed under his breath. "You stupid—"

Just as he was about to put the mask back on, Shang Jiao suddenly reached out and caught his wrist.

Then she burst out laughing.

"Relax, Prince," she said, laughing so hard she had to bend slightly at the waist. "I was just joking. Hahaha..."

Zetian froze mid-motion.

She casually took the mask from his hand and lowered it, still laughing. "I told you earlier, didn't I? I'm immune to your bloodline's effects. I'm the Blizzard Pegasus inheritor, remember?" She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "You should've seen your face. You panicked so badly."

She straightened and grinned at him. "Honestly, you must've practiced that warning speech a thousand times."

For a second, Zetian just stared at her.

Then he let out a short, helpless laugh and shook his head. "You almost gave me a heart attack."

She handed the mask back to him. "Then don't randomly test dangerous abilities on people," she replied lightly.

He took the mask, but this time he didn't put it on immediately. He looked at it in his palm, then back at her. "So... you really weren't affected?"

"Nope," Shang Jiao said confidently. "Not even a little."

Zetian studied her face carefully, searching for any hint of lingering charm or distortion. He found none. Her eyes were clear, her expression playful, exactly the same as before.

"Interesting," he murmured under his breath.

She crossed her arms. "What? Disappointed that your scary fox charm didn't work?"

He smiled faintly. "Relieved," he corrected his tone. "I'm very relieved."

He finally put the mask back on, the tension in his shoulders easing. "You know," he added, "most people wouldn't joke about something like that."

Shang Jiao shrugged indifferently. "Most people aren't me."

He chuckled softly, shaking his head again. "That much is obvious."

For the first time since waking from the nightmare, Zetian felt genuinely at ease. The room no longer felt like a cage, and the weight of his bloodline didn't press as heavily on his chest.

Chapter 742: A Father

A while later, the two of them walked side by side along the frost-paved paths that led back toward the Ice Palace.

Neither of them spoke at first, the silence stretching comfortably rather than awkwardly.

Zetian was the one who eventually broke it.

"May I ask you something?" he said, his tone careful.

Shang Jiao glanced at him briefly and nodded. "Go ahead."

He hesitated, choosing his words. "Why the change in attitude?"

He let out a small, self-conscious breath. "For the past few days, whenever I tried to talk to you, you either brushed me off or gave short answers. And now..." He gestured vaguely between them. "Now you're talking to me like a friend. I don't dislike it, of course, but I'm curious."

He looked at her more directly. "Is it because you felt pity for me? Because of my bloodline?"

His voice softened. "I've seen those reactions before. Once people learn the truth, it's usually one of three things. Pity. Respect. Or scorn."

They continued walking, their footsteps crunching softly on frost.

Shang Jiao shook her head slowly. "No. It's not that."

She stopped for a moment, then resumed walking at an unhurried pace. "I don't pity you."

Zetian blinked, surprised.

"I acknowledge your strength," she continued plainly. "That's all."

She glanced sideways at him. "You fought seriously. You pushed yourself even when you knew the risks. And you didn't hide behind your status."

After a brief pause, she added, "Also... you're not like most princes."

Zetian raised an eyebrow. "That's not exactly comforting."

She snorted lightly. "I mean it in a good way. You don't have that hollow arrogance that people like your uncle Lei Fengyun carry around. You were a prick, though," she said bluntly, "especially with your comments."

He coughed. "Fair."

"But," she went on, "I could tell you weren't looking down on me. You were testing me. That's different."

They walked a few more steps before she spoke again, her tone more serious.

"As for why I ignored you before... You already know the answer." She looked straight ahead. "There's tension between the palace and us. You're the Emperor's eldest grandson and the palace's representative. How could I not be wary of you?"

Zetian exhaled slowly, a bitter smile forming beneath his mask. "To be honest... I didn't come here voluntarily either."

Shang Jiao looked at him this time.

"My grandfather," he said quietly, correcting himself mid-sentence, "His Majesty... he chose me. I was sent here as a replacement for Uncle Fengyun. A hostage, more or less."

His voice was calm, but there was a tired edge beneath it. "At least Uncle could move back and forth between here and home. I can't."

He paused, then added with a faint shrug, "But it's still better than staying at the imperial palace. There, I constantly have to endure the looks, the whispers, the unspoken contempt from my own family."

Shang Jiao didn't reply immediately.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, several thoughts crossing her mind at once. The image of an imperial prince, powerful and talented, yet quietly cast aside, didn't quite fit the picture she had grown up imagining.

After a moment, she said, "Then I guess we're not so different."

Zetian looked at her in surprise.

"I didn't choose to be here either, but have to stay due to some unexplainable reasons," she continued.

She then looked ahead toward the towering silhouette of the Ice Palace. "If you're staying here, then at least don't think of yourself as just a hostage."

He smiled faintly. "And what should I think of myself as?"

She glanced away. "Well, you can consider yourself as my fri... well... sparring partner."

Zetian laughed softly, the sound carrying lightly through the cold air. "I guess that's not bad at all."

They continued walking toward the palace.

Three days later, the inner courtyard of the Ice Palace was filled with laughter instead of cold silence.

Lu Shan was running in wide circles across the frost-carved tiles, his small boots kicking up glittering snowflakes as Mark chased after him with exaggerated movements. Each time Mark pretended to almost catch him, Lu Shan squealed with laughter and darted away, his violet eyes shining with excitement.

"Papa, you're too slow!" Lu Shan shouted proudly.

Mark laughed and shook his head. "You little rascal. You think I can't catch you?" Yet, he didn't increase his speed. Just acting like a normal dad who couldn't catch his little son.

Nearby, Shen Yi was racing back and forth like a streak of light, her tiny feet moving far faster than her size suggested. Every now and then, she stumbled, only to pick herself up again and keep running, completely fearless. Shen Ling watched her closely, ready to intervene, but couldn't stop smiling.

"She's getting faster every day," Shen Ling said calmly. "At this rate, the guards won't be able to keep up with her."

Song Yue chuckled as she sat on the stone bench beside them. "She takes after her father. Always moving here and there, always restless."

Mark glanced back at them while lifting Lu Shan into the air, spinning him once before setting him down again. "Hey, I want to stay in peace, but the world doesn't let me. What to do. Something just keeps happening in my life again and again..."

Lu Shan burst into laughter again and tried to escape, only to be gently grabbed by Song Yue this time.

A little farther away, beneath the shade of an ice-sculpted pavilion, Sylvandria stood quietly. She was holding both elven twins in her arms, one cradled against each side of her chest. Faenya and Kaelen were awake but calm, their small fingers gripping her sleeves as if afraid to let go.

Her expression was complicated.

She was happy. Truly happy. She was finally part of this family, no longer standing at the edges or hiding in silence. Watching Mark laugh freely, seeing Song Yue and Shen Ling talk without tension, and seeing the children play together filled her heart with warmth.

Yet, there was sadness, too.

Because she couldn't join them.

The elven twins were different. Their bloodline was ancient and pure, and with it came limitations.

Even though they were already eleven months old and had reached the second circle of cultivation, their bodies were still fragile. They couldn't stand properly, couldn't walk, and spent nearly twenty hours a day asleep. When awake, they needed constant care.

More than that, they couldn't be separated.

If Faenya and Kaelen were more than a few meters apart, they would immediately begin to cry, their small faces contorting in panic as if something essential had been torn away. It was as though an invisible bond connected them, one that even Sylvandria couldn't fully explain.

So she stood there, holding both of them, gently rocking back and forth.

Mark noticed her eventually.

He paused his game and looked toward her, his smile softening. For a moment, their eyes met. Sylvandria returned the smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

Song Yue followed his gaze and understood immediately. She said nothing, only giving Sylvandria a warm look that carried reassurance rather than pity.

Around the courtyard, several guards stood at attention. They had been assigned to protect the area, but most of them were distracted, stealing glances at the scene unfolding before them.

This was the man who had dared to declare independence.

The man who had defeated the former patriarch in open combat.

The man who had stood against the Emperor without fear.

And yet, here he was.

Laughing.

Running.

Letting his children climb on his back and tug at his robes.

To the guards, it felt strange. Almost unreal.

But at the same time, it was admirable.

They realized that this was not a weakness. This was the kind of strength that could only come from someone who had nothing left to prove.

As the laughter echoed softly through the icy courtyard, the palace felt less like the seat of a powerful sect... and more like a home.

The laughter in the courtyard slowly faded as Lan Xia approached, a slim jade scroll held carefully in her hands. The soft crunch of snow beneath her boots drew Mark's attention first.

Lu Shan was in the middle of climbing onto Mark's back when Mark felt the familiar shift in the air. He straightened and glanced over, immediately noticing the scroll.

"Alright, alright," Mark said with a smile, gently setting Lu Shan down. "Go play with your sister for a bit. Papa will be right back."

Chapter 743: Lan Xia's take on Lu Zhen's other wives

Lu Shan nodded obediently and ran off toward Shen Yi, who was already attempting to climb a low ice sculpture on her own. Song Yue caught her just in time, shaking her head with a helpless smile.

Mark walked over to Lan Xia, brushing the snow from his sleeves. "What is it?"

Lan Xia handed him the scroll without ceremony. "A message just arrived."

Mark took it, his fingers pausing slightly as he felt the seal. "From the imperial palace already?" He raised an eyebrow. "They're being far too impatient if that's the case."

Lan Xia shook her head. "It's not from the Emperor."

Mark looked at her again, surprised this time. "Then who?"

"Lord Hei," she replied calmly. "He sent word that he will arrive at the sect this afternoon. He wants to speak with you in person."

Mark's expression shifted immediately. The casual ease he had while playing with his children faded into thoughtful seriousness. "Lord Hei..." he murmured. "That's unexpected."

He glanced down at the scroll again, but didn't open it yet. If Lord Hei was coming personally, the contents were likely secondary to the visit itself.

"I assume this isn't something that can be postponed," Mark said.

Lan Xia nodded. "No. His tone was... deliberate. Whatever he wants to discuss, he considers it important."

Mark let out a quiet breath. "Alright. I'll be there."

As he turned slightly, his gaze drifted back to the courtyard. Lu Shan had managed to trip Shen Yi in his excitement, and now both children were sitting in the snow, laughing as Song Yue scolded them half-heartedly. Shen Ling stood nearby with her arms crossed, watching with amused patience, while Sylvandria remained a short distance away, gently rocking the twins in her arms.

Lan Xia followed his gaze.

After a moment of silence, she spoke again, her voice softer this time. "You know... I've heard countless stories about households where multiple women share the same husband."

Mark glanced at her.

"They're usually filled with schemes, jealousy, silent battles, and endless competition," Lan Xia continued. "Even powerful cultivators are no exception to that."

She looked back at the courtyard, at the women talking quietly, the children laughing freely, and the absence of tension that should have been there.

"But your family is different," she said. "There's no hostility. No hidden knives behind smiles. They treat one another like real family."

She smiled faintly. "You're lucky, Husband. Truly lucky."

Mark let out a soft breath and replied, "Maybe it's because I wasn't a king or anything important when they married me. Back then, I was just a normal guy running a weapon store."

Lan Xia blinked in surprise. "But you told me before that your father was the Emperor of the land you lived in."

Mark smiled faintly, the kind of smile that carried more weight than humor. "Like I said before, it's a long story." He paused, then added, "But I'll tell you the short version."

His gaze drifted toward the courtyard, where Song Yue was crouched beside Lu Shan, brushing snow from the boy's hair while Shen Yi toddled around them, laughing without restraint.

"There was a prophecy," Mark began calmly. "One that spoke of the Empire's destruction. Because of it, my mother exchanged me with another child at birth and sent me away. I grew up not knowing who I really was. Years later, when I finally learned the truth, I was already deep into planning revenge against my parents and the Empire that abandoned me."

Lan Xia listened quietly, not interrupting.

"That was when I met Song Yue," Mark continued. "She came from a noble family and was already engaged to someone else. At first, she was just a customer at my shop. She helped me promote my business, gave me advice, even argued with me over prices." His lips curved slightly. "I never thought much of it back then."

He paused, his expression darkening just a little. "Her fiancé was insecure and cruel. With help from one of his friends, he hurt her badly. She had nowhere to go, so she ran. I gave her shelter. Nothing fancy. Just a place where she could feel safe."

Lan Xia felt the steadiness in his voice, but also the emotion beneath it.

"We became friends," Mark said. "Then closer than friends. We went through hard times together. Dangerous times too. And some very beautiful ones. Around that time, my business grew faster than I ever expected."

He glanced briefly at Shen Ling, who was standing a little apart, watching the children with a composed smile.

"That growth caught the attention of Shen Ling," Mark went on. "She was a princess of a neighboring kingdom. Her father wanted me as a matrilocal husband. He offered wealth, protection, and a future that most people would never dare refuse."

Lan Xia slowly nodded, beginning to see the shape of the past.

"When Song Yue heard about it," Mark said quietly, "she didn't get angry. She didn't cry in front of me. Instead, she thought about Shen Ling. About how Shen Ling treated her like a sister, how that kingdom had given her a sense of home she never really had."

He swallowed lightly. "Song Yue sacrificed her own feelings. She told me to marry Shen Ling. She said it was the best path for everyone."

Lan Xia's eyes softened.

"I think that was the moment," Mark continued, "when Shen Ling truly understood what kind of person Song Yue was. From then on, they stopped being rivals in name and became closer than most sisters I've ever seen."

He fell silent, watching as Song Yue lifted Lu Shan into her arms while Shen Yi clapped happily at the falling snow.

"That's why," Mark said at last, his voice steady again, "there was never room for schemes or jealousy. They didn't come into my life because of power. They stayed because of trust."

"And later on," Mark continued in a quieter voice, "while I was searching for clues about my brother, I ended up in an elven world by accident."

Lan Xia listened without interrupting.

"That's where I met Sylvandria," he said. "Back then, she was a priestess. Pure, upright, and devoted to her faith. Probably the purest person I had ever met. Fate pushed us together through a few life-and-death situations. If we hadn't relied on each other, neither of us would have survived."

He paused briefly, then went on.

"At first, she didn't have a close bond with Shen Ling or Song Yue. When she followed me, she was just a powerful elven demigod from another world. A companion. A friend. Nothing more."

His gaze softened. "But when I was gone, she stayed. She fought my enemies, protected my family, and stood beside them when I wasn't there. She even became Lu Shan's godmother. After all that... how could anyone truly hate her?"

Lan Xia nodded slowly, but her thoughts moved in a different direction.

No... he doesn't really see it, she thought. He couldn't. But she could.

She had noticed it clearly.

The sadness and longing were hidden deep in Sylvandria's eyes. The hesitation that appeared whenever the elf looked at Lu Shan, as if she wanted to step closer but restrained herself.

She had also seen Shen Ling's gaze. Calm on the surface, but always lingering for half a breath longer on the boy. A look filled with restraint, ambition, and something quietly buried.

Only Song Yue... Lan Xia realized, seemed truly pure in her thoughts. Open, warm, and without calculation.

Maybe even she knows, Lan Xia thought, that Lu Zhen loves her the most.

Lan Xia's eyes drifted to Mark, who was still watching Song Yue from afar. That gaze... she had never seen that look when he looked at her. It wasn't something he could fake. It was deep, natural, and unquestionable.

So this is what he meant back then, she thought.

When she had confessed her feelings and proposed marriage, he had told her clearly that even if he loved her and married her, she could never be his first priority. At the time, she had thought he was simply being honest, maybe even overly cautious.

Now she understood.

That place was already taken.

But it was fine.

She had chased after him, knowing all of this. She had married him with her eyes open, not blinded by illusions.

If she couldn't replace Song Yue, then she would take the place that belonged to her.

Second place.

And if that wasn't enough, she would make sure that among all his wives, she stood firmly there. Not above Song Yue, but never beneath anyone else.

Lan Xia shook her head lightly, as if brushing the lingering thoughts from her mind. Her tone returned to calm practicality.

"Anyway," she said, "so far, there's no news about the void stone you asked about. None of the elders or sect channels have reported anything."

Mark frowned slightly. "Then... do you think I should ask Lord Hei?"

"Lord Hei?" Lan Xia repeated, raising an eyebrow. "Yes. He's the first person that came to my mind."

Mark hesitated. "I've been keeping him as a last resort. If he does me a favor, I'm worried I'll have to compromise too much with the imperial palace afterward. His position is... sensitive."

Chapter 744: Song Yue's trauma

Lan Xia nodded, understanding his concern. Then she spoke again, her voice steady. "My master has no objection to betrothing her grandson to the princess. She already told me so."

Mark's expression darkened instantly. "No. That doesn't solve anything. I won't sacrifice someone else's future to solve my own problem."

Lan Xia didn't argue. Instead, she calmly asked, "What if no one is sacrificed?"

Mark looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"What if Lord Hei takes Lan Yichen as his disciple?" she said.

Mark froze. "Disciple?"

"Yes," Lan Xia replied. "Think about it. Lord Hei is coming here anyway. If he accepts Yichen as his disciple, then Yichen won't just be some hostage sent to the palace. He'll be under Lord Hei's protection."

She continued, laying it out clearly. "With that status, the palace won't dare treat him poorly. On paper, he can still be sent as a 'hostage,' but in reality, he'll be untouchable. His cultivation, future, and safety will all be secured."

Mark stared at her for a long moment.

Slowly, the tension in his shoulders eased.

"That..." he said at last, a smile forming, "that's actually a very good idea."

Lan Xia smiled back, faintly but with confidence.

Meanwhile, back in the courtyard, Song Yue and Shen Ling continued playing with the children, but their attention kept drifting toward the distance.

Every now and then, both of them glanced in the direction where Mark and Lan Xia were standing together, talking quietly.

After the third time, Shen Ling finally spoke, lowering her voice a little. "I wonder what they've been talking about for so long."

Song Yue shrugged lightly. "Probably clan matters. There's always something going on here."

Shen Ling giggled softly, then leaned closer. "Still... this Sister Xia is quite something."

Song Yue gave her a look. "What do you mean?"

"I've been observing her," Shen Ling continued. "Apart from us, she speaks very coldly to everyone else. Almost emotionless. At first, I thought it was just how she treated servants, but I asked around. She does the same with elders too. Saints, gods, people stronger than even Lord Yujiang from our world."

Song Yue frowned slightly. "It's not nice to talk behind her back like this."

"I'm not insulting her," Shen Ling said calmly. "I'm just stating what I see. The servants say she only started smiling after Lu Zhen entered her life. Before that, she was like an ice statue."

Song Yue stayed silent for a moment, watching Lu Shan chase Shen Yi around the courtyard. "Everyone has their own nature."

Shen Ling nodded, then sighed. "Sister Yue... you should still be careful."

Song Yue turned to her. "Careful? About what?"

"She isn't like Sylvandria or me," Shen Ling said quietly. "We don't compete with you. We already know where our place is. But her... she will."

Song Yue's brows knit together. "Ling'er..."

"Listen," Shen Ling continued. "Do you know what the servants whispered? She openly spoke against the former patriarch. She confronted the imperial prince without hesitation. She even declared that she would abandon the entire clan if it meant staying with Lu Zhen."

Song Yue's expression stiffened slightly.

"And Lu Zhen himself admitted," Shen Ling added, "that she was the one who proposed to him. She was also the one who pushed for marriage."

She paused, choosing her words carefully. "Someone like her... she won't hesitate. If you're careless, she will grab onto him with everything she has."

Song Yue shifted uneasily and suddenly spoke, her voice sharper than she intended. "Please stop it, Xue Xue."

The words had barely left her mouth when the world seemed to pause.

"Eh?" Shen Ling blinked, genuinely startled.

Song Yue froze. The realization hit her a heartbeat too late.

Shen Ling slowly turned her head, her eyes narrowing slightly, curiosity replacing surprise. "Xue Xue?"

At that exact moment, Lu Shan tugged at Song Yue's sleeve and pulled the blindfold from his own eyes with a triumphant grin. "Yay, I caught you, Mother! You're out!"

He waited for her reaction.

But Song Yue didn't take the blindfold back. Her face had gone pale, and she avoided Shen Ling's gaze. After a brief pause, she forced a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Mom just remembered she has something to do."

Without another word, she turned and started walking back toward the palace.

Lu Shan stood there, confused, holding the blindfold. "Eh? Mom... you're out. You can't escape like this. That's cheating."

He looked up at Shen Ling and complained, "Look, Second Mother, Mother is escaping again."

Shen Ling crouched down and gently ruffled his hair, her smile calm and soothing. "Mother must be tired in this cold weather. How about we rest for now?"

Lu Shan frowned but nodded reluctantly.

Nearby, Shen Yi was completely oblivious to everything. She was sitting on the snowy ground, clapping happily as she scooped snow with her tiny hands and let it fall again, giggling as if the world contained nothing but joy.

Shen Ling walked over and gently lifted both children, handing them to Sylvandria. "I'll come back later."

Sylvandria accepted them without question. She could sense something was wrong, but she said nothing, only nodding quietly as she held the children close.

Across the courtyard, Mark noticed Song Yue walking alone toward the palace, her steps hurried and her back stiff. A moment later, he saw Shen Ling following after her.

Mark frowned slightly. "That's strange... what just happened?"

Lan Xia glanced at him but didn't speak.

Mark exhaled softly and turned toward the palace. "I'll be back."

And with that, he followed after them, a faint unease settling in his chest.

Meanwhile, Song Yue walked faster, her steps uneven as she headed toward the palace corridors. The snow beneath her boots crunched softly, each sound echoing louder in her chest than it should have.

"Sis, wait."

Shen Ling caught up to her and gently grabbed her shoulder. Song Yue stiffened but didn't pull away.

"What happened?" Shen Ling asked softly.

Song Yue turned her head slightly. Shen Ling saw it then. Her eyes were red, tears trembling at the edges, stubbornly refusing to fall.

"Not now," Song Yue whispered.

Shen Ling stepped in front of her and turned her around. "Tell me," she said quietly but firmly. "We might not be sisters by blood, but I've always treated you as my elder sister. I've never hidden anything from you. Don't hide this from me."

Song Yue's lips trembled. She tried to smile, failed, and finally looked away. "It's nothing..."

Shen Ling waited.

After a few breaths, Song Yue spoke again, her voice breaking. "I just... remembered my best friend. My childhood friend. Lin Xue. She was like my sister."

Shen Ling's expression changed. Her voice lowered. "She's the one who betrayed you."

Song Yue's composure finally shattered. Tears slipped down her cheeks as she nodded. "She stabbed my husband, Ling'er. How could she do that? How could someone I trusted with my life do something like that?"

At that moment, a familiar voice reached them.

"Schatz... what happened?"

Mark had arrived, concern written plainly on his face.

Before Song Yue could react, Shen Ling stepped forward and pulled her into a hug, turning slightly so Mark couldn't see her face. Shen Ling looked at him calmly. "It's nothing. Just women's matters. We'll handle it ourselves."

Mark hesitated, then noticed Song Yue's shaking shoulders. "Are you crying? Why?"

Shen Ling's gaze sharpened just a little. "Lu Zhen. I said it's not something men should be involved in. Go."

Mark straightened instantly. "Yes, ma'am."

He took a few steps back, then paused and turned again. "Everything is alright... right?"

Shen Ling nodded. "Yes. Now go."

"Uh... alright," Mark muttered, retreating awkwardly. He didn't understand what had happened, but experience had taught him when not to push.

Once he was gone, Shen Ling kept an arm around Song Yue as they continued walking.

"Thank you," Song Yue said quietly.

Shen Ling squeezed her shoulder. "It's alright. Forget about it, sis. Look at you now. You're safe. And Lu Zhen... he's more than fine."

Song Yue shook her head slightly. "Lu Zhen suffered so many injuries saving me back then, Ling'er. Just when we thought everything was finally over, she almost killed him. To save his life, Lord Yujiang had to place that core inside him. Every time I think of her... I can't bear it."

Shen Ling gently stroked her back. "Shh... shh... it's alright. Forget about her. She doesn't deserve space in your heart anymore. You survived. He survived. That's what matters."

Song Yue closed her eyes, leaning into Shen Ling's support as they walked on, the cold air slowly calming the storm inside her chest.

Chapter 745: Allen and Lin Xue

Mark returned to Lan Xia, his brows still slightly knit.

She glanced at his face. "What happened?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. She only said it was... ladies' stuff." He hesitated, then added awkwardly, "I guess... could it be periods maybe?"

Lan Xia stopped walking and looked at him blankly. "Periods?"

Mark cleared his throat. "I mean... the flux."

"Oh." Realization crossed her face. "It could be." After a brief pause, she added calmly, "She isn't an ascendant after all. For mortals, those cycles can affect emotions a lot."

Then, after thinking for a moment, Lan Xia continued, her tone more thoughtful. "For those with bloodlines like us, the timings are often irregular. And when it happens, the pain can be far worse than what ordinary people experience."

Mark frowned. "But she doesn't have a bloodline." His thoughts immediately began to wander. Then what is it? Chaos energy? Or... is she hiding something from me?

Lan Xia studied his face and smiled faintly. "Sometimes, you think too much."

Mark gave a dry laugh but didn't reply.

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Later that night, Song Yue had already fallen asleep. Her breathing was steady, but traces of exhaustion still lingered on her face.

Shen Ling sat with Mark in a quieter chamber, speaking in a low voice.

"She still remembers it," Shen Ling said softly. "Everything. The betrayal. The knife. The fear. It never really left her."

Mark's fingers tightened slowly into fists.

He had thought time would dull it. He had believed that safety, love, and distance would bury those memories. But hearing Shen Ling's words made him realize the truth. Some wounds never healed. They only slept.

Images rose uninvited in his mind. The system's cold manipulation. Lin Xue's smiling face before everything shattered. Her disappearance. Allen turned away from him, possessed by the system after using the Lamp of Wishes, after becoming human again.

Mark inhaled deeply, forcing the memories down.

"It doesn't matter. We are alive and doing well," he said quietly.

Shen Ling shook her head. "But that doesn't mean she wouldn't feel hurt. I guess the betrayal incident truly suppressed in her heart"

Mark stared at the dimly lit floor, his jaw clenched. He had fought emperors, gods, and fate itself, yet this was one enemy he couldn't strike down.

The past.

And the scars it left behind in the heart of the woman he loved most.

Meanwhile;

Far away from Tianhan, beyond frozen worlds and imperial intrigues, the Plane of Water drifted in quiet isolation.

On the moon of a lush, ocean-ringed planet, dense forests spread like emerald seas. Rivers shimmered under twin suns, and thick mist clung to the ground. Nestled within the greenery was a small village. Wooden homes stood beside metallic towers. Farmers worked the land, children ran through fields, and above them all, sleek robots patrolled calmly, their red optics sweeping the area in constant vigilance.

At the heart of the village stood a castle.

Once ancient and weathered, it had now been reshaped by steel and glass. Mechanical limbs extended from its walls. Energy conduits pulsed like veins. Robots moved in and out with flawless coordination.

Deep inside the castle, in a sealed research chamber, a man stood alone.

He had blond hair and sharp blue eyes. His figure was lean, wrapped in a fitted combat-scientist suit, though the upper layer had been peeled down to his waist. Thick goggles covered his eyes, glowing with streams of data. From his outstretched palm erupted a narrow beam of black light, darker than shadow itself.

The beam struck a floating object in the center of the chamber.

It was a weapon.

A blade-like construct, broken into fragments yet still resisting annihilation. Its shape was strange and familiar at the same time, eerily similar to Mark's favorite weapon, Unnamed. But unlike ordinary matter, it did not melt or crack. Instead, under the black laser, its surface peeled away in layers, disintegrating into motes of nothingness.

Allen adjusted the output, his expression focused and calm.

"So even you resist," he murmured. "Interesting."

The door slid open behind him.

Soft footsteps echoed as a woman entered, her ponytail swaying gently from side to side. Lin Xue was dressed in a sleek black spandex suit, its design both practical and elegant. She crossed the room with familiarity, stopping just behind him.

"Allen," she said softly.

The beam vanished instantly.

Allen lifted his goggles and turned, his sharp features softening into a warm smile. "My love."

Lin Xue tilted her head slightly, her lips curving. "You're still not in your armor."

"Give me a few minutes," he replied lightly. "I was in the middle of something important."

She glanced toward the floating remnants of the weapon, her eyes narrowing with curiosity. "What are you doing this time?"

Allen followed her gaze. His smile didn't fade, but something colder flickered beneath it.

"I'm confirming something," he said. "A theory."

He stepped closer to the fragments, data panels forming around his hands.

"The void stone," he continued calmly. "They call it the most indestructible material in the universe. Immune to gods. Resistant to laws."

Lin Xue folded her arms. "And?"

Allen's blue eyes gleamed. "And I wanted to see if that was a lie."

The black laser reignited, stronger than before. This time, the void-infused fragments trembled violently. Fine cracks of emptiness spread across their surface.

Allen smiled wider.

"It can be destroyed," he said softly. "Everything can. You just need the right method."

Lin Xue crossed her arms and let out an exaggerated sigh.

"C'mon... this thing will never end," she complained, rocking slightly on her heels. "Please... please... the competition is about to start any minute."

Allen didn't even look up at first. He adjusted a setting on the console and replied calmly, "I can talk to them and ask them to postpone your surfing competition."

Lin Xue immediately puffed her cheeks and turned her face away. "That's basically saying I'm more important than your experiments."

Allen paused.

He stared at the data screen for a second longer, then exhaled slowly. The black laser vanished. The floating fragments of the void weapon were sealed back into a containment field. He removed his gloves and placed them neatly on the table.

Then he walked toward her.

He gently pulled her into his arms and held her close. His voice softened. "You were never my second priority, my love."

Lin Xue froze for half a heartbeat, then relaxed completely. She turned back toward him, her annoyance melting away. A small smile crept onto her lips, and then she giggled.

"Good," she said, looping her arms around his neck.

She leaned in and planted a light kiss on his lips. "Love you."

Allen smiled back, warm and genuine, resting his forehead against hers for a moment. "I love you too."

They stood there briefly, the hum of machines filling the silence.

But inside Allen's mind, his thoughts drifted far away.

I wonder how Master is doing...

It had been years.

I guess Lady Yue must have already had a baby by now.

For just a moment, nostalgia tugged at his chest.

I miss them...

Then Lin Xue tugged his hand impatiently. "Hey. If we're late, it's on you."

Allen chuckled softly and let the past sink back into the depths of his mind.

"Alright," he said, turning off the lights in the chamber. "Let's go."

Together, they walked out of the lab, leaving behind the silent fragments of a weapon that should never have been destroyed.

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Back in Heavenly Cold City;

Mark left Lan Xia at the Ice Palace and teleported straight to the sect the moment he heard of the guest's arrival.

Frost-laden air rippled as his figure appeared within the sect grounds. Along the way, disciples paused their cultivation and bowed respectfully, some clearly startled by his sudden appearance.

Mark acknowledged them with brief nods, his pace unhurried but direct.

A few elders sensed his movement and quietly followed at a distance, already guessing who the visitor must be.

By the time Mark stepped into the Sect Master's Hall, the atmosphere inside had already grown heavy.

Hei Zhenyu sat calmly at the central seat, his presence alone making the vast hall feel smaller.

To one side sat Lan Yujin, posture straight, eyes sharp, while two other grand elders occupied the remaining seats, their expressions careful and restrained. Mark greeted Lord Hei with a respectful bow and then took his seat, his gaze steady but attentive.

Hei Zhenyu smiled faintly, folding his hands together. "The reason I came in person today is simple," he said, his voice relaxed yet carrying weight. "There are two matters. The first is official business." He paused briefly, allowing the words to sink in. "An incident occurred recently at the Heavenly Palace. It involved the Jade Emperor."

The hall grew silent.

Chapter 746: Hei Zhenyu's Tenth disciple?

Even Mark's expression shifted slightly.

Hei Zhenyu continued calmly, as if he were speaking of ordinary weather. "Because of that incident, I intend to take a tenth disciple. His Majesty himself put in a word, asking me to give preference to the Lan Sect."

Shock flickered across the faces of the elders.

Lan Yujin's eyes widened first, then lit up with unmistakable excitement. Before anyone else could speak, he rose slightly from his seat and said eagerly, "Our sect is the strongest in the entire Azure Frost Dominion, Your Grace. Talent is something we do not lack. If you wish, I can immediately order all potential disciples to present themselves. You may choose anyone you desire."

The two grand elders exchanged glances, their breathing subtly quickening.

Mark leaned back slightly, fingers resting on the armrest. "What is the exact reason you are taking the tenth disciple, Lord Hei?"

Lan Yujin's expression darkened immediately. He half-rose from his seat, voice sharp with reprimand. "Lan Zhen... how dare you speak to Lord Hei in such a tone—"

Before he could finish, Mark turned his head and shot him a cold, cutting glare.

"Grand Elder Lan," Mark said calmly, but every word carried weight, "Should I remind you that I currently sit in the seat of Sect Master. Every disciple in this sect is under my protection. Even if the Jade Emperor himself comes here and asks for one of them, I cannot simply hand them over. I want to hear the reason."

The hall froze.

The two grand elders stiffened, their hearts pounding. To them, this was dangerously close to open defiance.

Hei Zhenyu, however, did not grow angry.

Instead, he looked at Mark with clear surprise, then a trace of interest.

Before anyone else could react, Mark suddenly spoke again, his voice shifting into a strange tongue the elders could not understand. "I'm sorry," he said in English from his past life and a language only Hei Zhenyu couldn't understand as a fellow earthling, his tone much lower. "Things are not stable in the sect. I need to establish my authority. I can't appear weak right now."

Hei Zhenyu's brows lifted.

Then, to the utter confusion of everyone else present, he replied in the same language.

"It's fine," Hei Zhenyu said calmly. "I understand. As for the reason, keep this to yourself."

The grand elders exchanged startled glances.

They could hear the sounds, but the meaning was completely lost to them.

Lan Yujin frowned deeply. A divine language? A tongue of the gods?

Hei Zhenyu continued, still in English, his voice steady.

"I was summoned to the Heavenly Palace recently. That's the real reason I couldn't attend your wedding. The Jade Emperor himself called me."

Mark's eyes narrowed slightly.

Hei Zhenyu went on, "The gods are planning to launch a grand tournament about ten heavenly years from now. The participants must be below the Transcendent Realm."

Mark immediately understood.

Hei Zhenyu sighed faintly. "All nine of my current disciples have already broken through the second Transcendent stage. They're no longer eligible."

Mark's gaze sharpened. "So you need a new disciple who hasn't crossed that threshold."

"Yes," Hei Zhenyu replied. "But that's not all."

His tone hardened slightly.

"I ended up clashing with the Jade Emperor during the discussion. He implied that humans can never truly rival celestials in such events."

A faint, dangerous smile appeared on Hei Zhenyu's lips.

"I disagreed," he said. "Strongly. I challenged that belief outright."

Mark let out a slow breath.

Hei Zhenyu continued, "So now, I intend to prove it. I want to raise a disciple who can enter that tournament and stand against the chosen of the heavens themselves."

The English conversation ended there.

Hei Zhenyu turned back to the others and spoke in the common language once more.

"The reason I seek a tenth disciple," he said calmly, "is because I need someone untainted by the Transcendent Realm. Someone with potential, resolve, and the will to fight gods without bowing."

The elders felt their scalps tingle.

Lan Yujin swallowed hard.

"So this is not merely a matter of inheritance," one of the grand elders murmured. "It is a confrontation with the Heavenly Palace itself..."

Hei Zhenyu nodded once. "Exactly."

His gaze lingered on Mark, sharp and assessing.

"Now tell me, Sect Master Lan... do you believe your sect has someone who can shake the heavens?"

"Lan Yichen."

The moment Mark's words fell, the temperature in the Sect Master's Hall seemed to drop several degrees.

Lan Yujin's eyes widened in shock. "Lan... Yichen?" he blurted out, unable to hide his reaction.

Mark turned his gaze toward him, brows slightly knit. "What? What happened?"

The second grand elder cleared his throat awkwardly before speaking. "Sect Master... ahem, I mean—" he quickly corrected himself under Mark's calm stare, "—Grand Elder Yujin has already selected Lan Yichen as his personal disciple."

Yujin nodded stiffly, his expression complicated. "When the child turns three heavenly years old, he is meant to formally enter the sect under my tutelage. That is why I was... alarmed."

Mark blinked once, then exhaled slowly. "I wasn't aware of that arrangement." He paused, then continued evenly, "But the imperial palace is already eyeing Yichen as he is only extremely talented, but even has ties to royalty. They wish to betroth him to the Emperor's granddaughter. In that case, becoming Lord Hei's disciple would be the safest path for him."

The grand elders fell silent, clearly shaken.

Hei Zhenyu leaned back slightly, fingers tapping against the armrest as he considered the matter. "Your reasoning is sound," he said after a moment. "But bloodline, background, and political value alone are not enough. I do not accept disciples lightly."

His gaze sharpened. "I will need to inspect this Lan Yichen personally."

Mark nodded without hesitation. "That's only fair."

Just as the matter seemed settled, Lan Yujin suddenly spoke again, a faint smile appearing on his aged face. "Then... what about your son, Lan Zhen?"

Mark's brow lifted at once. "My son?"

Yujin's smile widened, carrying a hint of calculation. "I heard that your son is only half Yichen's age, yet already stands at the fifth tier. And he grew up in the mortal realm, no less. Such a child's potential is terrifying. If he were to become Lord Hei's disciple..." Yujin let the sentence trail off meaningfully.

Hei Zhenyu's eyes flicked back to Mark, this time filled with genuine surprise. "Your son is already fifth tier?" he asked slowly. "At that age, such growth is absurd. He must be a reincarnation of a deity... or something even stranger."

Mark's expression darkened slightly.

"No," he said calmly, though a trace of coldness crept into his voice. "My son carries the power of Chaos."

The hall stiffened.

Mark continued, "While he was still in my wife's womb, a certain... unpleasant deity implanted the Orb of Chaos into her."

Hei Zhenyu was taken aback, and so were the grand elders. For a brief moment, the Sect Master's Hall fell into a strange silence.

"Orb of Chaos?" they reacted almost in unison.

Mark nodded calmly. "It was later extracted from her. But that's another story."

He paused, then continued evenly, "Because remnants of chaos energy merged with his soul, his early growth rate is indeed terrifying. But that also means—"

"He can never become a transcendant," Hei Zhenyu finished quietly.

Mark glanced at them and nodded. "That's right. He cannot become immortal. So there is no need for him to train under an existence like you, Lord Hei. And neither do I want him to struggle endlessly just to defy a destiny that was forced upon him."

He added in a softer tone, "Worst case, I can send him back to the mortal plane to manage affairs there. As long as he reaches the ascendant realm, he can live for several thousand years. That is already a good life."

What Mark said was only half the truth.

In reality, he deliberately painted his son as a dead-end path. On Earth, Lu Shan would be viewed as an unparalleled treasure. But here, in the Ice and Fire Plane, someone who could never transcend would slowly fade from the gaze of gods and saints. That was exactly what Mark wanted.

However, Lan Yujin clearly had no intention of letting the matter rest.

The old man's expression shifted, his eyes moistening as if struck by sudden grief. "He was the host?" he said with a sigh. "That is... truly tragic. Poor child."

He turned toward Hei Zhenyu with urgency. "Lord Hei, you have traveled across countless worlds. You have fought gods and demons alike. Surely, there must be some way to help my descendant?"

Mark stiffened slightly.

He knew his great-grandfather too well. The sorrow on Yujin's face was real enough to convince outsiders, but behind it lurked calculation. If even a sliver of hope existed, Yujin would grab it and use it to bind Lu Shan to the sect forever.

Hei Zhenyu shook his head slowly.

"Unfortunately," he said, "there is no way."

He stood up, his voice carrying the weight of ancient knowledge. "The Cosmic Orbs were born with the universe itself. They predate gods, laws, and even the Heavenly Dao. Once merged with a mortal, their influence cannot be erased completely."

Chapter 747: Dismantle Unnamed for void stones?

"Not even the Jade Emperor can change such a fate," Hei Zhenyu continued. "The only beings who can withstand a Cosmic Orb without consequence are direct descendants of Primordial creatures or pure Celestials. Because they are, by nature, eternal."

The hall fell silent again.

Lan Yujin's shoulders sagged slightly, as if all strength had left him. The other grand elders exchanged uneasy looks, finally understanding that this path was truly closed.

When Mark heard Hei Zhenyu's words, his heart skipped a beat.

Until now, he had always believed the issue was unique to the Orb of Chaos. That was what Yujiang had told him when the truth was first revealed, when the Orb had been secretly planted into Song Yue's body. Mark had assumed it was a special case, something tied only to chaos energy and its corrosive nature. He had never considered that the same rule applied to all Cosmic Orbs.

But the moment the thought crossed his mind, another name surfaced.

Shang Jiao.

She had once been the host of the Orb of Time. Even though it had been extracted from her long ago, the logic Hei Zhenyu described should still apply. If that were true, then... would Shang Jiao never be able to become immortal either?

For a brief instant, Mark's thoughts turned cold.

Then he shook his head inwardly.

No. It couldn't be that simple.

If Cosmic Orbs truly blocked the path to transcendence without exception, then his own existence would already be a contradiction.

He was still the host of the Orb of Creation, the very core of the system itself, and yet he had broken through to immortality.

Not only that, he remembered the tribulation he had faced clearly.

His lightning tribulation was far more violent than anything recorded in sect history. The Sky Judgment Bolt, the strongest lightning known to exist, had descended upon him personally.

That final bolt had not killed him. Instead, it had shattered the invisible ceiling that should never have broken.

That meant there was a way. A brutal one, perhaps unique, but a way nonetheless.

As these thoughts raced through Mark's mind, Lan Yujin continued his act, sighing heavily and muttering words of false sympathy for his "tragic" descendant. Mark didn't even bother looking at him anymore.

Hei Zhenyu, however, shifted the conversation smoothly, his expression turning serious.

"Anyway," he said, "the second reason for my visit is more private."

He glanced around the hall, his gaze briefly sweeping over the empty seats left behind by the grand elders. "I need the room to speak with Sect Master Lan alone."

Mark responded without hesitation, switching to English. "Lord Hei, we can talk like this. They won't understand it anyway."

Hei Zhenyu chuckled faintly, shaking his head. He replied in the same language, his tone carrying a trace of nostalgia. "While I do enjoy speaking English with you, reminiscing about my old days on Earth, I still prefer to talk in private."

Mark nodded. He turned back to the others and spoke in Orlon, his voice firm and unquestionable. "Please give us the room."

The remaining elders rose immediately and left one by one. Once the hall was empty, Hei Zhenyu raised his hand and casually cast a spatial isolation technique. The world around them seemed to fold inward, cutting off all sound, sight, and presence beyond the chamber.

Only then did Hei Zhenyu speak again, his voice dropping into a grave register.

"Lu Zhen," he said, "listen carefully."

Mark straightened slightly. "Yes?"

Hei Zhenyu looked at him intently. "Did you encounter Yuanlong?"

Mark's eyes narrowed a fraction, but he nodded. "Yes. A couple of years ago."

Hei Zhenyu didn't pause. "Did Yuanlong offer you the position of Jade Emperor's apostle?"

Mark exhaled slowly. "Yes."

"And," Hei Zhenyu continued, his gaze sharp as a blade, "did you reject it?"

Mark met his eyes directly. "I did."

For a moment, the isolated space fell into silence, heavy and oppressive, as if the very laws of the world were waiting to hear Hei Zhenyu's next words.

Hei Zhenyu's words fell like cold iron into Mark's chest.

"And now," Hei Zhenyu continued calmly, "you have ascended and become the Lord of this dominion. That alone is enough to draw the Jade Emperor's attention. Of course, he will not personally come to kill you. That would be beneath his status. But displeasure from someone like him never comes without consequence. Punishment will follow, openly or subtly."

Mark felt his brows tighten as Hei Zhenyu looked at him more closely, his gaze seeming to peel away layers of concealment.

"I can still sense your connection to the netherworld," Hei Zhenyu said. "In fact, it is not just one. You seem to have more than one contract tied to demonic existence. Sever those contracts, and the Jade Emperor will have fewer excuses to act against you. Do that, and you may escape trouble."

Mark's fingers clenched slightly.

"And if you cannot?" Hei Zhenyu asked, already knowing the answer.

Mark did not hesitate. "I won't."

Hei Zhenyu nodded, as if he had expected that response. "Then there is the second path. Return to the mortal plane."

Mark froze.

"No way," he said immediately, his voice low but firm. "I just ascended. I finally stabilized the sect, claimed my position, and brought my family here. How can I abandon my clan and everything I've built and go back to the mortal plane?"

Hei Zhenyu did not look surprised. He merely sighed softly.

"Then there is only the third option," he said. "Turn toward the Empire."

Mark's eyes narrowed. He already knew what that meant.

"The Heavenly Ocean Empire can negotiate with the Jade Emperor on your behalf," Hei Zhenyu continued. "An exemption. A stay of punishment. A formal recognition that places you under imperial protection. His Majesty sees you as a rare asset, Lu Zhen. A mere transcendent who defeated a third-stage transcendent like Lan Yujin, and who even managed to kill the Golden Demon Cat Empress. These are not small achievements."

Hei Zhenyu's tone grew heavier.

"Do not misunderstand," he said. "He is not negotiating because he fears you. He is negotiating because you are valuable. Blizzard Pegasus is only part of the picture. Do not underestimate the Emperor. His personal strength rivals my own, and if we count the divine artifacts in his possession, he may even surpass me."

The silence that followed felt thick and suffocating.

Mark leaned back slightly in his seat, his thoughts churning.

Sever his demonic contracts? No way... Returning to the mortal plane was unthinkable. And turning toward the Empire meant walking straight into a gilded cage, no matter how polite the terms sounded.

Hei Zhenyu watched him quietly.

"You stand at a crossroads," he said at last. "Every path has a cost. The Jade Emperor does not forget rejection easily, and power without backing is the most dangerous position of all."

Mark's expression hardened, but he nodded slowly. "I understand. I'll take your suggestion seriously."

He paused, then added, "By the way, I have a question, Lord Hei, if I may ask."

Hei Zhenyu gestured lightly. "Go ahead."

"Do you know where I can find void stones?" Mark asked directly. "Does the Imperial Palace have any?"

Hei Zhenyu was clearly taken aback. "Void stones?"

Mark nodded.

After a brief pause, Hei Zhenyu replied, "The Imperial Palace does have some, yes. But His Majesty will not give you even a single one. Void stones are extremely rare, and they are keys to major breakthroughs. They are strategic resources."

Mark understood immediately. He had long known that void stones were special. In the past, the system had used them to create upgrade crystals that pushed his rank higher. They were not just materials; they were foundations of advancement.

At that moment, the AI's calm voice echoed in his mind.

\*Ding! Master, it is best to dismantle Unnamed. I believe we can extract multiple void stones from it. If you allow me to analyze its core structure, I can replicate its atomic pattern and assist you in creating void stones later. We can reforge Unnamed afterward using plasma arcs.

Mark's heart sank slightly. Unnamed was precious to him, not just a weapon but a companion that had saved his life more times than he could count. Still, the logic was sound.

He pushed the thought aside for now and looked back at Hei Zhenyu. "I understand."

Hei Zhenyu studied him for a moment, then asked, "If you don't mind me asking, why do you need void stones anyway?"

Chapter 748: Lan Yuxuan's grandson

"To build world gates," Mark replied honestly. "Gates that can connect the mortal plane directly to this world."

Hei Zhenyu shook his head almost immediately. "That won't work. Traveling between planes without passing through the Null Point is impossible, especially from a higher plane to a lower one. Mortals can ascend upward, but descending directly is forbidden by cosmic law."

Mark's shoulders dropped slightly. He had already suspected this, but hearing it confirmed still stung. The idea of giving Shen Ling an easy way to commute between worlds was fading fast.

However, Hei Zhenyu continued, "Unless..."

Mark looked up sharply. "Unless?"

"Unless you possess the Orb of Cosmos," Hei Zhenyu said calmly. "That orb governs space itself. With it, the rules change."

Mark frowned deeply. "One of the seven cosmic orbs?"

Hei Zhenyu nodded. "Yes. Unfortunately for you, the Orb of Cosmos is in the Jade Emperor's hands. He used it long ago to split a single unified plane into nine separate realms. It is the foundation of the current cosmic order."

Silence settled between them.

The Orb of Cosmos was unreachable. Void stones were monopolized by the Empire. Direct world gates were forbidden by cosmic law.

Mark stared at Hei Zhenyu for a long second, then let out a dry breath. Great... just when I thought my hopes were crushed completely.

Hei Zhenyu, however, calmly continued, as if he had been waiting for this reaction.

"However," he said, "you can obtain a fragment of it."

Mark's eyes sharpened instantly. "A fragment?"

"It won't give you full control over space," Hei Zhenyu explained, "and you won't be rewriting cosmic laws. But it will give you enough authority to bypass them. With a fragment of the Orb of Cosmos, you won't need world gates, void stones, or even the Null Point. You'll be able to travel between planes directly and create temporary spatial paths at will."

Mark felt his pulse quicken. That was exactly what he needed. No commuting issues. No portals. No risk of trapping Shen Ling or anyone else.

He frowned slightly and asked, "The fragment is with the Imperial Palace?"

Hei Zhenyu shook his head, a faint smile appearing on his lips. "No. Not with the Heavenly Ocean Empire."

Mark blinked. "Then where?"

"With the Arcturian Federation."

Mark froze for a moment. "The Arcturian... Empire?"

Hei Zhenyu nodded. "Yes. Once a part of the Heavenly Ocean Empire. They declared independence after the Great War four heavenly decades ago. It was led by the Ancient Murong family, backed by the Emperor's third brother."

Mark quickly calculated in his head. Four heavenly decades... around ninety Earth years.

Hei Zhenyu continued, "They survived because they gained the support of the Four Dragon Kings. With that backing, His Majesty couldn't suppress them without suffering unacceptable losses."

Mark frowned deeply. "That sounds... impossible. How am I supposed to get a fragment of a cosmic orb from a hostile empire?"

Hei Zhenyu chuckled lightly. "Who said anything about killing or stealing?"

Mark looked at him. "Then what?"

"You buy it."

"Buy?" Mark repeated, genuinely stunned.

Hei Zhenyu nodded. "A fragment of a cosmic orb is priceless to most, yes. But in terms of hierarchy, it is only equivalent to a Celestial-grade divine treasure. Valuable, but tradable. The Arcturians are pragmatic. If you offer something they desperately need, they will sell."

Mark's mind immediately went to one thing.

"Weapons," he said slowly.

"Exactly," Hei Zhenyu replied. "Your firearms. If you strike a proper weapons deal, you can obtain the fragment."

Mark's expression darkened. "Wouldn't the Emperor be offended if I arm his enemy? Especially with weapons powerful enough to shift the balance?"

Hei Zhenyu nodded calmly. "Yes. You will offend him greatly. That is unavoidable."

He leaned back in his seat, his tone steady and practical. "That is why you must be discreet. No banners, no obvious routes, and absolutely no traces left behind. The Imperial Palace has spies everywhere, especially watching you. If they sense even a hint of large-scale weapon transfers, they will start digging."

Mark listened carefully, his brows knit together.

"At the same time," Hei Zhenyu continued, "His Majesty is not very interested in modern weapons. To him, they look crude compared to divine artifacts. But once he sees their true power, once his people start taking losses from them, he will no longer ignore them. After all, fear sharpens attention."

Then Hei Zhenyu gave a strange smile. "You are from Earth. You should understand this better than anyone. Did companies there not sell weapons to different countries quietly, even illegally, until they landed a massive contract?"

Mark blinked, then let out a breathless laugh. "When you put it like that... yeah. That actually makes perfect sense."

Then his expression turned serious again. "But Elder... you are the Grand Preceptor of the Empire. Isn't helping me do this considered betrayal?"

Hei Zhenyu shrugged, completely unbothered. "Betrayal is a strong word. I am not raising a blade against the Empire. I am merely... turning a blind eye and offering advice."

He looked at Mark with a faint glint in his eyes. "Besides, I can afford to do this much for a fellow Earthling. Nostalgia is a dangerous thing."

Mark smiled genuinely and clasped his fists. "Thank you, Elder. I won't forget this."

Hei Zhenyu waved his hand. "Enough. My business here is finished."

He straightened slightly and said, "Now, bring me the one you mentioned earlier. The child. I want to see for myself whether he is qualified to become my disciple."

Mark's heart skipped a beat, but he nodded firmly. "Understood."

He stood up, already forming plans in his mind. Yichen... let's see if fate is willing to open a door for you.

\*

After a while;

Yuxuan arrived at the sect before noon, holding her grandson's hand.

The Elder Hall was quiet, with incense smoke curling near the beams. Several grandelders were already seated. Mark stood to the side. A few other elders lingered nearby, pretending to sip tea while their eyes stayed on the child.

This matter was too important to ignore.

If Yichen could become Hei Zhenyu's disciple, the shadow of the imperial palace would no longer press so close to their throats.

Yuxuan bowed first. "This old woman greets the grandelders."

Yichen followed her lead, bowing clumsily but with care. His small fists trembled inside his sleeves.

Hei Zhenyu sat at the head seat, eyes closed. When he opened them, the hall felt colder.

His gaze fell on Yichen.

"Three-Tier," one elder muttered softly.

"So young," another whispered.

Hei Zhenyu rose from his seat.

Each step he took was slow, steady. The sound of his boots against the stone floor echoed in Yichen's ears. By the time Hei Zhenyu stopped in front of him, Yichen's throat was dry.

Hei Zhenyu looked down at him. "Child," he said, voice calm, "I will ask you three questions. Answer honestly."

Yichen nodded at once. "Yes, Senior."

The elders leaned forward without meaning to.

Hei Zhenyu asked, "Tell me. What is more valuable? Strength, knowledge, or authority?"

The hall fell silent.

An elder's teacup froze halfway to his lips.

"That's too heavy for a child," someone thought.

Yichen lowered his head. He did not answer right away.

His fingers tightened around his sleeve. He remembered long nights by the oil lamp, his grandmother's voice slow and patient.

He lifted his head.

"My grandmother says strength and authority are like two sides of one coin," Yichen said.

Hei Zhenyu's brows moved slightly.

Yichen continued, words coming more smoothly now. "If you show strength without authority, people fear you and call you a rebel. If you show authority without strength, people smile to your face and laugh behind your back."

A few elders exchanged glances.

"So neither is valuable alone," Yichen said. "They only matter when they stand together."

Hei Zhenyu said nothing. He waited.

Yichen took a breath. "But knowledge is different. Even without strength or authority, knowledge can earn respect. It can earn money. It can make you useful to powerful people."

He paused, then added softly, "If someone needs you, they will protect you."

The hall remained quiet.

An elder let out a slow breath. Another nodded without realizing it.

Several elders exchanged glances, their expressions shifting from curiosity to shock. That was not an answer they expected from a child, let alone one who had barely reached the third tier.

Yuxuan's hands tightened slightly inside her sleeves, but her face remained calm. Still, there was a faint tremor in her eyes.

Hei Zhenyu looked at Yichen for a long moment without speaking. Then, slowly, a smile appeared on his face.

"Good," he said. "Very good."

He did not praise loudly, nor did he nod exaggeratedly. But those two words alone carried enough weight to make the elders' hearts thump.

Hei Zhenyu raised a finger. "Second question."

Chapter 749: The Official Proposition of Peace Treaty

He bent slightly so his eyes were level with the child's. "If one day, knowledge tells you to retreat, but authority orders you to advance, what will you choose?"

This time, even Mark felt a bit tense.

Yichen hesitated for a brief moment, then answered carefully, "I will first ask why I am ordered to advance. If the reason makes sense, I will obey. If it doesn't, I will retreat."

An elder frowned. "That sounds like disobedience."

Yichen shook his head. "No, Elder. That is responsibility. An authority that refuses to explain itself is afraid of being questioned. If advancing will only waste lives, then obeying blindly is not loyalty."

The elders stiffened again.

Hei Zhenyu laughed softly. "Sharp tongue. Not bad."

He straightened up. "Third question."

His voice grew heavier. "If one day, your master stands on one side, and your sect stands on the other, whom will you choose?"

This time, the pressure in the hall became suffocating.

Yuxuan's heart clenched.

Mark's gaze sharpened.

Yichen swallowed, then spoke slowly, choosing every word with care. "If my master is right, I will stand with my master. If my sect is right, I will stand with my sect."

Some elders inhaled sharply.

"That is arrogance," one muttered.

But Yichen continued, his small fists clenched. "If both are wrong, I will stand with neither. I will protect the innocent and bear the consequences myself."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

Hei Zhenyu stared at the child, his expression unreadable. Then, suddenly, he laughed—loud and unrestrained.

"Hahahaha!"

The elders were stunned.

Hei Zhenyu turned to Mark. "This child... is a bit too intelligent, which is quite troublesome as he is not a blank book."

Yuxuan's heart sank.

But then Hei Zhenyu continued, "But I like him."

The hall erupted in shock.

Hei Zhenyu placed a hand on Yichen's head. "You have no fear of authority, no blind worship of strength, and just enough respect for knowledge. You will survive long enough to be dangerous."

He looked at Yuxuan. "I will take him as my tenth disciple."

Yuxuan let out a slow breath. She placed her hand on the boy's back and gave a gentle push.

"Kneel to your master, Little Chen."

Yichen did not hesitate.

He stepped forward and dropped to his knees. His forehead touched the cold stone floor.

"Yichen greets Master," he said clearly.

The sound echoed softly in the Elder Hall.

Hei Zhenyu looked at the kneeling child for a long moment. His gaze was deep, as if weighing something unseen. Then he spoke.

"You may stay here for seven days," he said. "Pack your belongings. Spend time with those you care about."

Yichen lifted his head, eyes bright.

"On the eighth day," Hei Zhenyu continued, "your senior brother will come for you. He will take you to the Sun Palace, where you and I reside."

He paused.

"From that day on, you are my disciple."

Yichen's hands trembled as he bowed again. "Yes, Master."

Hei Zhenyu's gaze shifted to Yuxuan.

"I have heard about Yichen's betrothal," he said. "Lu Zhen told me of the proposal from the imperial palace."

The elders stiffened.

Hei Zhenyu's voice remained calm. "If you agree, I will speak to His Majesty. If you disagree, I will also speak to His Majesty and end it."

His eyes settled on her. "What do you want, Lan Yuxuan?"

Yuxuan stepped forward and bowed deeply, her back bent with age and resolve.

"You are his master, Lord Hei," she said. "His future can only be decided by you."

The hall was silent.

Hei Zhenyu nodded once. "Very well."

He turned his head slightly and looked toward Mark.

"I cannot comment on the Emperor's granddaughter," he said. "That matter is beyond me."

Then he added, "But her father, the Fourth Prince, is someone worth forming a relationship with."

Mark blinked.

"He is righteous," Hei Zhenyu continued. "Fearless. He dislikes court struggles and avoids politics whenever he can."

Hei Zhenyu waved a hand lightly. "You have my blessing."

For a heartbeat, no one spoke.

Then Mark and the others smiled. Some relief showed on their faces. Some surprise. Some quiet joy.

Yichen remained kneeling, his small back straight.

He did not fully understand politics or marriages.

But he knew one thing.

From today on, the path before him had changed.

Later;

Snowlight spilled through the tall crystal windows of the Ice Palace, washing the private chamber in pale blue. The air was cold but still, heavy with quiet tension. Mark stood straight before the low table, both hands holding a jade-bound scroll.

Across from him sat Prince Lei Zetian, wrapped in a silver cloak, his expression calm but alert.

"This is the official proposition from my side," Mark said and placed the scroll on the table.

Lei Zetian accepted it and slowly unrolled the seal. His eyes moved line by line, careful and sharp. The chamber was silent except for the soft sound of parchment.

The first clause made him pause.

"Azure Frost Dominion will pay contributions for fifty years," he read aloud. "Ten million cronies every year. Fixed. No changes."

He tapped the table once, lightly. A steady payment. Not a tribute born from fear, but a price paid for peace.

He continued reading.

"The second clause has been revised," he said. "Azure Frost Dominion will not expand its territory, regardless of alliances formed. It will not provide manpower, openly or secretly, to any force acting against the Empire."

"The third," Mark went on, "Azure Frost Dominion will send one elder, Second Stage Transcendent, to serve at the imperial court."

This time, his fingers paused longer on the parchment. A high-level elder stationed in the capital. A promise of loyalty. Also a leash, if needed.

He read further, slower now.

"No dual marriage," Mark said to him. "Instead... Yichen will be sent to the Empire."

The Prince's gaze sharpened.

"He will serve as a political hostage," Mark continued, "and accept the betrothal to your fourth prince's daughter."

"They will marry when they come of age," Mark went on. "Yichen will continue serving the Empire even after marriage."

The words hung in the cold air. Hostage. Disciple. Son-in-law. Official.

Several roles. One body.

Lei Zetian reached the final clause.

"The Lan Sect will release Len Fengyun from all duties as a sect member."

The prince rolled the scroll back up halfway, then paused.

"And in return," he said, "Azure Frost Dominion asks for only two things."

Mark's voice was steady. "Formal recognition from the imperial palace. And the withdrawal of all imperial troops and officials from their territory."

Lei Zetian continued reading. "A fifty-year peace treaty. During this time, the Empire will not act against Azure Frost Dominion, directly or indirectly."

He finally set the scroll down.

"No adamantine gun purchases," he said. "No, Prince Zetian, aka me as a political hostage either."

Prince Zetian did not hide his reaction this time. The scroll lay open on the table, its edges catching the cold light, but his eyes had already lifted from the words.

"A Second Stage Transcendent," he said slowly. "Patriarch Lan is willing to send one to the imperial court... rather than betrothing his own daughter or sister?"

There was disbelief in his voice, thin but sharp.

Mark stood by the window, hands behind his back, watching frost creep along the crystal panes. "I don't like offering women as currency," he replied. His tone was casual, almost lazy, as if discussing the weather.

Zetian's brows drew together. "But Yichen is being sent," he said. "As a hostage. As a political piece."

Mark turned his head slightly. His eyes were calm. "It isn't a sacrifice if the people who protect him agree," he said. "And they do."

The prince studied him, searching for hesitation. He found none.

Mark stepped forward and placed one hand on the table. "This is my final stance," he said. "No extra clauses. No hidden exchanges. Either the Empire accepts this deal, or there is no deal."

The words landed cleanly, without force, but they left no room to move.

"Take the proposition back to the palace," Mark continued. "Place it before His Majesty. Let him decide."

Zetian exhaled slowly. "I understand."

He rolled the scroll back up, but instead of standing at once, he hesitated. His gaze drifted toward the carved pillars, the hanging frost talismans, the quiet strength woven into the Ice Palace itself.

"However, Patriarch, I like it here," he said suddenly. A faint smile touched his lips. "After the treaty is signed... I wonder if I may still join the sect."

Mark did not react at once. Then he nodded.

"Once peace is established," he said, "you may apply through proper channels. Not as Prince of the Heavenly Ocean Empire but only as Lei Zetian."

Zetian looked at him.

The prince smiled more openly this time. He rose, gathered his cloak, and turned to leave. At the threshold, he stopped and glanced back.

"One more thing," he said. "If I may ask. Which elder will be sent to the court?"

Mark answered without pause. "Grand Elder Lan Ming."

Zetian froze.

"Lan Ming?" His eyes widened for just a breath. Then he gave a slow nod. "I see."

With that, he left the chamber, his footsteps fading into the cold halls of the Ice Palace.

As the door closed, Mark's expression changed.

The warmth drained from his eyes as if someone had doused a flame. He stared at the closed door, lips moving barely at all.

"You backed them against me," he murmured. "You old geezer."

His fingers tightened, the wood of the table creaking under his grip.

"One by one," he continued softly, "the elders who stood with you will fall. Quietly. Cleanly. The clan will forget their names."

He straightened, gaze drifting toward the deeper halls of the sect, where power slept behind sealed doors.

"And you," he said, voice colder now, edged like ice. "Dear great-grandfather... no. Great-granduncle."

A thin smile appeared.

"You will be last."

Mark turned away from the table, hands clasped behind his back once more. "I won't let you go," he whispered, "until I squeeze every last drop from that Fourteen-Circle realm of yours."

Chapter 750: Earth 1712: Han Sungjun (37 years ago from Present Timeline)

Earth 1712, Mortal Plane;

31st day, 12th Month, Year 11978;

The city of Hanyang was filled with celebrations for the New Year. And in one of the residential districts, just like everywhere in the city, thousands of people came out of their homes and started their countdown together.

However, a young detective was seen rushing up the stairs in panic; a layer of mana covered his body, increasing his speed by ten times. Soon, he reached Apartment 703, which had half of its door open. Sweating down to the neck, and with a trembling heart in nervousness, he slowly opened the door.

Creak

As the door creaked open, his eyes widened, spotting a dazed five-year-old boy sitting amidst dead bodies, a dozen in number, eleven of them in armed suits and weapons, and one in casual wear. Attached to him was a dark wraith, irregularly shaped, but its aura got thicker and thicker as it absorbed the energy from the corpses. In his hands, there was an unconscious baby boy, roughly a few months old.

Tap

The mana pistol in his hand fell to the floor. "Seok-Jin-ah..."

Psssh

Soon, as the fireworks display dazzled the skies, outside the glass doors of the apartment, the boy turned his head to look at the man without an ounce of expression on his face. "Dad." He called.

"What..." The officer gasped as he slowly walked forward, "What happened?"

The boy responded to him with a swift turn to the baby he was holding and then looked back at the officer. "Everyone is dead, including mom. Jun seems fine though..." He still didn't have any expression on his face as if he wasn't feeling any emotions.

"You..." The officer asked in a hushed tone, slowly approaching the boy while keeping his wary gaze on the dark wraith. "What... what did you do?"

18 years later;

Year 11996;

Unnamed Island, Zuania Continent;

An 18-year-old young man in a navy blue suit was walking through a long corridor with several rooms with metal doors located side by side, while giving brief nods along the way to the passing by armed soldiers.

He was roughly a head taller than an average man, had messy black hair, his left eye was covered by a patch, and possessed a face that could be considered charming and manly instead of boyish charms that a typical 18-year-old would have.

Maintaining steady steps and a serious face, he made his way to a metallic door with two more men in suits guarding the room.

Beep

"Identity Verified. Welcome, Mr. Han."

As he stepped inside, someone was waiting for him. He was tall and bulky, wearing a coffee-colored trench coat. Even the clothes couldn't hide his bulging muscles. In front of him, Sungjun was like a little kid.

Cheng Hu, a Lieutenant Commander of the Special Forces of the newly formed World Federation, gave a firm nod. "Welcome, Agent White Wolf."

Sungjun greeted him with a standard salute, "Sir."

Taking a deep breath, the lieutenant commander spoke. "I will come to the matter directly. Do you know the reason why we saved you?"

Sungjun furrowed his brows, but it only lasted a moment, and his calmness returned. With his hands to the back, he replied. "At first, I thought it was because you responded to the SOS. But seeing myself in such a location where an outsider like me isn't allowed, I believe you need my services for something."

To that, the Lt. Commander gave a smile, "That's right, Agent. The main reason we brought you here and treated you is because of the Temple of Horus Dungeon. In four decades, many failed and died. But you were the only one ever to escape alive."

"It's confidential, Sir. I can't reveal the details..." Sungjun maintained a firm tone, to which the Lt. Commander leaned forward, placing his hands on the table as he stared at him with an intense gaze. "Agent, I didn't know what you did, but the Dungeon's break has sped up because of you and your mentor's mistake. Based on our investigation, we only have twelve days to clear it. Or else, we would be facing a catastrophe."

"Twelve days?" Sungjun's eyes widened as he took a step back in surprise, "That's..."

Cheng Hu took a deep breath as he collapsed on his seat. "Agent, I'm aware that it is a mission of Black Commando, and I won't ask for you to reveal the details. All I need from you is to lead the team to the secret entrance that you found. Even though you aren't a part of Special Forces, we will give you complete access to this facility until this case is done. And don't worry, you will report to others as an Academy Cadet who just joined the forces. I already got permission from your superior for the job, and this mission will be labeled as a joint secret mission between Special Forces and Black Commandos. However, it was only after it was completed. So, I expect you to hide your identity to the end, Agent."

Sungjun gave a nod and saluted. "Yes, Sir."

"You may be dismissed."

Sungjun returned to his ward and continued with the physical tests.

Once he was done, he asked around for directions to the dorm. A soldier escorted him to the gender-neutral dorm. As if the hospital wasn't deep enough underground, the dorm was located even deeper. They had to take an elevator to go down nine more levels, reaching the deepest part of this underground facility.

Upon entering the entrance hall of the dorm, his eyes wandered around. The dorm was a three-story structure, circular in shape, with space in the middle like a huge hollow. It appeared to be modeled after those shopping malls in the cities.

There was a reception counter, a bar, an elevator, a gym, a cafeteria, and a couple of unknown stores placed on the ground floor, well, it is technically underground, so it can only be described as the lowest floor.

Sungjun observed around as he walked towards the reception counter. It was already evening, so the bar was quite lively with everyone chattering around and some arguing.

Due to Sungjun's young age, he didn't expect to draw much attention as several of them are rookies from various parts of the world. However, he underestimated his looks. Even if it was for a moment, he felt the gazes of the young female Hunters as he passed by them, and some of them were quite flirtatious.

But then again, it isn't something unexpected. The Hunters usually go through either battles or other missions all week and rarely get time to have proper relationships. So, most of them would be single, and they generally tend to hook up with people they find attractive without any strings attached later.

Sungjun understands it and hence didn't pay any attention. He simply went ahead to find his room: 214.

"Here I am."

Along with the number, there was a paper stuck on the wooden door. On the paper, the horrible drawing of a pink dolphin was seen.

"I don't feel good for some reason," Sungjun mumbled as he looked at the drawing. "It's not a female, is it?"

Taking a deep breath, he unlocked the door with the pass he was given at the reception counter.

Beep

As the door was opened, a woman appeared in his vision, who seemed anything but ordinary. Watching the sleeping girl on her bed while hugging a dolphin plush toy, he muttered. "Oh, boy..."

A pink room that is decorated – check

Female – check

Adult age, but has child-like looks – check

Twin tails hairstyle – check

Underdeveloped body – check

"Oh boy, not this kind of roommate," Sungjun's face darkened as he stared at the girl. "The troublesome type of woman that only looks good in Japanese anime, not in real life. I hope she isn't the one I'm thinking."

\*Knock\* \*Knock\*

He knocked a few times on the door until his supposed roommate woke up from her sleep. And fulfilling his exact expectations, she flared up in anger as soon as her eyes fell on him. "You, how did you get inside? Who are you?"

Looking at the girl who was ready to attack him, Sungjun introduced himself, "I'm Han Sungjun, your new roommate, Miss..."

His eyes wandered for a moment and then finished the sentence in an uncertain tone, "Sun Xiao?"

"You know my name?" She furrowed her brows.

"No, I guessed it." Sungjun shrugged his shoulders as he calmly pointed to a shelf where a backpack was placed. "I assume that is yours." On top of it lies the writing of her name, probably done by herself.

"Ah... I see." After taking a clear look at him, she gestured for him to come in.

As he went inside and sat on his bed, she asked, "Codename?"