"An Emperor needs to be benevolent and righteous, he must know how to discern right from wrong, he must have integrity, be polite and well-mannered, he must never look down on tradition and he must respect his elders."

Greed is brought back by Truth under mysterious conditions and ends up in Xing, where he's caught in it's turbulent political scene – from rebel princes to corrupt officials trying to manipulate the young Emperor, he sees it all. Ling, on the other hand, continues to build on his plan of saving his decadent country on the verge of collapse, unaware of the growing shadows lurking on his seemingly stable rule.

And the flames of war may have sparked.

My first work for this fandom, decided to make a Greed/Ling fanfic because there's so few and they are my OTP. OTL
Also I'm interested in the concept of Greed surviving/reviving and living in Xing with Ling
and thought 'Why not? Certainly I can put my (severely lacking) knowledge of chinese customs and politics to use.'

Some important notes before we begin our story:
- Since this is Xing, all names will be surname-name basis;
- Alkhahestry will be changed to Waidanshu (which is how they translated it in my country), IMO it gives a more authentic flavor. Think that alkhahestry is how amestrians refer to it.
- English is not my first language, but hey I need to start somewhere right?
The Man With Golden Eyes

His body was numb but yet he felt a heightened sense of self, like his mind was sharper than it could ever be. His body was flowing through a current, though if it was a literal or metaphorical, he couldn't tell. It had him embraced by its coldness, and when it became unbearable, he opened his eyes.

He was now standing, a vast whiteness spreading as far as the eye can see. It was wide, but it felt claustrophobic. He felt a presence behind him and the awareness made him turn himself, only to face a giant door, it's design simple.

"Hey." He turned to the source of the sound, only to see a white silhouette of a ball, it didn't take long for him to notice it was his original form. He kept quiet, the form before him with a smile spread wide across it's face.

It reminded him of Gluttony.

"It's your first time here am I right?" He couldn't tell what's the deal with its voice. It was both masculine and feminine, it came from one source but felt like it came from everywhere. The silhouette snickered. "Well, kinda. Welcome Greed."

"What I'm doing here? I thought I died."

"Technically you did." Now it stood up, it's form changing to an even more familiar one. Greed frowned, he could recognize that silhouette anywhere.

It was his first body after all.

"Say, what if we made a deal?"

-----------------

The clock pointed to one o'clock.
He was already bored out of his mind, the room so silent it was possible to hear the ticks of the clock. It was his responsibility to overlook the last stage of the imperial test and so he was supervising the possible new trainees on his less extravagant throne on the room designed to these sorts of things.

The emperor looked to his right, the Vice Minister of Personnel of the Right was standing, sometimes looking at applicants, sometimes staring at his pocket watch. The Minister of Personnel himself couldn't attend the test and Ling didn't know if he should feel insulted or relieved that he wouldn't need to look at his face.

He really hated the man.

It was at times like this – times where he really had nothing to do – that he reminisces the past. The last two years were turbulent; to really affirm his claim to the throne he had to pacify certain regions of the country, it was relatively easy with the use of waidanshu for war purposes and once he defeated – and therefore gained the support – of the powerful Sima clan to the north, most of the other clans submitted to his reign. It didn't stop some other clans to revolt, of course.

The oldest members of the court underestimated him or outright tried to manipulate him, this led to court reforms, but even then his court is divided and he fears the possibility of court factionalism; and it isn't over, he had to recover the economy, which pummeled to the ground thanks to his idiot siblings and their civil wars, and he also had to reevaluate plans his Predecessor had canceled, plans that made perfect sense and helped the common folk.

All of this made him think of Ed, Al, and his adventures in Amestris. As life risking as it was, part of him still enjoyed some parts of it, there he didn’t need to deal with spoiled, self-entitled pricks who thought the world owned them everything.

And he isn’t talking only about his half-brothers.

His mind wandered more until it settled on Greed, the only reason he's here now, ruling his country, is because of the homunculus' sacrifice. He understood the reasons, he accepted his death, he moved on, but every now and then his death plagued him, especially on nights where he was all alone.

"...Highness..."
The same happened with Fu, and when he could, he'd always make an offering to his grave, the guilt sometimes swallowing him whole. There was a long way to go for him to forgive himself.

"Your Majesty..."

The darker turn of events kept him so deep in his memories he didn't notice the minister calling for his attention.

"Emperor Hongzi!" He opened his eyes and only now he noticed he was leaning on his elbow. Ling stared at the applicants, the test was over and they were staring back at him, expectant. Vice Minister Yun leaned over to talk more privately. "You need to give them your permission to leave." Oh yes, sometimes he forgets about this.

Ling straightened himself and put on a more dignified look. "I wish you all luck, and I can't wait to see some of you on my staff." He meant it, the imperial staff could use some fresher minds. "You're all dismissed." They bowed and exited the hall, Yun's attendants also finished piling up all the tests, informing their superior of such.

"The results should come in a month. I'll leave the essays with you, as the Son of Heaven should decide for himself which solutions he liked best." He was glad to hear that, as per tradition, the Emperor must choose six matters of the state that needed to be fixed and the candidates must write an essay on how to fix these issues. Along with their opinions on past events, how far in the past was his choice. The fact that he'll rate them personally meant he can have an idea of the writer before formally knowing them.

They heard footsteps coming to their general direction and faced the source, a woman in fine silk clothing tinged in a regal vermilion color and intricate patterns, a Phoenix was resting besides peonies in her headdress – the symbol of the empress. She was followed by servants, her mere presence making the Vice Minister bow in respect while Ling just smiled.

"Empress Dowager Yao." She glanced at the official for a short moment then ordered her servants to deliver the essays to the Emperor's apartment.

"Vice Minister Yun you're dismissed." Said man bowed one last time before leaving the hall and subsequently the palace, under normal circumstances only Ling had the power to allow people in and out of the palace, but she was his Regent, and such she enjoyed certain privileges usually reserved for emperors.
"Court is about to begin. Leaders from eighteen clans are to attend this meeting, including the leaders of the Sima, Xing, Jin and Zhong clans. Do you remember what you need to discuss?" Sima and Zhong in the same room? Oh god this is going to be annoying, these two are allies from before he was born. They're going to back up one another at every opportunity.

"The matter with the Qin and Ruan clans." These two are part of what scholars call the ‘Five Poorest Clans of Xing’, both princes are older than him and had a better chance at the throne than he had, so it's no wonder they revolted when Ling was named emperor. The rebellions happened one after the other and only now was it finally dealt with, Ling can’t really say he blames them, Mei would’ve done the same had he not swore to protect her clan.

“And what is your opinion?” She pressed, his mom was torn between exiling and executing them, he himself trying to find a third option. The emperor sighed, if only his court wasn’t so divided.

“This child and subject thinks it's best to punish them, but not to the degree the Ministers of War and Justice want.” If he choose to do as they wanted, he wouldn’t be able to look Lanfan and Mei in the face. His mom nodded, the talk ended there.

-------------

When the Emperor and Empress Dowager entered the Main Hall, the place was already filled with the clan leaders to the right and the ministers to the left. Ling sat on his throne, his mom facing the clan leaders, the Imperial Secretary soon appeared with her subordinates and stood at his left side, with the Imperial Clerks sitting in a corner of the hall, all of them keen to write all the events in this audience, as well as any edict the Son of Heaven may come up with.

The Censorate were all over the place, but the visitors couldn’t tell they were there. The plus side of making his clansmen members of the Palace Censorate was that the Yao clan are masters of concealment and espionage, only the Emperor knew where they were hidden.

“We shall begin the audience now.” He paused, preparing mentally for the shitstorm that is about to come. “We have to decide the fate of the Qin and Ruan clans. I personally think we should punish the leaders of the rebellion and spare the soldiers.” A few nodded, some frowned, and Minister of War Yumei glared, she was the first to speak.

"And how do you plan to punish them?" She said it slowly, they had shared their thoughts on the matter in a previous war council and Ling made it clear he doesn't approve the idea of executing
the entire Qin and Ruan family, she's just asking it again to see who is going to take her side. Ling
opened his eyes to meet her glare head on, his conviction firm.

"Take their nobility titles and exile them."

"With all honesty Your Majesty," Now it was Sima Huang's turn to talk – current leader of the
Sima clan after his father's death last year and the former Sima prince's uncle – when Ling
acknowledged him he gave the Emperor a curt nod. "You're being too nice. These rebellions were a
clear act of betrayal, and as such punishment should be handled accordingly."

"This subject must add that it seems like Your Majesty is taking it easy on them because You, the
Holy and Exalted One, is pitying them for the unfortunate conditions of their clans." He called it,
the Zhong and Sima would back one another. The young Emperor decided to ignore the fact Zhong
Sui talked without being addressed, in the corner of his eyes he could see Yumei smirking.

"Executing their families will only deal with one of the problems, what about the rest of the clan?"
By the tone of his voice he was clearly frustrated, even if it was controlled, it was good to see that
someone besides Ling saw that there's more to consider here than just the noble family.

"This is where the Judicial Court comes in, Lord Tang Shao. We execute them – as per the code –
and turn another family into nobles to replace the former clans. The last part is, of course, for the
Minister of Personnel."

"You're underestimating their loyalty, Minister Xiang. What if they revolt?"

"Then we arrest these marginals, I could use some extra hands for all the public works His Majesty
has approved." Sometimes the Minister of Work can be such a bitch.

The back of his head was starting to ache and they still aren't even arguing. He decided to focus on
another thing, like his mom, who, judging by her face, found this oddly amusing and frustrating at
the same time. He wished something happened, anything to call off this meeting. In the end it
would've been best if he just made a decree and rolled with it, but no, he had to have the dumb idea
to listen to their opinions.

"They brought this upon themselves!" He lost part of the conversation, because this came out of
nowhere. "They should be glad they still have their princes, the Lei and Zhou clan didn't had the
same luck, and they're poorer than these two." There it is, using those two clans as a tool to further
their point. Ling forgot whose clan he's from, but from his clothes alone he could see his clan was in a respectable position.

"Please everyone calm down, we're tormenting the Son of Heaven." Xing Quan – the Xing patriarch and the oldest man in the room – managed to silence everyone in the room, he caressed his beard before continuing. "We should do as Your Majesty wants. Only the main branch of both families commanded the rebellions, promote a distant relative and make them the new rulers. It's as easy as that." Their eyes met and he bowed briefly. Everyone else in the room remained silent and the meeting ended there.

He should feel grateful, but deep down he felt helpless, even mildly angry. They respected his opinion more than their own Emperor's, but should he really be surprised? He's from the highly respected Xing clan, and his grandfather. Ling pushed all of this aside and was about to finish the audience when a guard shouted.

"There's an intruder in the Inner Court!" He and his fucking mind.

"Your Majesty!"

"Audience is over. You're dismissed." He left the Main Hall without further delay and followed the Chief of the Guards, Lanfan was close behind. On the way there he wondered why it took so long for the guards to notice this person's presence, and why the hell this person didn't invade sooner, it'd spare him of the headache that's getting worse.

He needs to eat soon.

They stopped at the entrance to the Inner Court. It didn't take long for his mother to show up as well, the intruder himself – now that he could see him – was tall, taller than anyone present, muscular, had black spiky hair and wore a sleeveless changshan colored black and gold. He wasn't xinguese though, his golden eyes gave that away. He was restrained by spears holding him down, on his knees, with a guard at each side, he was annoyed with the rough treatment but honestly, what he expected? Their eyes met and he seemed relieved to see him.

His eyes reminded him of Ed.

"Hey Ling, order these assholes to unhandle me." And he thought his brothers were self-entitled. Everyone else got offended by his words, Lanfan and Yufan readying their weapons. Ling lifted his
"He's not from here, he doesn't know xingese etiquette." They calmed after this, and the stranger now looked impatient. Both stared at one another, something about this guy was familiar but he couldn't point it. Yufan approached and stopped their little staring contest.

"What should I do with this person?" He was still trying to point what he felt familiar about him but stopped thanks to a pang in his head.

"Imprison him, at night I'll have Master Feng interrogate him. Now I just want to eat and rest." The guards forced the intruder to stand up, his expression one of betrayal and anger. Ling couldn't care less, he was too hungry and weary to give a crap. This didn't stopped him from shouting at the Emperor though.

"Fuck you pissant, I thought we're partners!" His voice sounds so familiar...

Lanfan was surprised too, but followed him as if nothing happened. "You have two more audiences to attend." Honestly let his mom attend the first one, she's his regent after all, he'll show up to the last one. She signaled to the Chief and he left to inform the Household Counsellor to prepare Hongzi's lunch.

"I know."

They walked in silence throughout the apartment, that stranger's voice looming in his head all the way. That deep, boisterous voice was uncannily similar to Greed's, all the way to his mannerisms, but it can't be, Ed himself said that the dead can't come back. The stranger wasn't even a homunculus to begin with, he's probably an amestrian with xerxian ancestry.

But isn't Edward and Alphonse the only alive xerxians? Weren't they all turned into philosopher's stones? That person also acted strange when he faced the Emperor, as if they were intimate. Ling stopped at his bedroom's doors, his hands on the doorknobs.

It can't be Greed, right? Even if his voice is familiar, and his manners, and his obnoxious selfishness, and his stupidity, and his insults, and and...

Fuck, he'll need to discover this later.
Reunion

Chapter Notes

I changed the summary, things is, the first one described only a part of the story and not the thing as a whole. I think the new one looks better. :P

The place was familiar to him even though he never set foot on it, the sound of chatter and glass clinking, and the unpleasant smell of alcohol gave away that he was at a bar, more precisely the Devil's Nest. Ling could see everyone he saw on Greed's memories on that fateful day, but it wasn't only them, at the corner of his eyes he saw Lanfan talking with that snake woman he forgot the name.

He heard laughter and turned to source of the sound, more so because he could recognize that melodious velvety voice anywhere. Ling saw him, in his signature long blue changshan, long hair tied in a ponytail, crossed legs and talking with the man from earlier, his legs on the coffee table, one arm on the backrest, the other resting on a bent leg. Ling decided to approach his cousin, having found nothing else to do, when he was close enough they stopped whatever conversation they were having to look in his direction.

"Oh, Ling, let me introduce you. This is Greed, the owner of the place." It was his turn to look at the man before him. He wasn't wearing the clothing he did yesterday, instead Ling thinks he's wearing the one Ed described on one occasion before. He gave him a malicious smile, flashing his shark teeth.

"You still don't believe me do you kid?" He shook his head and the man shrugged in mocking indifference, he patted the couch and, for some reason, Ling obliged and sat beside him. The moment he did though, the man put his arm around his shoulders, when Ling started to protest he pulled him closer. His hand rested on his head, and his cousin teased him at this.

Even in his own dreams Feng was a cheeky bastard.

"What I must do for you to believe me?" They stared at each other, his face was serene now but Ling could still feel the underlying playfulness in his tone. He was serious however.

"Convince me you're the real Greed then. I'll warn you though, we were soulmates, I'll know if you're lying." This made "Greed" burst into laughter, Feng joined him soon after and Ling was left
flustered, looking between them feeling humiliated.

"Your wish is an order, partner."

---------------

A single pat on his hip was enough to wake him up. Ling opened his eyes slowly, drowsy and dazed by this weird dream, his body was heavy and tired and Ling doubt he can get up. He shouldn't have stayed the night awakened reading essays.

"Ling, my son, you have an audience in an hour." She persisted when he gave no response, shaking him instead. That was a terrible idea as it made his head throb, even if lightly. His mom patted him with more strength, getting impatient, he groaned to see if she would simply give up and leave him alone, but apparently it came off as a whimper, as her reaction was different from what he expected.

"What are you feeling?" She nudged him to roll and face her direction, he did so and briefly caught sight of Yue on his room before covering his face with his blanket, the light too much on his eyes. His mom closed the bed curtains, isolating them. She cupped his forehead with a hand, sitting on the bed to stay in a comfortable position, maybe he can exaggerate his pain.

"Soreness, kinda numb, I think I’m fatiguing."

"Can you get up?" She helped him sit up, what is a simple action turning out to be a hassle. Ling faked dizziness and fell on his mom’s shoulder, she sighed in defeat and got out of bed, but not before helping him lay down. "I'll call a physician and order breakfast, is there something in particular you might want?"

"Baozi, pork flavored." She frowned at that.

"It's morning you're not-alright, you can have it." His mother threw her arms in defeat and exited the bedroom with Yue tailing behind, Ling followed their qi until he felt it leave his apartment to talk to Lanfan.

“Call Feng.” Lanfan appeared in front of the bed, one knee and a fist on the floor. He could barely make her pose through the curtains. He awaited for her to leave, but she remained there, unmoving.
Ling sighed “I just faked the intensity of my pain to mom.”

“With all honesty Your Majesty.” She stopped there, Ling knew already what she was about to say but gave his permission nonetheless. “Your Majesty mustn’t skip on his duties. His will is the will of the people.” He didn't want to go to the audience, he wanted – or better yet – needed to talk to that stranger, his curiosity was getting the best of him and he needed to confirm things as soon as possible.

"But I need to talk to that man before he’s executed. There’s a chance he’s Greed and I’m not risking losing him again. An opportunity is seldom presented and easily lost. Now, Lanfan, please." Lanfan exited the room by the window, this left him alone to ponder. If he tried this a year ago his mom would've forced him out of bed, saying he must never look weak to his subjects, when she discovers he faked all of this she'll skin him alive. He choose to focus on what he should ask that intruder, thinking back on it, he never claimed to be Greed, it was Ling's wishful thinking that claimed that. But then again who else was idiot enough to insult the Emperor in front of his guards.

Ed was.

He heard a knock on the door and hoped it was Yue with his food, but soon he heard Lanfan asking for permission to enter, so she had already found Feng.

Now that he's thinking properly, why was his cousin chatting merrily with that guy in his dream?

"I've bought Master Yao Feng as requested Your Majesty." He heard wood creaking and wanted to curse, he swears if there’s a risk on the floor. Feng stopped and decided to pick through the curtains to check on his younger cousin.

"You finally want tips on how to dress like a respectable emperor?" He teased. This early in the morning and Feng was already cleaned up, in terms of looks they were complete opposites: they have a slender figure overall but that's where the similarities end. Feng has longer hair and a side fringe to the right. His eyes were less shifty and he wore a simple eyeliner. On the other end of the spectrum Ling couldn't really care about how he looked or how he dressed, as long as he was comfortable it was enough.

"The intruder from yesterday." He bowed and opened one curtain, Ling wanted to kick him but Feng distanced himself from the bed. He sat on the chair and opened the book, searching through the pages for his annotations from the previous day.
"His testimony matches those of Your Majesty, Lanfan's and Princess' Chang Mei." He then browsed more pages. "Oh, and of Master Alphonse Elriki...I didn't butcher it right?"

"Slightly." He cursed under his breath and returned to the previous pages.

"He also added that you two were very close, and looking again at Alphonse's testimony, his looks kinda resembles one of the brothers.'" So even the looks are familiar, but not equal, considering how his cousin worded it.

"Kinda?" Lanfan also caught that, however unlike him she's probably suspicious, as overzealous as she is.

"The eye color doesn't match, and I checked his body, no tattoos." He turned to the next page and sighed, this isn't good. "You will like this next part," he snarked. "he told me he's here in Xing for half a year already, living in the area belonging to the Xia, he even worked for the Lord of Le for two months, that's how he got the clothes he's wearing now."

"A spy?" Lanfan was agitated, for good reason, the Xia were the first to object to his claim to the throne, and their princess hated his gut for prohibiting her from the capital, like he did for almost all of the princes. This could be a ploy, who knows.

"I doubt that. This means they'd need to find someone who looks and sounds like this Greed, and tell him his history. Hell, they’d need to know his life in the first place." Feng raised his finger, to show he didn't finish speaking. "Not to say that revealing this kind of information can only mean two things: this is false information to misleads us, or he's a terrible spy."

"Now that you pointed this out..." Lanfan murmured, talking more to herself than anything, likely trying to find a reason for someone to part with such information. Ling was curious too, and there’s only one way to find out.

"I want to talk to him personally."
He hated this place, he hated these clothes, and more importantly, he hated that brat for putting him in this predicament. Okay, he didn't hate him, he hated the fact he did it. He laid on his "bed" and stared at the ceiling, which was better than doing nothing.

In Ling's defense he probably don't know of this appearance, Ed did mentioned him before to Ling, even if it was to excuse his clothing choices. 'You talk about my fashion sense because you never saw Greed's!' Stupid kid.

He was taken from his stupor by the heavy sound of keys and the door opening, he scowled to whoever stepped on the cell, defiant to the end, to hell with these guard and their sadistic punishments. His face softened when he realized it was the brat, a mischievous grin started spread across his face.

"Yo Lanfan, you're still a fine young lady." She glared behind the mask and he held back his laughter. If he had never seen Lanfan in combat, he wouldn't take her seriously, the bodyguard's face was too cute. Greed then turned his attention to his previous host.

"Hey there Ling." he stopped himself, feigning remembrance. "My apologies Your Majesty, forgot you're Hongzi now." Ling rolled his eyes and this made Greed smirk.

"Are you a spy?"

"Now I know why that guy over there interrogated me last time."

"Are you Greed then? The owner of that garbage with a tacky name, what was it?" He mocked, pressing a finger between his eyes, trying to remember in an over-the-top manner. Greed sat, angry already, brat is provoking him on purpose. He is not talking shit about his bar nor it’s name, specially when he’s referred to as ‘Son of Heaven’.

"Devil's Nest, and the only garbage here is your backwaters country." It was Ling’s turn to frown, but it didn't last long unfortunately, as he gave that signature sly smile.

"Oh, I hit a nerve?"

"Hard not to when you look down on my things." His tone was serious but this only made the pissant's smile widen.
"Hard not to when they were a bunch of losers." He felt a pang on his chest, he never though the kid was so insensitive, not when he acted the way he did when he murdered Bido. Greed lowered his head, taking deep breaths to calm down, he wanted to punch Ling so much right now.

"You have no right to say that when you dress like this." He raised his head and was taken aback by Ling’s sudden change of expression, the pissant was holding back tears, his denial evident when he muttered ‘it can’t be.’ Greed wanted to ask what the fuck was wrong with him when suddenly everything made sense, he spent the entire night thinking about what to tell Ling to convince him he was indeed Greed, but he never thought about reactions, Envy's weakness. Ling was smart, he'll give him that.

“What I told you? What I told you when you were possessing me?” He was almost sold, only one more confirmation. This memory is so vivid, it is what made him keep the kid around after all, Greed could be polite and just recite everything Ling told him that day but he decided to be an asshole just to drive it home that yes, he was the monster that possessed him.

“You though you were big shit, going on about ‘being an emperor’ and ‘I want absolute power’.” He waved his hands dramatically and then raised his voice to imitate Ling. “‘These idiots are giving me immortality on a silver plate how can I say no?’, ‘my girlfriend lost an arm to get my sorry ass this far, I don’t want to disappoint her.’” Greed cleared his throat and looked up to see Ling’s relative struggling to keep a straight face, Lanfan likely flustered – if her head lowered serves any indication – and Ling shuddering. If he was laughing, crying or seconds from convulsing he doesn’t know because the kid hid his face in his sleeves.

It turned out to be the first two when the emperor threw his head back as he laughed, Greed wanted to ask if he lost his mind but was interrupted. “How? I saw you vanishing before my eyes!” The teen was torn between disbelief and joy, Ling rubbed his eyes, almost hiding his teary face in his sleeve and straightened himself, waiting for his answer.

“I have no idea kid, I thought I bit the dust too. I made a deal with a strange being and now I’m here.” Ling nodded, surprisingly accepting his answer. Greed, however, was still skeptical. “You believe I’m Greed?”

“Who else would insult the Emperor and be an asshole about it, too?” Sounds fair, Ling beckoned him to get up and closed their distance with a hug, burying his face on the crook of his neck. “You need a bath.”

“I missed you too.” He broke the hug, but held onto his arms, taking in his friend's new look, trying to absorb everything at once. Ling’s happiness was palpable and it felt good to be wanted.
"Welcome back." The Emperor mouthed an 'ah!' and turned to his clansman. "He's forgiven, we're going back to the palace." The man bowed and exited the cell, Ling left soon after, taking Greed with him. He was glad he got to exit this place quickly, but even more glad that Ling believes that he is indeed the homunculus that resided his body two years ago.

They exited the building and stopped in front of the carriage, waiting for Ling's relative to return. Greed and Lanfan insisted that Ling entered the carriage beforehand, but he declined, wanting to be near them the whole time. Greed shrugged at his stubbornness and choose to focus on the mounted guards escorting them, more precisely to the horses, marveling the idea of riding one since his days at Le.

"I can teach you horseback riding when we return to the palace." Lanfan suggested in her usual rigid tone, taking him out of his reverie. Looking back at Ling and Lanfan now, they didn't change much.

"If you're going to be my teacher, I'd be more than glad to." He purred, one forearm on the carriage for support. Perhaps he shouldn't tease someone who can easily kill him, but Lanfan's angry face is just too funny.

"You told Feng you arrived here six months ago, but was only in Lord Xia’s staff for two months. What you did in the other four?" Ling interjected, placing himself between them. Greed rolled his eyes, jealous much?

"I worked as a hooker." He mocked, but glared at the two when he got no reaction from them. "Wait, you guys believe that?"

"Well, um, you look, how can I say...attractive enough?" At least his tone was apologetic enough when he realized Greed felt insulted, Lanfan only nodded behind him. Greed gave them an irritated glance before huffing in frustration, running a hand through his hair to calm down.

"I helped an old pharmacist when he found me in a forest." They faced him with a look that told ‘I’m not buying your story’, this was getting annoying. Greed crossed his arms, flustered, not even meeting their state. "It's the least I could do for the couple that housed me, fed me and...clothed me." He said slowly and glanced at their direction again, at least now they look surprised.

"You were naked?" Seriously this is the only thing he got from his history? Well, he can tease him with it.
"What? You're interested in my nudity princeling?" He purred and Ling blushed in response to his words, mission complete. Ling's relative arrived along another men, his clothing in his arms.

"Here, your old clothes back." Perfect timing.

"Let me give you a sneak peek." He winked and took off the upper part of the prisoner's uniform, a bland-green-robe-thingy he hated and was glad to get rid of. He was handed his changshan back and he wore it, but before buttoning it up. "Can I return the pants later?"

"No." The prison staff replied with that stone face typical of them. Greed scoffed, he pointed to the carriage with his thumb.

"Can I change there?"

"Please!" He’s still red from embarrassment and Greed tutted, Ling's clansman handed the rest of his suit and he entered the carriage to change. While dressing he stopped here and there to pay attention to the small details decorating the transport, a Xinguese carriage was so different from those he remembers.

When Greed finished changing he opened the door to let them in, Ling was the first one – of course – and he frowned at his blouse when he noticed Greed didn't button up the last three knots at the top, but shrugged that off as his family member entered the carriage too, Lanfan was the last one and she sat besides Ling. The travel for the most part was silent, save for the idle chats they'd have occasionally, the travel started to bore him out of his mind and he decided to do something more interesting than stare blankly at the street: pester Ling.

"Don't you think you believed me too easily?" He teased, Ling raised an eyebrow.

"You can return to the prison if you want." He threw his head back and just laughed.

"Like hell!"

"What are we going to do now, Son of Heaven?" That boy he forgot the name decided to brake in their friendly banter. Rude.
"I'm thinking of giving him the title of Consultant." His relative nodded, and Greed stared at the two, confused but masking it in disinterest.

"Consultant?"

"This title permits you to participate in audiences and walk in the Palace. But don't give any responsibilities nor power." The third kid explained.

"But if he wants to survive the court, he'll need to learn our language, the reading of qi and martial arts." Lanfan commented.

Wait what?

"But who's going to teach him? He's too tall for the Yao Martial Arts."

"Oh, I know. Your Majesty, the Zhou style, it, I think it uses the person's height and strength on their favor right?"

"Nice one Lanfan!"

He's barely catching up.

"He can stay on their lands for a year! The Zhou are qi specialists, Greed will learn fast." He has never seen Lanfan this enthusiasmatic.

"Hold on!" He exclaimed, this conversation is going out of hand. "You're deciding things without my consent! Why do I need to do all of this?" He was lost, one moment he was playing with Ling, now they want to send him to wherever the hell these Zhou lands are. "Won't I stay in the palace?" All three calmed after his rant, Ling straightened himself before replying.

"Yes, you will. But like Lanfan said, you'll need to learn all of that first."
"And what if I refuse?" He crossed his arms, saying that more out of stubbornness than anything. Ling tilted his head slightly, a smile on his face, taking none of his shit.

"It's simple. You're not staying in the palace."

Chapter End Notes

So here it is, the second chapter. How's my Greed? I don't know if I nailed him and I'm kinda nervous. ^^'

Problem is, the guy has two different personalities and I decided to fuse them, with the first one being dominant.

On Greed's eye color: I went for yellow/gold/whatever you guys want to call the Elrics' eye color because Greed is now human and red is for ishvalians. I could go for lilac but since he have Hohenheim's blood yellow it is, and no he isn't blonde because the thought wierded me out; Let's just say Father used another man's blood to make Greed and both men's DNA went into account when Truth created human!Greed's body.

Hope it doesn't sound weird;
This chapter has a mention of suicide. It's very brief but it never hurts to warn.

Papers, papers and more papers. It was pretty much the only thing on his desk. Letters from relatives, audience requests, clan reports, state revenues, palace expenses – he wastes too much on food – projects that needed to be signed with their budget annexed to them, and a hundred-page essay on the best way to proceed with the Xing-Amestris railway. This excluding the essays from before yesterday that he still needs to rate.

Ling threw himself on the floor and sighed, his fatigue is making him completely unwilling to do any work. He choose to read the letters from his family, the first one written by the Yao Patriarch and this was enough to draw a smile from him.

"My illustrious daughter, your mother, keeps me updated on your endeavors at the Purple Palace. This old man looks upon the House of Chang and the House of Zhou with pride, knowing well how Hongzi's virtue shone on them, giving these once decaying clans a foothold on which they can stand in this chaotic times. People say The Son of Heaven did little, but with many a little makes a lot, so regardless of what they say, this subject believes Your Majesty can save this Empire from its own rotting bowels.

And one more thing, when are you getting married? The House of Yao needs to be expanded."

He wonders if he can rip off that last part of the letter.

Hongzi heard a knock on the door and hummed to let the person in, Yue bowed after closing the door behind her then handed a file to him, it contained the observations from the Censorate regarding the past week's audiences. He simply threw the thing on the table, one more thing to read, great. She pursed her lips, eyeing the table and her Lord's features, considering her next move.

"It's okay I'm not mad. What's the schedule for today?" His words caught her off guard, Yue checked on her pocket watch before opening the book she carries around at all times.
"In thirty minutes you have breakfast with the Empress Dowager. Since Your Majesty left the Heavenly Apartment without warning Lady Yao choose to relocate the breakfast to the pleasure garden" Her voice had a tone of reprimand on it, but was passive enough to be passed off as a remark. Ling was happy until she mentioned his mom, he was so screwed. The young emperor laid his head on the table, he wants breakfast, but food is not good if you aren't alive to eat it. He opened his eyes, looking at Yue deadly serious.

"Cover this one for me."

"No."

"Why not?" He drew out the words, whining like a child. Even the pile of papers look more interesting now. Yue put her hands on her hips, not wanting to deal with this early in the morning.

"Whose idea was it to deceive his own mother? Now face the consequences!" She cleared her throat. "Continuing, since the Empress issued an order that all audiences must start after noon, you'll have up to two hours of free time depending on how long you stay in the garden." She took a moment to breathe. "Starting at noon you have an audience with the Minister of Work, regarding the expansion of railways; one o'clock, meeting with an Amestrian ambassador; at one thirty, tea with said ambassador; at three o'clock, a private audience with the Yao Patriarch; four o'clock, supper-" He raised a hand to stop her there, repeating her name until she finally regarded him, he was going to forget most of it anyway.

"Isn't my suppers supposed to be at three?" Hedistinctively remembers the Court Physician saying a meal every three hours, which usually meant sharing meals with whoever came to visit him at the time. The Imperial Secretary scrutinized her agenda, nodding upon checking the book.

"To answer your question, no, they are indeed at four." She mouthed an 'oh'. "My sincere apologies Your Majesty, you're not having tea with the ambassador, it's lunch." He waved his hand nonchalantly and handed her a paper, getting on his feet using his table as support to meet his impending doom. "What is this for?"

"An order for the Minister of Personnel, he is to make official Greed's title of Consultant. Have someone deliver it to him." He exited the room and she followed suit, in a moment's notice Lanfan was also there escorting him. "When is the Zhou Master arriving?"

"In about three days."
"Three days?!"

"Since the construction of the south railways are delayed they can't travel much by train, so part of the journey is by horse." He rubbed his temples, at least this means more time with Greed before he parts, which brings the question.

"How much free time I'll have in these three days?"

"Not much. If you want to spend time with the man You, the Holy and Exalted One have bought recently, Your Majesty can do so in the morning." Ling hummed, already planning a morning schedule in his head, he just hopes Greed is an early riser.

“Thank you Yue, you’re dismissed.” The woman turned to the opposite direction and left his side, Lanfan took the opportunity to walk almost beside him, she seemed as reluctant as he was. “Do you think there’s still time to flee?”

“You’ll only irritate her more.”

“You’re right.”

----------------

The pleasure garden is about one third of the Purple Palace, comprising of two pavilions, a lake, an orchard, a sparring area, an outdoors bath complete with a spa, and a secluded area dedicated to meditation. Those last three things added on the first year of his reign. As such when Ling arrived he had to ask one of the servants of his mother's whereabouts, as she could be in either pavilion, or set up breakfast somewhere else entirely.

It turned out she was in the ground pavilion, Ling was guided to the place, walking there at a snail’s pace. They didn’t even get ten steps away from the pavilion and he was wavering, the servant guiding him stopped to check on His Majesty, and both jumped when a slipper almost hit Ling in the head.

"What are you doing? Climb the stairs already!" Ling gulped and slowly turned to leave, he can always eat in his apartment after all, but before he could do anything Yufan appeared before him and carried His Majesty on his shoulders, sitting the Emperor on the cushion laid there for him.
She started to eat first, her eyes closed the entire time. His mom was different from him, she closes her eyes when angry, unlike him who does the opposite. They ate in silence, Ling meekly eating his noodle soup to avoid any outbursts from her, and instead of facing his mom he decided to focus on the food, or on their bodyguards, who are standing there instead of hiding in the roof, which they normally do.

"Mom-" a hairpin flew too near to his face, piercing the balustrade behind him.

"Master Tao told me that when he arrived to check on you your room was empty, and Guardswoman Lian told me you left on a carriage with Feng and Lanfan. You lied to your mother." He muttered a 'sorry'. "What made you commit such treachery?" She was indignant, Ling opened an eye, chopsticks still in his mouth, weighing the pros and cons of telling the truth.

"I wanted to talk with that intruder." Another hairpin was hurled near him, now her hair was loose.

"That vulgar man?" She spat, now calmer. Seeing her hair down reminded him of how he was a replica of his mom.

"He's the man that saved my life back in Amestris." He confessed, she looked at Lanfan for confirmation and huffed when his bodyguard nodded, finding solace in her cup of soymilk.

"Where is he now?" She was genuinely interested, it's a shame he'll sour that now.

"In the..." He was involuntarily shrinking and that gave him away. Ling faced his mom, who was glaring him with an intent to kill. "Earthly..." He eyed Yufan this time, who was likely bracing himself for the storm that is coming. "Apartment..." He blurted and with that the calm before the storm ended.

"You ignorant child!" She slammed her hands on the table, the action alone making him flinch. "That place is for Empresses only!"

"Then I just need to marry him right?" He joked to ease tensions, but got a comb thrown at him, fortunately Lanfan protected him with her automail.
"I don't care what he is for you, he's staying in the harem!" How is he going to tell her that Greed won't accept that even if he begged?

"Three more days, and he's out for training with the Zhou for a year." He tried to bargain, the Empress Dowager calmed down but wasn’t convinced yet. Ling pleaded with his eyes, a staring contest taking place until she resumed her meal.

"Summon him." Yufan ducked his head and exited the construction, not long after some servants appeared with more tableware. For some unnamed reason Ling got nervous at the prospect of Greed and his mother in the same room, what if she disapproves of their friendship? What if Greed insults her and gets locked up in a cell again? Talking about Greed.

"Mom what do we call a Consultant?" Her chopsticks were still in her mouth when she faced to him, her expression more carefree. She finished munching on her food and tapped her chopsticks against her lips.

"A Consultant is part of the gentry, so Gentleman." Gentleman Greed? He had to stifle a laugh. Yufan arrived with Greed behind him, now wearing a simple, long black changshan, again not buttoning the top, only this time he left only one button.

Both men climbed the stairs and his mom took notice of the unbuttoned shirt, raising an eyebrow in response. The Commandant of the Guards offered a seat and Greed stood there confused, Lanfan having to explain to him what to do. Once sat, Greed watched both family members with a quizzical look on his face, he knows what he realized.

"Your mom? You look exactly like her." He just nodded, his mom offered to pour soymilk in his cup and Greed accepted, making a face when drinking the beverage.

"Talking about family, what about yours?" Ling, Greed and Lanfan tensed at this question. Greed drank his soymilk again, glancing subtly in Ling's direction to get any kind of permission, which he received, he finished his drink and grinned to the Empress.

"I'm the fourth of seven sons. Have you ever heard of King Bradley? He's my older brother." 'No he's not.' He contained the urge to say but fortunately was wise enough to remain shut. His mom was suspicious, but maintained her composure.

"Didn't know he had siblings."
"Not much is known about his personal life."

"Fair enough." She offered more soymilk but he declined, Ling took the opportunity to ask for more and in turn refilled her cup. The empress inhaled in her cup, taking in its fragrant aroma. "Thank you, for saving my child back in Amestris." Her words had a tenderness typical of loving mother. Ling smiled in his cup, not only for feeling loved, but for how smooth their conversation is.

"Nah, don't mention it." He played with his cup, an elbow on the table. Ling decided to ignore his bad conduct and focused on the overall fondness in his voice and eyes, marveling over how different he looked compared to his usual smugness. "Let's just say that I couldn't stand the thought of losing another friend." Ling felt his body warm and attributed it to the soymilk, he already knew the reasons behind his sacrifice, but something about getting Greed's insight on the matter added more weight on that bittersweet memory.

His mind was delving into weird places he wanted to avoid for now, so he returned to his food, saving his douhua for last Ling decided to go for a mantou, he was in his third one when he noticed Greed wasn't eating.

"Why aren't you eating?" He got Greed by surprise, he looked around the table with apprehension and finally settled for a baozi. Ling had to see Greed using his chopsticks to poke a hole in his baozi, subsequently sighing in relief for the thing not being a tangbao, for him to recall that Le is in the south, and as such he isn't used to northern and eastern food, the ones comprising the breakfast. His concern caught his mom's attention.

"Here, you should try this one." She poured soup on his bowl, Greed silently protested which his mom ignored, placing the dish next to his plate. He raised his hands in defeat and resigned to the situation, munching on his steamed bun.

"I want you to try this one too." Ling parroted his mother and placed a variety of buns and dumplings on his plate, Greed scowled, his face pretty much saying 'dude what the hell?'. Ling gleefully ignored him and placed a part of his omelet and jidanbing on his plate.

"I already ate breakfast." He mumbled. They stared him, deadpan.

"You can always eat more." The former homunculus sighed in defeat, eating one of the dumplings offered to him. His face brightened as he munched the food, making Ling and his mom smile.
"This is goo-" He stopped mid sentence as he looked at their smug smiles, Greed gave an exasperated sigh, obviously bothered by proving them right, and went back to eat his food like a pouty child.

After emptying almost every plate and basket on the table Ling turned to his douhua, only to find an empty spot on the table. His eyes landed on his friends as he was about to take the first bite of his dessert, Greed felt his stare and he stopped on his tracks as their eyes met.

"You're pouting." He closed his eyes as he savored the treat, completely ignoring the young emperor, however Ling still faced him, wondering if he stared long enough he could bore a hole in his head. Greed faced him again, surprised to see that Ling is still mad at him for eating his pudding, but chill enough to give the impression that he was unfazed by it, which is likely the case.

"You said I could eat didn't you?"

--------------------

The meeting with the amestrian ambassador went smoothly, more than he thought. He chuckled at the irony, it was easier to deal with a complete stranger than with people he talks almost on a weekly basis. But then again, it's easier to be rude to those you know.

Hongzi was heading to a small building made for the sole purpose of a private or even a secret meeting. His mood today was good, Greed promised to teach one of the cooks an amestrian pudding recipe – how Greed know of these things is beyond him. He never took the homunculus as someone who even bothered to know basic human hobbies – to make up for earlier, the foreigner envoy introduced him to black and milk tea and he absolutely loved it, and now he's going to talk with his grandfather.

The building itself was located in a secluded area in the Inner Court and only the Emperor's closest advisers and friends could enter. Lord Yao was already inside, sitting on his knees, two guards at each side kneeling on one knee and a fist on the ground. Ling sat on the opposite side of the table, Lanfan slightly behind him.

The crease on his brows deepened, a frown on his face as he found no one guarding the Emperor save for Lanfan. "Only one personal guard? Do you want to get yourself killed?" He groaned, shaking his head in the process. His grandpa knocked on the table and a third guard descended from the ceiling, taking the same pose as the others, but only after a quick glance at Lanfan. "Take
Yongji with you, I'm confident in her skills now."

"Of course you are, why else she would be here?" He beamed, getting a chuckle from his old man. He could sense that Lanfan was tense since she heard Yongji's name, resisting the urge to see the childhood rival who was denied the privilege of protecting their prince in the journey to Amestris, because she was deemed too unskilled for the job.

"You two can talk later. So, my child, did you receive my letter?" Ling sensed the growing anticipation in the Lord’s features, making him look less like the esteemed general and patriarch and more like a silly grandpa overly fond of his grandchildren.

"Yes. It's reassuring to know that I have your support." He bowed quickly and smiled, he meant those words, not everyone is lucky enough to have the support of the family, he heard stories of princes who were just seem as some sort of object, a chance at the throne for some clans, princes who would take their lives for losing the War of the Princes. The thought made his stomach turn, why his mind liked to go to such dark places when he's having a good time?

The sound of his old man groaning took him out of his melancholy thoughts, his grandpa had changed from seiza to sort of a cross-legged position. He didn't noticed his head was lowered until he raised it to face his grandfather, who was supporting himself on an elbow, a shameless smile on his face. Ling know what was coming and restrained himself from rolling his eyes. "What about the other subject I addressed?"

"I'm not interested nor am I old enough to consider it." He was disappointed but not surprised. The Lord straightened himself, his expression grave and eyes vacant, as if his mind was somewhere else, Ling has seen this almost lifeless state once, something his grandfather acquired after a lifetime of hardships. The Lord of Wa put both arms on the table, his hands entwined.

"You do know they'll ask this same thing in two years, yeah?" Ling muttered a 'yes'. "You'll have to choose: marry one girl from each clan and continue this bloody sport or abolish the clan system and turn our country into a dynastic one."

Chapter End Notes

An Imperial Harem is a big area in the Inner Court full of small houses where the concubines live, since Ling have none the place is empty. That's why his mom ordered him to put Greed on the harem, nothing more. f(^^'

Also introducing two new characters, yay. \(\text{ Oswes }\) If I knew how to draw anything that isn't chibi I'd probrrably draw them, because I have a clear idea of how they look. (I do
hope this isn't an issue though...}
Dantian

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Purple Palace was a beautiful place, the outer court was the pinnacle of majesty and harmonious symmetry, things related to war on the right, academics to the left and on the back the halls used by the Emperor mainly for audiences. As if as contrast, the inner court had this overall aura of tranquility, specially in the small hours of the day. He was only able to enter these parts thanks to his daughter, busy as ever in the imperial library. But enough about the palace, he's returning home soon and he wants to bid his grandson farewell.

By request of Linyu, a servant guided him to the Heavenly Apartment. The courtier stopped before a hall leading to the entrance of the building, he was halted at the door by two guards but upon showing his daughter permit he was allowed inside, one of the guards gave him directions to the Emperor's private chamber and Cheng bowed in gratitude.

The place is built around a small courtyard meant for meditation, from here he could see Lanfan and Yongji stationed on the door to his grandson's private chamber on the second floor. Arriving there Cheng raised a hand in greeting and both girls bowed while holding their fists in salute, Lanfan doing it with more vigor than her friend.

"His Majesty's still sleeping, I'm afraid." Lanfan informed, still keeping the hold fist salute. Cheng grabbed the doorknobs and before entering the room, he gave Lanfan an affable smile.

"Then I just need to wake him up." Emperor or not Ling is still his grandchild and he'll be treated as such when not in office.

Cheng opened the door and was almost overwhelmed by the opulence of the room, right in front of him is a balcony facing the pleasure garden. Aside from that the bed took the entire left portion of the room, a table with knickknacks was placed beside it and a tall vase to the other side. There's a tea table set facing the balcony, a cushion on each chair. Closer to him there’s a vanity, and behind it an ornate screen almost hiding a wardrobe, there's probably a floor mirror too, near the wardrobe there's a mannequin dressed with today's hanfu. All of this topped of by a brocade rug with a dragon in it's center.

As Cheng approached he eyed the incense that was burnt out and shook his head, this kid can be so reckless sometimes. He could make Ling's silhouette behind the thin curtains of the bed thanks to the lit lamps inside the bed frame, the cricket was laying face down. He must have felt his qi as he placed his hands on each side of his body to get up, sitting with bent knees and stretching out, he groaned as he did so and rubbed an eye, the young emperor ran his fingers through his hair and
stopped at the midsection, where his hair should be tied. All the while his grandfather awaited to be addressed.

Cheng dismissed the idea that Ling have noticed him entirely when his grandson completely ignored him to search something on the bed, tossing his numerous cushion aimlessly. He decided he had enough of it and opened the curtains to reveal his grandchild sitting with a cushion on his arms, sleepy but wary eyes and tousled hair, in other words, an utter mess.

And it didn't stopped there, the ties on his plum robe have loosened and the clothing is falling from his right shoulder, he can't see much with the cushion blocking it – and honestly, thank goodness-but what he can see of his left leg is showing. Ling quickly straightened himself and fixed his clothes, a deep red on his face.

"Grandpa! What are you doing here?" What would otherwise be a yelp was dismantled by his yawn, the Yao Patriarch resorted to tie the curtains as it became obvious his grandson wanted to exit the bed, giving up on finding his hair lace.

"You look tired?" He worded it slowly, suspecting something but waiting for the cricket to blurt it out, by his looks he either moved a lot in his sleep or something entirely different happened. Ling gave a nervous laugh and stretched again, which he assumed was because the kid was uneasy, so perhaps his last hypothesis is right.

"A bit sore." He rubbed a shoulder, wincing in pain when he pressed accidentally his collarbone. "And I went to sleep late thanks to that idiot."

"...that idiot?" He bought someone to his bedroom?

"A dear friend of mine." He shrugged his shoulders, not really caring that he just called a dear friend an idiot. Ling opened the drawer of his end table and snatched a comb and a ribbon, straightening his hair and tying it in a bun. Oh, so he's going to take a bath. "He'll stay in Wen for a year to train, so I wanted to enjoy every last minute I had with him." Cheng cocked an eyebrow but his grandson willfully ignored him.

The Child of Heaven headed to the tea table and offered a chair to his grandfather, sitting only after he did, propping his chin in the palm of his left hand the moment he rested on the chair.

"So why did you invade my bedroom?" Ling quipped and his words made his old man flinch,
Cheng had forgotten that he needed to say goodbye to his child, too absorbed by Ling's unruly state from before.

"I'm heading back to Wa." He confessed, his face straight. Ling's hand fell on the table in a loud 'thud' as his face fell.

"So soon?" It almost sounded like a plea for him to stay, Cheng pursed his lips, avoiding eye contact. As tempting as it is to spend some leisure time with his grandson, he still have his duty.

He huffed, there's no point in lamenting these things this long in his career. "Someone has to supervise the eastern borders." His voice had a tone of finality, Ling raised from his chair and offered his grandpa a hug, who accepted it. They walked alongside each other until they left the bedroom, Cheng went ahead to exit the apartment while Ling went left.

The two sisters ducked their heads as he exited the place and he couldn't help but feel a bit uneasy that they weren't following their master wherever he went. Cheng was about to leave the Hall of Intersection when he felt a faint qi coming from the Earthly Apartment, his brows furrowed, his face stern. It isn't a servant as whoever is in there isn't moving, but it isn't an Empress either, since he's sure the cricket would tell him such information, and even if he didn't it would be on the news.

Cheng decided to check on this suspicious qi then, concluding that his party can wait a bit longer. The place didn't even have guards which just made him more concerned, he picked up his pace and once arriving at his destination he knocked the door. No response, so he waited a few seconds to bang it instead.

He heard someone complain on the other side of the door, their voice muffled by it’s thickness. When the door did open, however, he didn't expected to see such a handsome gentleman, much less one in such unruly state, residing in a place reserved to an Imperial Consort.

“This is bordering on desperation Hongzi.” The man said in a kind of controlled anger he didn’t know people could muster after just waking up. He looked down and only now he noticed he wasn't talking to his grandchild, but to a complete stranger, the lad cleared his throat out of embarrassment and leaned on the doorway. "Hey old man, what's with all that banging? Can't you see that people are sleeping?" What a nice baritone, he mused. The man yawned while he waited for a response and proceeded to stretch his triceps, his hanfu was closed loosely and overall he could say he’d look elegant if he dressed properly. No wonder that kid doesn’t want to marry right now. His biceps peaked through the fabric and it was endearing to watch as he changed to another kind of stretch, but he stopped it abruptly to cross his arms.
"Oy, are you even listening to me?" His voice took him out of his stupor, Cheng should be ashamed to be caught ogling a total stranger, but he was too old to care. He had to look up to see the gentleman in the face and only now his eyes took sight of the man's golden irises, as captivating as it was to gaze at such beautiful eyes Cheng cut that short to duck his head. Just because he didn't care doesn't mean he shouldn't apologize.

"Ah! My apologies for being so discourteous young one, this old man was just curious about the strange presence in the Earthly Apartment." So people really had an issue with him sleeping in this room, but whatever, he's staying here for what, two hours or so? Greed looked down on the old man just to see the old fog checking the sash in his robe. "You tied this wrong."

"Was too tired to care." His eyes perked at his statement and when they faced each other again, his expression changed, like he knew something now.

"Awake till late at night?" He frowned at this specific question, but soon shrugged it off as a wild guess.

"This is none of your bussiness."

"Indeed it isn’t. Are you friends with Hongzi?" Greed nodded slowly, still sleepy and slightly careful to not blurt out any unnecessary or intimate things about himself or Ling, even if the man is apparently from the Yao clan – a cherry blossom is their mon, as Ling had informed him. This meant nothing to him though, anyone could put a brooch on their clothes and pretend to be from any clan.

The old man seemed to enjoy the response given and nodded in return, a satisfied smile in his face, one that told Greed the man had all the information he wanted. He turned his back to him. "My, that cricket has good taste." Cricket? Greed stared at the elder as if he had grown a second head however he didn't questioned him. He was already in the Hall of Intersection when he faced Greed one last time, before exiting his field of vision.

"And thanks for the eye candy."

-------------------

By the time he finished tidying up it was already eleven in the morning. Having found nothing else to do, Greed jumped off the balcony of his bedroom, landing on the pleasure garden if his
memories served him well. The pavilion from before was on the horizon, Greed turned to the right on a path full of trees and bushes, following a trail of small red pagodas that served as lights. He whistled at the beauty of the place, letting himself indulge in the bright sounds of birds chirping and the vivid colors of the myriad of trees all sporting different hues, from green to red.

He walked through the greenery until he ended in a glade, the place was small and secluded and contained some ornamental rocks, he got confused as what was the purpose of the place and exited it as soon as he arrived. Passing by the trees revealed that the place was the home to some birds and small animals like rabbits, not wanting to disrupt the animals Greed opted to exit the woods.

His little stroll ended in a barricade of bamboos, there's a building on the other side and Greed wanted to explore that, he turned to leave but the moment he heard Ling's voice instinct made him turn back to search for his previous host. It was difficult to make anything out of the bamboos and only then Greed became aware of what he was doing and stopped immediately, returning to his previous plan of walking around the trees to reach the construction.

The place was just after some cherry trees and looked more like a shack, the ground around it was paved with grey stones and a stone garden added a relaxing touch to the area. Greed walked more until he found a wooden door, before knocking he heard Ling's laughter and by reflex smiled. He opened the door after being invited by Hongzi and found himself in a corridor with a paper door to the left, Greed didn't even bother with it and went straight ahead to the open area he saw through the bamboo.

To his right Lanfan and another guard were sitting on armchairs – masks off so they're likely off duty – while Feng was sprawled on the sofa facing them and playing with a fan, there's someone massaging Ling but he can't recognize them. Ling, on the other end, laid face down on a stone massage table naked save for a towel on his lower area and chin propped in his right hand, his hair was tied in a bun but his fringe still in place and Greed must admit, he looked nice in this hairstyle now that he left the bang there. Their eyes met and he mimicked Greed's indifferent face.

"People can only enter here with my permission." It wasn't even a reprimand, if anything Ling was just pointing it out.

"Say that to someone who gives a shit." The other girl almost raised from her seat if not for Lanfan raising an arm to stop her. Ling noticed her reaction and chuckled, he then changed the arm supporting his chin, not at all fazed by his friend's antics.

Now that he had a better look at the place he realized it was some sort of outdoors spa and that the wall of bamboos, the wood awning and open shack where to give His Majesty some level of privacy. Greed glanced off to where the other three sat and saw the cherry blossom emblem on Feng's fan. Thinking about cherry blossoms.
"When I woke up this old dude was all over me-" Ling snorted and burst into laughter, but it wasn't hysterical, on the contrary, it was barely audible. He supported himself on both elbows, his shoulders shaking, Greed approached him, unsure as to why he found that so funny. Ling raised a hand and at last stopped to look him in the face.

"Sorry, that was dickish of me." He raised from the table and hopped off it, soon after that the girl besides him bought a robe, he muttered a 'thanks' and dressed quickly, facing Greed again. "So, how this old man looked like?"

"Yellow scarf, brooch with the Yao crest, a golden tiger headpiece." Everyone in the room froze except for Greed, who glanced at all of them. Looking now at the girl near the table, he thinks he recognize her from back in Amestris, he turned to face Ling again and saw that he cupped his face in his hands. Greed patted his shoulder and this was enough to make the kid face him again, face full of shame.

"That's my grandfather!"

"That explains a lot." Ling slapped his arm when he caught on what he was implying. He could tell him that his grandfather probably thinks they have an affair, but Greed concluded that it was for the best that Ling don't know about that too. The girl behind him huffed and crossed her arms.

"I know this isn't my place to say." Ling waved his hand dismissively and she continued. "But Lord Yao Cheng is too shameless, last time it was my Alphonse!" Alphonse? This name sounds familiar somehow. At hearing Alphonse's name Ling's face brightened up, he turned to Greed and nudged his arm, successfully grabbing his attention.

"You haven't seen Al yet right?" Oh, so Alphonse is that Al kid, Greed shook his head. "Lanfan, please?"

She raised from the chair and went to the door, but before opening it she faced the emperor. "Put some clothes Your Majesty, real clothes." Ling nodded and headed to the door Greed ignored earlier, Lanfan exited the spa but stayed within view, talking with a servant, as it happened, the Zhou masters have arrived.

By the time Lanfan bought Greed's future teachers to the cottage Ling was already in a presentable state sitting in the couch alongside his cousin while the girl – Mei, as she introduced herself – took Lanfan's place. There was a group of four people, three men and a woman, being guided by
Lanfan, upon their arrival Mei and the other girl stood up to give their chairs to the group, which only the woman and the oldest looking guy took, and by the looks on Ling's and Mei's faces, that woman was important.

"Lady Zhou what are you doing here?" Ling surely liked the woman, if his cheerful expression was anything to go by. She grinned before ducking her head and making the hold fist salute.

"This subject just figured out that if we're going to teach our fighting style to His Majesty's friend I might as well rate him first." She has a point, Ling nodded in agreement, Lady Zhou put an elbow on the arm of the armchair, supporting her chin with the back of her hand, she glanced at Greed and smirked before facing the emperor again. "Oh my, what a fine young man you have as friend Emperor Hongzi. So, shall we begin with the test?"

At hearing this Mei approached Greed to ask him to lay on the table, he was stubborn at first but then relented. The people from the Zhou grouped around the table with Ling soon following them, not wanting to miss the chance of seeing Lady Zhou’s abilities to read the three treasures, Mei must have thought the same too, as she remained on the table. They gave space for the Zhou Matriarch who put both hands on the table, glancing up and down on Greed before settling in his face.

"Where's my manners, let me introduce our party." Lady Zhou gestured to her group. "Parallel to Your Majesty is my uncle, Zhou Ren, he'll teach you proper etiquette; next is Master Xuan, he's the one you'll be seeing the most and will be your martial arts teacher; last is the scholar Ding Mi, he'll teach you Xingese and I am Lady Zhou Yuan, your hostess during your stay. Now..." She stretched her arms and then pointed to his changshan.

"You'll have to open your shirt." Greed obliged and the Matriarch ran her fingers through his torso, finishing on his navel, she pressed on the spot, making Greed squirm a little. Instinctively Ling's hand found itself on Greed's shoulder, comforting him. Lady Zhou raised an eyebrow and retracted her fingers.

"He has an amazing amount of Jing!" She crossed her arms, satisfied with her finding. "Actually, I think he has more than enough to learn our ultimate fighting style."

"But then will a year be enough?" The eldest member of the group – Zhou Ren – inquired, drawing everybody's attention to him.

"If we push him to the edge, it's possible." Ling faced the man who will be Greed's master, he was so absorbed by his words he barely noticed Greed's hand patting his own. The emperor withdrew
his hand and with that out of the way Greed raised from the table, sitting with an arm on his knee.

"What are you guys talking about?" Greed directed his question to Yuan, and Ling had to face her too, as he was as puzzled as the ex-homunculus.

"I'm curious too. What is this 'Ultimate Fighting Style'?' Yuan's attention went from Greed to Ling and she flashed him a smile.

"Wind. Forest. Fire. Mountain. Although I think in Wa it is known as Furinkazan."

"Furinkazan?" Lady Zhou glanced at Mei, surprised she didn't know the term. Ling stepped over to explain the terminology, quite surprised and excited just thinking on how they'll apply this philosophy in a training.

"As swift as the wind, as calm as a forest, as destructive as fire and as firm as a mountain. In short, be ready for any situation." He just hope that by the end of the year Greed doesn't become paranoid. Mei mouthed an 'oh' and joined Feng on the sofa, it seemed that with this information out of the way and with Greed's amount of Jing in mind, Lady Zhou's group were done. They bowed to Ling and went to the exit.

"You're already leaving? Don't you want to stay for tea?" This time she only glances over her shoulder, her brows turned upwards.

"Thanks, but I must decline. We're tired from traveling so we're returning to the hotel." A beat and. "Oh, and we'll be parting tomorrow morning." And with that they were gone, Ling wished at least Lady Zhou stayed, as he could ask about her son, he had no idea he missed Xiong this much until he saw his mother.

"Should I still bring Alphonse?" Her words snapped Ling out of his musings, he just nodded, still a bit lost in his memories. It was not until Greed waved his hand in front of him that he finally stopped to pay attention to the former sin.

"Stop dozing off, will ya? What are they going to do with me?" Ling rolled his eyes, he should be honored to be learning the ‘Four Wills’. He was going to tell him that but had a sudden mischievous gleam in his eyes, maybe he can jest him.
"Well, by the looks of it, they will train your resistance, speed, strength and stealth." He said innocently and then turned his back to Greed. "Of course, if we go by the overall meaning this means you'll train nonstop. You must excel in every formation, the ideal soldier. They did say you'll be pushed to the edge." He chuckled then glanced over his shoulder, Greed looked calm but he could see a hint of trepidation in his features. Good.

Ling flashed a devilish grin. "It'll be a training from hell." He said in a mock-scary tone, after that he turned and tilted his head to the side, smiling as if nothing happened. "So, how do you want to spend your last hours of peace?"

He opened only one eye, just barely enough to look at his dear friend, and the look of displeasure on Greed's face was utterly priceless.

Chapter End Notes

Finally Ling's mom has a name! \o/ And I decide to be creative and give her a name that resembles her child's. /sarcasm
It's Lin-yu not Li-nyu, just to be clear.

Also, I got my hands on the Fullmetal Alchemist complete guide and the way it worded it, it looked like Envy, Lust and Greed use transmutation to change appearance, grow her nails and harden his skin respectively. Maybe that's why when Envy change appearance shockwaves appear? Why I'm telling this? Who knows...
When he asked Lanfan about why she's leading him to the garden, the guard just said that His Majesty wanted to show him something, however he still had his doubts, Ling always talked to him either in his study or the house in the harem quarter he's staying right now. When he, Jerso and Zampano asked why they had to live in the harem Ling just said the place will be unused during his reign.

They arrived in a small cottage shortly after and when Lanfan opened the door she quickly sidestepped to avoid Mei, she lunged forward and since Alphonse didn't saw that coming, they fell on the ground.

He heard footsteps and it turned out to be Ling, their eyes met and Mei rolled off him, sitting in the grass by his side. Ling had a smug smile in his face while Mei just looked expectant, Alphonse glanced between the half-siblings, lost to their intentions. It was only when Ling stepped out of the door to give space to someone else that everything fell into place.

"What's with all this fuss?" He wanted to scream but found himself unable to, it can't be Greed, right? His eyes widened and so did the stranger's, and as if coordinated, they both pointed their fingers at one another. "You've got your body back!"

"And you're alive!" Alphonse stood by kicking his legs, disbelief written across his face. "I thought you died!" He turned his attention to Ling, his face saying everything he needed, the emperor nodded.
"This makes us two." So this is Greed? For sure? and he's too nonchalant for someone who got back from the dead. He wanted to ask so many questions but none came to mind, his head was still busy trying to process the situation.

"How?" He waved his hands in his direction as a whole, for a while this is the only thing he can come up with. "The dead can't come back. It's impossible." Greed now sported a cocky smile, typical of him, and approached Alphonse, bending down a little to get to eye level.

"Then it just means I didn't die." His voice was low and matter-of-factly, then he straightened himself and returned to the cottage to lean against a wall. Greed crossed his arms and tilted his head upwards, his eyes distant, only now Alphonse realized that his eyes aren't red anymore. "Yes, I didn't. But I'd rather die than be trapped in that place forever." Something came to mind when Greed confessed, and this made him frown.

"That place? A vast whiteness?" Greed lowered his head, surprised, but soon he relaxed and shrugged his shoulders, as if he remembered something.

"That too."

"So you've met with the Truth?" He raised his eyebrow, showing only mild interest.

"So that's its name." Alphonse groaned, rubbing his temples afterwards, seriously he can be as imprudent as his brother. Even Ling jumped on his act of rashness.

"You never asked?" Ling's voice was accusing, baffled by how thoughtless Greed can be. Greed, in his turn, only gave him a side glance and distanced himself a little.

"It said it was me and I just accepted, I mean, it looked like me. I guess." He defended himself, it sounded almost like a rant. Alphonse was so lost in their banter he almost forgot to ask the most important question: what he had to pay.

"What the Truth wanted as wage?" They stopped their little game of glaring at one another to look at him, Greed's expression now was serious. "What it took from you?" He gave a defeated sigh and rubbed his nape, the change in mood taking Ling aback and making Alphonse anxious.

"Everything except my mind." Alphonse continued to stare and when it became obvious that he
won't be content with only that he continued. "My body, my abilities, it took them all and in exchange gave me a new body and a soul." He stopped to gaze at his hands then dropped his shoulders, eyes closed, bothered by something Al can't pinpoint. "The worst of all is that I was just a part of Father, like my brothers, so technically I'm all of them in one body now. Well except for Pride, that sick fuck."

"So, you know how to use alchemy?" By instinct he tried to shove his hands in his pockets, only to remember that his pants don't have one, Greed cursed under his breath.

"Eh, probably." 'Probably?' Al shrugged it off, if it is a possibility that he has Father's memories, maybe he know things he can’t even begin to imagine. Greed snapped his fingers and this drew Alphonse's attention to him.

"If I'm also my Father, does this makes me Hohenheim's son too?"

--------------------

“Raise your arms-yep, that’s good.” The Imperial Tailor ran the measuring tape around Greed’s chest and the naturalness in which Greed acted tells him he already had clothes made for him, not that it matters but it was small details like this that perked Ling’s interests the most, being perceptive and all.

This was the last measure to take, He always likes to begin from bottom and then move to places where the measured person don’t need to move, ergo why only now the chest is being cheked. Oftentimes the emperor would try to peek at the measures already inscribed in his notebook and he would place the thing somewhere else out of annoyance.

Ling sighed and resigned to look through the clothes catalog, he does want to try on a changshan, a long one to be more precise, after seeing Greed, Feng and even Alphonse wearing it from time to time – Mei loves when he does it – and maybe he can order a recreation of his former clothes, his happi became unusable after he turned it into a makeshift bandage for Lanfan, and his pants, well, he doesn’t remember what Greed did to them.

On a second thought he doesn’t have any idea of what end the rest of his clothes had, he’ll have to ask Greed when he get the time.

“We’re finished, now you can choose which clothing you’d like.” Master He pointed to the catalog
on Ling’s lap and Greed approached him, he gave him space on the loveseat and they both
rummaged through the pages. They contained only a basic drawing of the clothes it provided, with
colors and patterns on another separated section.

“This one.” His eyes followed Greed’s fingers and he must say, from all the clothings listed here
he didn’t expect a yuanlingpao to be the one to catch his attention. Master He inspected the page
itself and nodded, ordering a disciple to gather the fabrics and another one to bring him his order
journal.

“Now, Master Greed I’ll ask you to choose a fabric.” The apprentice came back in time to show
him the available materials and Greed ran his hands on each of them and stopped at the third one
displayed to him. Ling touched the fabric out of curiosity and understood why Greed probably
choose this one, it was soft and light, perfect for warm temperatures but not what he needs for now.
Oh well, he said he could choose anything and he gave him his father’s clothes it’s no big deal.
“You have a taste for quality, that’s for sure.”

“Can you make it black?” Greed didn’t meant it as insult, but his tailor sure took it as one, he
humphed and puffed his chest, and Ling sit there wanting to see how he reacted with hurt pride.

“I can make it anyway you want.” He declared proudly, Greed smirked and Ling could see the sly
in his eyes, he’s planning something and he’s looking forward to it.

“Then I want it embroidered with golden dragons on the shoulders, and clouds on the sleeves
hems. Make it flashy, oh, and I want the inner part burgundy. As for the pants I don’t want it
baggy, I don’t care if that’s the norm here, I hate it, make it fit and make it white, and I want my
boots with the same embroidery as the upper part. Understood?” Master He nodded and waved a
hand to the other apprentice with the journal, who scribbled rapidly trying to keep up with Greed.

“Let me check, you want a black, embroidered yuanlingpao, white trousers and matching boots?”
Greed nodded. “Anything else?” Ling raised a hand as if in class and the master tailor gave him a
curt nod. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

“I want a long changshan with medium sleeves, make the slit wide, I want it...” He checked the
color section and pointed to a color labeled ‘Spring Green’. “In this color here.” He asked for the
catalog back and Ling handed it, he bowed again.

“Anything else Your Majesty?”
“A doupeng for Greed, make it match my late father’s hunting garb.” He nodded. “What hour is it?” Master He fished for his pocket watch and opened it. Yue is right, he does need to have one, but the thing is so ugly and he doesn’t know where to keep it.

“Ten to six.” He answered absentmindedly, Ling’s eyes widened and he raised from his seat abruptly, taking Greed by the sleeve – with him as wide-eyed as he was and confused like a startled deer – and storming off the room, but before he closed the door.

“Thank you for taking your time with us Master He, but now I’m late for an appointment.” And with that he was gone, unable to see the people inside looking at one another as clueless to what happened as Greed himself.

The Emperor walked in the halls with Greed following him like a lost puppy, Ling chuckled, amused at the scene despite the hurry. The sky was darkening outside and he picked up pace, it was nearing six and he was late for dinner, not that it was much of a problem since it was meant for only him and Greed. The way it was set up, they are going to dine on the lake pavilion, it will look like a date to any bystanders, it was embarrassing, but Greed wanted to go there at least once before moving for a year.

A diner date, the thought alone made him blush, the concept of date is foreign to Xing, the closest they have is meeting with someone alone in a secluded place where they can comfortably act in a romantic way, but the Amestrian tradition to take someone you wish to court or even a lover to dine in a sumptuous place is engraved in his mind and the lake pavilion perfectly matches this idea of luxurious romantic environment, with it’s waterlilies, candle lights and exotic lamps, coupled with the sight of a pristine lake and other lavish flowers by it’s margin, Greed will definitely think the same as he’s now. Worse, he might think he has the hots for him.

Greed whistled and he looked up to meet his gaze, an act he regretted as Greed laughed while walking away in the direction of the garden. All of Ling’s worries escaped his mind in place of sheer annoyance of the nerve this idiot has.

------------------

"Why your gramps calls you cricket?" Greed's arms were bent behind his head, his body slanted on the pillows. Ling was beside him on the bed, sitting with bent knees with a lumbar pillow on his lap.

"Because there's a cricket in Wa that's called bell cricket, and my name just happens to have the same sound as bell." He shrugged without blinking, and untied his hair, because sleeping with a
ponytail can be uncomfortable. "This, and because I play flute and, according to my grandpa, I tend to ‘hop around’."

"You play flute?" Ling nodded. "Since when?"

"Being part of nobility I'm forced to learn at least two forms of art, I choose poetry and music for convenience and the flute just happened to be the one I disliked the least." And with time, he started to like his flute, the instrument is safely guarded inside the dresser but he decided to not part with such information, last Greed asks him to play it right now and he hurts their ears with off-tune "music".

"When I finish my training you have to play for me."

"It's a promise then." They remained in silence for a while. Ling took this chance to examine Greed's looks, his long legs and broad shoulders matched perfectly with the hanfu – this one was from his late father – the navy color accentuated his skin and made a neat contrast with his eyes. It's a good thing that he's slender, too, or else the robe wouldn't fit. Ling can partially see his chest and abs from how loosely he ties the damn clothes, moving up, he must say he likes the sharp features of Greed's face, like his eyes, nose and jawline, it kind of contrast his soft hair, now down and messy after a bath.

"I think you look better this way." He nodded in his overall direction and Greed grimaced, he attacked him with a pillow in a speed he didn't thought he could manage. Bless his quick reflexes, or else he would have been hit in the head.

"Bite me!" He had laughter in his voice, and it sounded so rich when he was joyful. "Also, whip your mouth, you're drooling." By reflex he did as Greed said, and the idiot went hysterical, grabbing his stomach as he did so. Ling growled when he noticed he meant it figuratively and blushed, feeling humiliated, he did this again. He's too prideful to admit he was ogling his friend and out of spite he used the pillow in his hands to hit him.

"The pot calling the kettle!" He tried to hit again but this time Greed defended himself, he doesn't know when his smile appeared, but perhaps it's because he's enjoying where this is all going. "You think I didn't notice how awestruck you were by my looks when we were on the spa?" Now it was Ling's turn to get hysterical. Greed changed to a more comfortable position, all the while protecting himself from Ling's ferocious blows, the more he defended, the more Ling liked the challenge.

"There was no ill intentions when I gazed at your body." In the middle of his sentence he defended at least four blows, Greed caught one of the pillows as a shield and when Ling was about to hit him
again he used the opening to attack him, the hit so strong Ling fell face first on the bed. "Are we going to mock fight every time I visit your room?"

By the time he shifted his face to get some air Greed returned to his initial pose, but now with a leg bent, Ling weighted his choices and settled for laying on Greed's stomach, he didn't complain or tensed so Ling made himself comfortable. "Why not? And besides I was the one tortured yesterday." Greed rolled his eyes.

"Not my fault if you're ticklish." Ling chuckled and he smirked by reflex. "Tell me, what a Consultant really do?" He was eyeing the ceiling, seemingly lost in thought. Ling drew a circle in his chest to get his eyes on him.

"It's kind of a place holder. I want you in my court, but I don't have a suitable job available right now." Greed hummed in response and Ling continued to draw in his chest, this time writing 'human'. "It could be any title depending on your achievements." Now he drew a star. "Attendee, Swift as Tigers Cavalry, Palace Architect, General of the Rear."

"What?"

"You heard it right." Ling waited for the information to sink in and decided to humor him a little more. "Want to hear a better one? General who Drowns Mischiefs."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Greed frowned, torn between confused and amused, he then raised a finger as he remembered something. "Want to hear a better one?" Ling adjusted himself and he grinned. "Knight of the Bedchamber." They stared at one another for a good minute before Ling buried his head on his arms, Greed didn't understand what was happening until he noticed Ling’s shoulders shaking.

The Emperor perked his head up soon after. "What was that supposed to mean?" He tried not to laugh and his voice went higher than expected, the act alone made Greed laugh, making Ling’s efforts useless. They laughed in unison and honestly he wanted this moment to last forever, he hadn't been ecstatic like this in months.

A loud bang on the door made both jump and cease their little happy moment. "Your Majesty you need to sleep!" They heard Lanfan on the other side of the door and this marked the end of their conversation. Ling moved to a corner of the bed to give Greed space, once he hoped off the bed and headed to the door Greed wished him good night.
Ling stared at the door for a couple minutes waiting for this laughs to die off, he closed the curtains and threw himself on his bed, cherishing these last few days with Greed, days that made even his stressful work bearable, days that would not return for a long time.

He drifted to sleep minutes after.

---------------------

Five horses were stationed on the front door of the palace, each member of Lady Zhou's party holding a rein, except for Master Xuan who held another one belonging to the horse meant for Greed. Ling and Al came to see him off and he felt a little down that Lanfan is nowhere to be found, she is here, because there no way in hell she's leaving Hongzi undefended, but she's not showing up.

"Remember to write me." He nodded and Ling handed him a large suitcase. "Your clothes. It will take time for your yuanlingpao to be finished, but when it does I'll send it to you." Greed hummed, he didn't want to use the clothes of a dead man but it is better than nothing, at least he's dressing in luxury. The emperor signed for him to get closer which he obliged. "Don't lose this bag no matter what." He whispered, deadly serious, and soon returned to his calm demeanor, Greed rolled his eyes but hummed anyway, this is getting ridiculous and he's looking like a henpecked husband right now with all this ordering and babying.

Or better yet, a rooster-pecked husband, because Ling is a man.

"There's a chance I'll not be here by the time you return, but we'll catch up in the future." There was a silent promise in his words and he grinned at that, having his spirits lifted up. Greed climbed down the stairs and waved an arm in farewell.

"No sweat kid, I'll probe into my mind someday to take anything from dad dearest." He got up on his horse with the help of his future master and faced both teens, their smiles brightened their faces and made Greed smile in return. "If I discover anything I'll let you know."

"It's a deal then." Al was confident and he liked the kid's spunk. Lady Zhou started to move and soon they trailed behind, someone jumped off the stairs but Greed didn't bother to discover who it was, as it happened, it was Ling.

"I'll train and play the best song you've ever heard! So don't disappoint!" His soulmate shouted in
the middle of the street and Greed had to chuckle at his boldness, he thought the kid's life as emperor would've made him rigid and boring but he was delighted to be proven wrong. It will suck to leave him for a year.

"I'll hold this against you!" He couldn't see, but Ling was smiling. This farewell made him lower his head to think, Ling's promise-slash-challenge brought him a sudden urge to amaze the kid by the end of year. He smirked, yeah, he could do that. Greed straightened himself, now confident, he will master this Furinkanzan.

Chapter End Notes

What's this? The plot is moving?! Yeah sorry about the other two chapters, I really dragged things in them but now I hope this won't happen again.

Now starts what I like to call the 'White Snake arc'

Also important note: Since I like to have at least one chapter in advance I'll only post chapter 6 after finishing ch. 7, it can take a while because the reason ch. 5 took this long was thanks to me taking a lot to finish ch. 6 and since the first 5 chapters were already done when I posted they were faster. With that said and done I hope you guys understand and continue to support this fics.
Welcome to Wenchang

Chapter Notes

A sort of introduction to Greed's training...? I hope it isn't boring.

Also this chapter is filled with headcanons, and I never think I told this but the more to the east, the more Xing resembles Japan and not China. (there's canon evidence in the manga that Xing is a mix of China and Japan, like when Mei fantasizes her and Ed wearing yukatas in a matsuri, Ed is helping her wear her sandal because she slipped, and the obvious Ling's sarashi and happi and Fu and Lanfan being ninjas).

"Here we are. It is not as impressive as the capital, but I'm still proud of it. Welcome to Wen."

They stepped out of train and the first thing he caught sight of was the minimalist and yet charming station, the edges of the platform were littered with maple leaves and sometimes he could hear the crunching noises when they were stepped on mostly by kids, at last the few that landed on the same station as them.

The terminal itself was similar to those located in small towns in Amestris, only with a typical Xing flavor he grown to like. There was a huge clock on the center which must have been imported from the west, Yuan's group walked to the entrance and he was still amazed and slightly weirded out by how much the stations took from Amestris.

The ride to the Zhou manor was calm, once in a while Greed would stare off to a mountain he'd seen since they landed. 'That is were you'll be training.' Lady Yuan had told him before laughing to her heart's content. From what he understood, Wen was to the south of Xing, just like Le, but unlike Le, it had a different aesthetic from it, people here dressed more similarly to how Lanfan and Yongji would in their off times.

When they arrived at the Zhou Matriarch's residence he was awestruck, a manor on the foot of the mountain with a main building in the center and separate smaller ones surrounding it topped by an enormous maple tree and other foliages. He hopped off the horse once they reached the stables and was rushed inside the main building, sauntering through room after room taking in the simplistic and relaxing decorations. Greed followed Yuan outside of the house and ended on a sort of patio made of stone with lighter stones making a road leading to the smaller buildings, the outside was neatly adorned by round shrubs, other colorful flowers and a stone lamp here and there. She led him to the lodging nearest to the mountain and in the way he caught sight of a bigger house.

"That one is reserved for His Majesty. Don't worry, yours is pretty nice too." She informed after taking a smoke from her pipe. As their climbed the stairs Greed couldn't help but stare at the statue of a fat raccoon with a straw hat and big scrotum and he had to question Lady Yuan's
rather...unconventional taste for decor.

"Li-Hongzi's coming? He didn't say anything." Her words flared a spark of anticipation on him that he didn't know he had, often in these three days he felt that once he reunited with the kid he can't bear to stay away from him for too long, but he was too proud to admit that. The Zhou matriarch gave a hearty laugh and he snapped out of his reverie.

"He didn't. Something about the way he acted tells me that." Greed groaned, just remembering the way the brat acted, it looked like they were married, or worse, he was a small child. Yuan unlocked the door and threw the keys in his direction, sliding the door open in a ceremonial fashion. "Welcome to your humble home. I'll have my daughter deliver the books and timetable later, you're free for the day." His eyebrows raised in interest by the mention of her daughter, Yuan gave him a telling look and patted his shoulder, then turned to leave. "Ah! And remember to remove your shoes when stepping on the mat."

She left Greed on his own and headed for the main building, he entered his new accommodation after he lost sight of his hostess and slid the doors shut behind him, he huffed, bummed that he won't sleep in the best guest room because hypothetically Ling is coming. The entrance gave space to a long corridor ending in a sliding door with translucent paper, to his left was a double white door with wood frames, with a built-in kitchenette next to it, and to his right two doors similar to the one on the left. Greed entered the left door and it was a small empty room save for a sink – who looks like a giant metal box if you ask him – and a mirror, there's also two corner glass shelves holding hand towels and soaps. The door in front of him led to a lone toilet and he raised an eyebrow, okay then.

Greed ignored the other door facing the sink, presuming it is the bathing area, he asked Yufan once on why the xingese designated each bathroom furniture to their own separate room and he said it was because it is more hygienic, he decided to roll with it and exited the area. The door facing it contained the bedroom, his bed was pretty much on the floor because of how low the bed frame was, a paper screen divided his bed from a short cabinet that took the entire right side of the room and to the left more doors that were actually closets, one storing mattresses and other bed stuff and the other one was empty, Greed shoved his bag on the closet without even unpacking and went to the next room.

This one seems to be a living room and now he understood what Yuan meant by mat, the floor was completely covered by it, ten to be more precise. The room contained a center table with cushions, directly in his field of view there is an elevated platform with a painting and a vase, right next to it and separated by a wall some cabinets, two shelves with differing heights and a lone counter below them with a phone placed on top of it, to the left of the table and attached to the chigaidana was a low cabinet taking half of the north side of the room.

Right to it's side there's a translucent door and when Greed opened it he was greeted by the
breathtaking sight of the Baishe mountain, the view lifted his spirit and the former sin crossed the balcony to support himself on the rail, taking in the chill autumn air. It's not a panoramic view but damn you can't get mad at this sight. The balcony extended to the other side where a stone round bathtub stood, Greed approached it and saw a stone console, probably to store bathing essentials, he doesn't know, but one thing is sure, immersing in this tub while gazing at the mountains must be otherworldly.

Yuan's daughter still had to deliver his books so the ex-homunculus decided to take a bath, he returned to his room to finally browse the contents in the suitcase. Greed found that most of the clothing were hanfus and he cursed under his breath, that's what happens when you let people do your job. Greed fished through his clothes and found a piece of paper containing a phone number, likely Ling's, plus a satin bag containing money, he pressed his temples with a hand, he really feels like a kid right now. He elected to ignore the kid's antics for now and settled for a blue yuanlingpao and silver trousers, he could question Ling's father fixation on the color blue but he wore black his entire life so he can't really judge.

He was relaxing in his bath when Yuan's daughter showed up with his material for tomorrow. Greed awaited for her to leave to move out of the tub and get dressed, since today he's free he choose to spend his day off hanging in town, if he's staying here for a year it's for the best that he knows what Wen has to offer.

He strolled leisurely to the stone streets of Wen, making his best to avoid walking on soiled dirt which meant not straying from the main path much. On his walk he stumbled across all sorts of small shops, from stands to small, worn out houses decorated with red paper lanterns to add a little touch of color. They sold each of everything, from fish to fruits and grains, from time to time people would ring him up, tempted by the possibility of selling to a rich costumer, Greed knew his clothes would give off this vibe even if it wasn't true, and he tried to hide this by wearing cotton instead of silk, but the high quality of the piece can't be hidden.

Walking by a pebble road full of bamboos, Greed stopped by a shop with colorful, contradicting drapes on the door matched by a vivid red bench and parasol, with other bland wood benches sitting nearby. Two girls in light clothing and loose hair chit-chatted in a more distant bench with a tea tray sitting neatly between them, they held snacks in their hands and he had an urge to try some.

Inside of the shop was even more bland with everything made of the same wood -walls, counter, tables, you name it. He approached a man on the other side of the counter and was glad to see a menu with drawings of the snacks sold, he also saw that they sold xiaolongbao and was tempted to try some.

"A tea and siaolongbao please." The man ignored that he butchered the 'X' and Greed was thankful for that.
"Any other thing?" 'Anything else?', Greed pointed to the snack from before, a set of three spheres on a skewer, he nodded and moved away from the counter.

Greed settled in a table near the entrance and after some time another person came in with his order, setting everything neatly on the table. They opened the basket and the sweet, savory aroma of the buns filled the air, he inhaled deeply to really immerse himself in it, his first instinct was to take one of them but he decided to ask what the hell the other snacked is called. "Name is?" He pointed to the square plate.

"Dango."

"Thanks." Greed proceeded to poke holes on the buns, so the inner steam goes away. The dangos are also peeping hot so he sipped his tea instead, he still remembers it, the first time he had the (mis)fortune of proving a xiaolongbao, he didn't know the damned thing had soup inside and ate the entire bun in one bite, burning his mouth and throat. He recalls old man Wang bringing a concoction that removed the pain – he couldn't taste anything afterwards though – and grandma Su asking if he's okay.

At last, that's what he thinks she said, he understood jackshit at the time.

Thinking about the couple made him feel a sudden shame and that old, familiar loneliness he got used to after living so long with it, Greed stared blankly at his cup of tea, wondering what they're doing now, or if they're even alive to begin with.

He concluded his food cooled enough and transferred a bun to the spoon given to him, eating the xiaolongbao in a single bite and letting the savory broth and pork wash away the bitter taste of remorse. Greed probably ate everything faster than he should have, but he didn't care right now, as tasty as it was, the food didn't help with that persistent feeling of guilt.

He paid the owner and exited the place, there's one thing he can do to take his mind off things and ease the pain.

Greed walked aimlessly until his feet took him to a shady-looking bar, he entered the place without a second thought and if he had to say anything about the place he'd say it was the Wen version of Devil's Nest, only less classy. He can say the place took from Amestris or any of its neighboring countries, because traditional xingese bars tend to be claustrophobic.
The moment he entered the place all sound stopped and eyes were all over him, Greed ignored them, not really in the mood to engage with people right now, and went directly to the bartender, the woman eyed him but didn't gave much thought, as long as he's paying she's not giving any shit and he prefers this way.

"Mijiu. A bottle, please." She nodded and went to silently do her business. Greed glanced to the side where a group of thugs couldn't decide if they glared in his direction or conspired between themselves, as if his presence alone was an insult to them. Fuck these guys. There was a guy behind them minding his own playing with his cup, he could relate to that.

The sound of glass thudding made him turn to the bartender again, she placed his order in front of him, not at all amused. "Coming here, you're bold." 'Bold of you to come here.' Damn and he thought Lanfan had a stick up her ass. He could tell her that he died twice and didn't really care but his xingese is broken and it would come off awkward.

Greed was in his second cup when that group from before surrounded him on the bar, with what he guess is the leader supporting his weight on his arm, his hand planted too near to his bottle to his comfort. He kept drinking his mijiu, not eager to entertain any of them.

"Nice clothes chad." The bartender's expression changed, whatever is going to happen she doesn't want it on her bar and she made it clear, saying things he couldn't understand. The asshole talked back, making her shrink and now he wished he had his ultimate shield back. "Let's go out, shall we?" He placed a hand on his shoulder, continuing on his friendly façade, but Greed slapped it off.

"Buy me a drink first." He teased and gave him a sardonic smile, succeeding in his attempt to piss the man off. He cursed and almost punched him in the face, if the boy from before hadn't hold his wrist.

"Nice talk Zong, mind if I join?" His tone was too cheerful for someone involved in a bar brawl, but he guess it matches with his joyful manner and youthful face, he was smiling wide and the pricks suddenly chickened out, some visibly terrified. Zong, now that he knows the dickhead's name, wrung his wrist free and bowed, muttering a 'no, sir.' "Good." The kid was still smiling and Greed was weirded out by how dissonant it all felt, all these thugs with their tails tucked between their legs by a single threat of this smiling ball of sunshine. He was about his height so maybe that accounts for something, but some of these guys are taller.

"Don't you know how to make a scene? Nice to meet you, Greed." He knows amestrian? He knows his name? The brat had his hands on his hips and it was so patronizing it was infuriating, but if he can command the respect of this entire bar he must be a beast. Greed still didn't drop his guard, he
saved his ass but it could be an act.

"You know me?" He eyes him from head to toe and nodded.

"Tall, black hair and yellow eyes. A total pisstaker. Yes, your description matches those of Your Majesty, Emperor Hongzi." He offered his hand a bit too enthusiastically to his tastes but he accepted anyway. "I'm Zhou Xiong, eldest son of Lady Zhou Yuan."

--------------

"Are we there yet?" They're jogging for a while now with Greed trailing behind, Xiong had volunteered to guide him, because according to him, he feared Greed might get lost on his way to the dojo.

"Yup, we're near." He stopped mid-track to point at a hill. "The dojo is at the top of this slope."

It was a clear morning and the air up in the mountains was fresh, from where they are he can see the farmlands, charmingly weird things that looked like rings on the hills. Xiong called for his attention and he had to wonder who were those guys from before, also Ling was clearly taking the piss when he asked about the 'Furinkazan' and Xiong seems like a decent enough guy, so it may not hurt to ask.

"Uh, this fighting style, Four Wills-"

"Six." He abruptly said, adding that. "The real number is six, few people know this detail but we prefer this way."

"To answer my question." Greed pointed his words to show his annoyance in being interrupted and he recoiled, having the decency to apologize for that. See what he says about Xiong being a decent guy? "What I'm going to train?"

"Well..." He trailed off, from uncertainty or shyness he has no idea, his demeanor is more sheepish now, so likely both. "My-our master will have to see you in action first. But to be honest Six Wills is more of a philosophy applied to our already existing fighting style, only difference is that the pupil enhances six 'natural abilities' to an extraordinary level to become the ideal soldier. I'll let Master Xuan elaborate." Greed hummed to show he understood, but there's still something missing.
"And this fighting style is?"

"Every clan calls their fighting style 'clan' style," he turned around to face him, walking in the same ease he would've had he been looking forward. Show off. "Our enemies nicknames it 'snake fangs'." His eyebrows perked in interest. "We focus on joints and other sensible parts to strike powerful and precise blows. Breaking your opponent's bones is essential, so there's a lot of grapples, your height is also important because of kicks, usually aimed on the head. Oh you can dislodge a limb if you can't break it." And he continued to babble about other things you can do with the Zhou style and Greed stopped listening to gaze at the stone structure ahead of them, the red and auburn trees making a neat contrast to the dark blue roofs. There's a sign on top of this arch-like thing but he can't read for shit.

Xiong changed the subject to Ling and some stupid ass rebellion that he barely paid attention to, instead glancing at the big flight of stairs waiting for them and the impending disaster that will unfold on it. Said and done, Xiong tripped on the first step and fell on his ass, hurting his elbow on another step, immediately recoiling it to rub at the stinging part. He looked around dumbfounded, as if wondering where the hell those stairs appeared, and faced Greed, accusing and pouting. 

"Why didn't you warn me?" It sounded to whiny and pouty he had to cover his face to contain his laughter, if Xiong tripping wasn't enough to make him laugh, his reaction certainly was, he doesn't act his age.

"Now you learn to look forward while walking, blabber-mouth." He rolled his eyes subtly and tipped his head upwards, so that he's looking at the stairs upside down. "We're here?"

"We're here." Greed offered an arm to him and they climbed the stairs in silent, Greed more so thanks to anxiety. It was weird, to say the least, he was looking forward to it and at the same time feeling an unconscious uneasiness that was becoming stronger the shorter the distance to the dojo became. He didn't know what to expect, he kinda does but not enough, and he hated that.

"Welcome Greed. Usually I'd start your training right away, but I want to see your abilities first." Master Xuan signed to Xiong to come closer and he stopped in the middle of the square, facing Greed with confidence. "I want you to spare against Xiong. Don't worry, I know waidanshu, so you can go all out."

He barely registered Xiong's kick on his face and almost couldn't defend it on time, bless his reflexes. Greed was flabbergasted, when he got so near? A second kick came and this time he wasn't so fast and got hit on the knee, followed by a headlock.
"The main focus of our fighting style is to disable our opponents with as less moves as possible. We take pride in our abilities to take on multiple foes at once." Their master walked around them, arms clasped behind his back. "Continue."

Xiong released him and this time Greed was more careful, he fought worse, he can handle the big ball of sunshine. Xiong advanced and he managed to evade this time, Greed took this opportunity to punch him but the kid defended his blow even with his back to him, soon after counter-attacking by kicking his hip. Greed recoiled and Xiong took advantage of this to grapple and throw him on the floor, he recovered fast and faced Xiong, both on their knees.

"Of course you're not here to just train our style, I'll guide you through what we call the 'Six Wills'." They resumed their fight, with Greed blocking and evading most of the time, after a while he noticed a pattern: the attacks are meant to either kill or immobilize, and they fight dirty, oh they fight dirty, Xiong is right now aiming mostly at his eyes and crotch. His hands position also intrigues him, sometimes it resembles claw and sometimes it is flat, and this reminds him of how he used to fight when he had the ultimate shield. "'Six Wills' are six abilities required of a soldier, said abilities are speed, strength, resistance, stealth, agility and calmness. Some of these you gain as you train normally, however since you need to excel in those fields you'll partake in special courses to enhance them along with your usual training."

He was finally able to pin Xiong on the floor. "Isn't speed and agility the same thing?" He was struggling to break free and this added a smug smile to Greed's face. Now to what Xuan said, his training sounds like a hassle and at the same time oddly familiar, like he had experienced this somewhere.

Oh yeah, Father's abusive training from hell.

"I meant agility in both senses of the word. You two can stop for now." He pointed to Greed. "You'll have to lose weight." He freed Xiong and stood up, not at all amused by his master's observation. He crossed his arms, his indignation clearly showing.

"Why should I?" He copied his pose, ready to explain why his comment made perfect sense.

"To gain speed, which is lacking. You managed to best Xiong but if that was a real fight he would've killed you two times, that said your defense is your best attribute and the way you keep your composure even when losing is a head start, if I had to guess I'd say you trained when little but is now rusted. So, Greed, what kind of training you had back in Amestris?"
Greed stared down to the floor trying to remember anything from when he was born. He clicked his tongue, it is hard to say, from what he remembers he was a noble and such learned standard noble things like fencing and piano. Aside from that he can't really say he learned any sort of martial art, unless he consider flailing his arms around a form of martial art.

He concentrated more, he knows it, it's in the tip of the tongue, a fist fighting very popular amongst nobles. He tapped his fist on his palm, the name was boxing! Yes, that's the thing, now he recalls how noblemen liked to punch their friends or rivals in the face for amusement.

"I've learned boxing and fencing but I was never a fan of both so I forgot almost everything." This is more thanks to him stopping doing everything that reminded him of Dad Dearest than anything else, it has passed a century already so he doesn't really expect his muscle memory to work either. Greed focused on his master to see how he would react, he nodded before meeting his eyes.

"Fencing, huh?" He entered the building and returned with a pair of swords. "Let's see what you can do."

---------------------

He plopped himself on one of the armchairs in the balcony, facing Baishe mountain but eyes distant, his legs were still sore from sitting in that stiff bent-knees position and he wanted to smoke to ease the stress, and this is only day one for fuck sake! Greed closed his eyes to relax and focus on more pleasant things, like his days of freedom exploring Amestris, everything was brand new and exciting and he loved the feeling, as corny as it is. Meeting different people from all social classes and age groups, having different kinds of possession along the years, until he settled in the south and rescued the chimeras in the lab.

From all the things he obtained in life they were the most precious, and now the monster who murdered them lives within him.

"Are you sleeping?" Xiong inquired, bent to meet his eye level. Greed slowly opened his eyes, waking from his half-sleep state. Xiong stayed in the same position, eyes attentive like that of a dog but otherwise unreadable, Greed thus faced him, brows arching as a silent question. Xiong straightened himself and nodded to the bathtub. "Your bath is ready."

"Thanks man." He means it, Xiong offered a hand to lift him up and Greed went inside to get a bathrobe, conveniently the indoors bath has a door to the balcony, so a trip there and back was faster than initially assumed. Greed started undressing himself but stopped mid action when he noticed Xiong was peeking curiously at him. "Excuse me." He said waspishly and Xiong sat on the
armchair absentmindedly, staring off to the private quarters.

Once he immersed himself in the tub he felt as if all tension had faded away, Greed gave a sigh of relief, Xiong's idea wasn't bad after all. When the kid invaded his room, asking if he had already taken a bath, beaming with excitement when he answered yes, then proposing that he relaxed in the outdoor tub Greed wanted to tuck himself in bed and forget he even know this weirdo, because one: he had already taken a bath why would he want to soak himself again?; two: his body was already bitching that it was tired and didn't want to cooperate anymore, and finally three: it's fucking cold outside. When he reject his offer Xiong started to plead like child complete with puppy eyes – now how an adult accomplishes that is beyond him – he even offered to prepare the bath, and when he relented, because he couldn't stand anymore 'please', he acted like a kid who had too much sugar.

"Is the bath to your liking?" He asked out of politeness, Greed hummed and closed his eyes, so he could relax even more. He heard Xiong giggling. "Don't sleep now." He hummed again, the water is making him mellow. In the quiet of the night only the sound of rustling leaves and the occasional howl was heard, Xiong fidgeted a little, looking around uncomfortable, as if he wanted something but was ashamed to ask.

"What is it?" He talked above him, this time more wary, Greed opted to look at the moon, it's beauty enhanced by the company of the nature, if he keep his eyes closed he'll doze off and sleep in the tub, which is unwise.

"How did you survive?" He knew what Xiong meant, but his peer elaborated his question anyway. "When you sacrificed yourself to protect His Majesty, how did you survive? It's just that, you know, when we were drinking in the after party, because rebellion, he got drunk, that lightweight, and then, he, he said," He got lost in his own train of thought and threw his arms up in exasperation, it was endearing to watch. "He lamented your loss, he told me he saw you die right in front of him, I don't know if I should be telling you this." Neither he does, this seems like such an intimate thing to be sharing, but more importantly, Ling was so devastated about his loss that he started to drink, underaged? The same Ling who needed to get off his high horse? Now he’s curious about what other things he might have told Xiong.

"Nah it's okay, continue." At first he gave him a skeptical look but shrugged his shoulders, he suppose he can part with such information, since it regards him.

"He said you lied to him, that you acted all nice and charming just to make him drop his guard then act like a total jerk. It was bad you know, he started to curse you then broke into tears, I didn't know what to do at the time, but to think he bottled it all up and endured the excruciating pain of loss just for the sake of his country and people, it made me respect him, made me think 'this is a person I'd be honored to follow'. Even if he was a drunken mess at the moment." Xiong's eyes were sparkling and it told of how much he regarded Ling, Greed returned to stare at the moon having a
newfound respect for the his host.

"Yes, sometimes Ling is amazing." His voice was more tender than he intended it to be but he got his thoughts across. Xiong only cocked an eyebrow at his statement, cynical but mocking.

"Sometimes?" Greed flashed him a smug grin.

"The other he's a sassy, bossy, hollier-than-thou henpecking wife wannabe." Xiong snorted and this made Greed smile cheekily. Talking about Ling made him yearn for the kid's companion even more and automatically his eyes searched for the moon again, Xiong followed his gaze and mouthed an 'oh!'.

"The Autumn Festival is coming soon."

"Autumn Festival?" Xiong nodded.

"A holiday to celebrate the moon, where we exchange moon cakes between loved ones and celebrate with family and friends and talk about those dear to us that live far away, because even if we're away from one another were still under the same moon."

"Cheesy." Xiong gave him a light half-shrug.

"Cheesy but true." Greed left the tub and quickly wrapped himself in the robe, entering the indoors bathroom to shelter himself from the cold, before he did it though Xiong made his leave to his own room, leaving Greed alone in his abode to rest for the day.

He changed into his pajamas and slid under the covers, the fine cotton soft and soothing against his skin. Greed shifted in the bed until he got himself comfortable and his mind swam back to the things Xiong said about Ling, his soulmate and only possession right now, part of him felt bad about making the kid suffer the way he did, even worse because apparently he barely set foot on his homeland and he was made emperor and had to quell a rebellion, hardly having time for himself and to mourn, which resulted in an emotional breakdown in the middle of a party. At the same time he must admit he was touched to hear how much he means to Ling, as sick as that may sound.

His thoughts lingered on his companion for a little more until his eyes became heavy again and
sleep claimed his body completely, and if he took too long to sleep and waked late the other day, he blames it on Xiong and his pleasantly stupid idea.
A week has passed since Greed left to Wen and after that farewell his routine went back to what it used to be, even if part of him missed Greed and the laid-backness he brought to his life, another one – the stronger one – knows that it was for the best that they separate for a while. He can't falter, not when he's nearing the end of the second year of his reign.

This is why he's now in the Outer Court, being guided by Yue to the Imperial Library, more precisely to the law section, where all judicial documents are kept after the Great Court finishes all of their revisions. The Imperial Library is a monster of a building, almost as big as the Hall of Harmony, where a big chunk of his secretariat work and where the main audience room is located, said place can hold all fifty clan heads and all department heads of the palace, that's how big it is.

Once they entered the library Yue led him to the northern wing of the place, there he saw not only Feng but also other members of the Censorate and members of the Great Court, most of them were minor officials delegated to minor tasks or even ambitious apprentices studying past cases to broaden their knowledge of xingese law. An assistant librarian approached them and Yue asked for recent cases, they instructed them to the right place and left them alone to discuss whatever business the Emperor had there.

"Found it, this is the case for the Qin-Ruan Rebellion. Here's listed everything, from their disapproval of your claim to the throne to the Court's final verdict." She handed him the book and Ling jumped to the last part, where the court's punishment is written down in details. Like he wanted the immediate family will lose their nobility and be exiled, but research on their entire family tree is still ongoing, this part being the job of the censorate. The rest are comments of the Great Court and how they'll proceed to divulge the news to these families and to where exactly they'll be exiled to, there's also a note of which jail they were sent to and Ling made a mental note to remember the name of the place.

"I want to make a request to Judge Zifa, I want to be the one to tell Prince Qin and Princess Ruan of their fates." Yue nodded then muttered 'understood.'. "What's my schedule for today?" His secretary looked at him as if suddenly he was someone else, but quickly recovered and fumbled to get her journal. He frowned at her antics, is it so difficult to see him as a responsible Emperor?
"A meeting with the secretariat at two, then you have to attend an opera play that'll happen at three with Lady Wei, since you agreed to accompany her, after this you'll be in her companion until four thirty, where you two will have tea at the Red Moonflower, the hotel she's staying at.” Lady Wei? If he throw his charms on her he can bring another powerful clan to his side, lovely. Hongzi nodded and walked to the exit, Yue in toll, he was halfway to the Hall of Harmony when concern hit him suddenly.

"What this opera is about?” She squinted her eyes trying to remember and Ling hoped she does, depending on the play he won't be able to see it.

"It is nothing war related, so rest assured." He sighed in relief, thanking whoever God for Lady Wei's tact. His body shivered from the memories of the nightmares alone, after his three consecutive campaigns he hadn't had a decent night’s sleep in months.

An assistant of Yue's hurried down the stairs and when he got close enough he bowed deeply in respect once to Hongzi and then to his superior.

"I've got news! Lord Xing Quan has arrived in the capital." As if coordinated another member of the writing staff rushed to them to deliver a letter, offering it ceremoniously to His Majesty.

"A letter from Minister Shen, it arrived ten minutes ago." Ling frowned and took the letter perhaps with more strength than necessary, ten days, ten freaking days for him to respond. The emperor faced his secretary with a face that showed all of his frustration right now, she flinched, not knowing how to respond. He opened the letter just to read that the Minister of Personnel can't turn Greed into a Consultant because he doesn't have an id. Ling tossed the letter to Yue and went to the Hall of Preservation to prepare for the upcoming audience. It took Shen ten days to write and send a letter about something he could easily inform Yue on the phone. This is why he hates him so much.

"I want to talk to Lord Xia on the phone. Prepare one for the Hall of Preservation." They all ducked their heads and hurried to the Hall Yue's assistants came from. Ling strolled to his destination, a smaller building to the left of the Hall of Harmony, and found his mom there already with a servant doing her hair. He went to his usual chair and started to read his annotations on the meeting and what he have to say, just so he have something to occupy his mind.

"You're fuming."
Ling sighed. "Why grandfather recommended Minister Shen?" It was her turn to sigh, a sigh that gave away that she's done with this.

"What happened this time?" The empress sounded tired, unlike her usual stern self, he almost didn't caught that, still bitter about his Minister of Personnel.

"He took ten days to answer my letter and he lives in the capital, and he didn't do it by phone, that'd be too practical, no, he sent a letter explaining why he couldn't do what I asked of him. Sometimes I think he doesn't take me seriously." He ranted, ignoring his mom's warning to behave in public, 'last thing you want is slanderous gossip flying around.' She always reminds him. It is possible that his mini rant will reach Minister Shen, but know what, he wants it, maybe he'll finally be ashamed and stop working half-heartedly.

Or he'll get butthurt and become more insufferable.

"He's a technophobe and you know that."

"That's why he have assistants." He finished reading his anecdotes and two servants appeared with a hanfu for him to wear. After he finished dressing up in more extravagant clothes Yue arrived with the phone he requested.

"Lord Xia is already on the phone, I mentioned only the essentials to give him context. It seems he's not so pleased to know your friend is alive." This made him frown, Greed didn't mentioned anything about his services to him – actually he mentioned nothing about his time in Le – but suddenly Ling's becoming aware of why he fled to the capital and he wants to confront his friend. Lord Xia want him dead, and knowing Greed he probably fucked up.

"Lord Xia."

"Your Majesty." There was a pause, as if he bowed out of respect thanks to force of habit. "Your assistant informed me that the Son of Heaven wants to know about the man I employed two months ago." There was venom in his words when he mentioned Greed and this made him flinch. What Greed did to him?

"I want to know if he has an identification, since you were his master and Governor of Le I thought you might have something." The other side became silent and this only helped rise his anxiousness, is Greed a criminal? He wouldn't put it past him. From the back he can hear a conversation
between Yue and his mom, and knowing her, she's likely wanting an explanation to what Yue said before. If she didn't disapprove of Greed staying in the palace before, she'll do now.

Hongzi heard the sound of paper and straightened himself. "Yes I have his identification. This subject must ask however, what is it that Your Majesty wants?" If he tells him the truth he'll never oblige, but if Greed really did something wrong he will punish him. Should he lie, no, if Lord Xia sees Greed in the court he'll make an uproar and his image will sunk to the ground. It is ironic, how Ling's risking to throw away everything Greed died to achieve because of the imbecile himself.

He'll have to cut corners.

"A week ago I jailed this man and Master Feng wants his id to make a proper report to keep in the Imperial Library. This man keeps saying his name is Greed, can you believe it?" Lord Xia hummed and Ling was glad he bought that.

"His real name is Mu." What the what?

"What?"

"That's his name, at least according to his id. The runt is the son of Doctors, can you believe that?" He said idly. Ling rested, that must be the name his adoptive parents gave him. He really needs to ask Greed what happened in those six months. Someone patted his shoulder and as it happened his mom was notifying him that the audience is to begin.

"Lord Xia I'm sorry but an audience is about to begin, I'll have to hung up. Send me a copy of his id, Yue will give the details later." He meant to hung up, but stopped when Lord Xia pleaded desperately for him to hear what he had to say, the tone of his voice was something else, like a weird cocktail of fear, anger and wonder.

"Whatever you do Your Majesty don't, and I repeat, don't let him near swords. He's dangerous, specially when cornered." Pfft. Greed, dangerous. What really made him dangerous was already taken from him, any trained xingese soldier can defeat him, that's the whole reason he was sent to Wen after all. He can't say that of course.

"This applies to anybody Lord Xia."
"You're not understanding Your Majesty. An apprentice physician cut off the hand of my guard with my granddaughter's jian, with a speed that matched hers. He barely touched a sword in the two months he was her servant! He's dangerous Your Majesty, kill him before he does more damage." He didn't know what to say, what to feel. Should he believe him? Is Greed really dangerous? Being unable to hear Greed's side on the matter made him feel like he was about to do something wrong, like betraying him.

"I'll see with the Minister of Justice what can be done. Thank you for warning me" He seemed satisfied with his answer and hanged the phone. Ling gave the phone back to Yue and pushed this conversation aside for the moment, for now he needs to focus solely on the meeting.

All office heads of the Palace were attending the audience in his throne room, without clan heads to add fuel to the fire he hopes things won't go to shit once he opens his mouth to talk about Amestris. It is a good thing to have different opinions in the court, it is not a good thing, however, to have them slander one another like ten year olds because it.

"We're about to discuss the entry of new courtiers to the palace. I am eager to hear your reports, as well as any complaints, so we can fix them together." They all kowtowed, the first one to rise was Yufan.

"We've acquired four hundred soldier, all volunteers, totaling twenty-three hundred Imperial Guards. This'll enable me to move more qualified people to be Your Majesty's and Her Imperial Highness' personal guards." Hongzi internally groaned, resisting the urge to sag down on the chair out of bemusement, but he nodded, there's a time and place for that. But still more guards, there is eight in his apartment alone, counting Lanfan and Yongji, he wanted to protest, but Ling decided it was best to do so in private.

"If I may, Your Majesty."

"Speak."

"I've received letters from my pupils informing me that they'll return from Amestris in two months. This subject requests for a second batch of students to be sent there but." She cut herself there, afraid to speak the next part. Too late, his curiosity is taking the best of him and he wants to know what concerned her.

"Continue, Master Changmi." She pursed her lips, not knowing how to proceed and he must say, he has never seen the Household Counsellor this nervous.
"Xing is eight times bigger than Amestris! Why we must send the same number of apprentices as them? They're the only ones profiting from this." She blurted out and some of them nodded, Ling frowned, she has a point, he must admit.

"You want to send four thousand xingese to Amestris? They'll think we want to invade them!" The Commandant of the Equipage lashed. "They may not be a military dictatorship anymore, but their higher ups are still members of the army, they will see this proposal as a threat." He added, some department heads showed their agreement, mostly because of the implication that Amestris is hostile. Ling can't really say he blames them, Amestris still needs to clear itself from the warmongering image it painted thanks largely to King Bradley, this is a long process that won't be subdued in just two years.

"I never said we should send this much, but to Amestris, five hundred is a good number, this same number means nothing to Xing, maybe for the capital, but that's that." She defended herself, clearly mortified by his blunt statement.

"I'll see if I can ask Master Mustang on the subject. Now, Master Hu, anything to report?" The General bowed with a slight clumsiness, not expecting to be addressed after his little discussion with Changmi.

"My pupils are studying smithing techniques in Amestris, with some of them learning about automails, like the Son of Heaven requested. I give five months before they return." Hongzi pursed his lips, one part will return in two months and the other three months after them, not to say that there's still the group learning alchemy and the fourth one learning anything that is new to Xing. He wanted all of them to return in the same month.

"Master Changmi, order your subordinates to return in five months. I want them all coming back together. Master Tao, the same applies to your assistants. Yue, contact the Minister of Rites, he is to inform Amestris of my visit in two months." She bowed and left the room. "Now, on the preparations for the Autumn Festival."

------------------------

The sky was tinted in a vivid orange hue that he was almost unable to make off, the rocking of the carriage like a cradling making it difficult to keep awake. The play was interesting and a nice pause to his routine, and his stay in the hotel took longer than planned, because thirty minutes weren't enough to savor all the delicacies provided to him. Lady Wei was satisfied that Hongzi enjoyed tea with her so much, he couldn't convince her to submit to the Yao clan but at least she agreed to become allies, it is better than maintaining her neutrality.
"You look blissful Your Majesty." Her voice was like that of a bird chirping and it lulled him even more into a state of half-sleep. It looks dumb to fall sleep with someone whose intentions are unknown, but Lanfan and Yongji are with them on the carriage.

"It was good to have something to distract me from my duties, even if just for an hour." She giggled, an elegant and graceful sound expected from a noblewoman, even more of a leader of a powerful clan.

"I'm honored to know I could help Your Majesty." She proceed to open her fan in one quick motion, the sound a loud intrusive thing that broke the silence, she did on purpose. "If only my daughter agreed to come with me, I'm sure Your Majesty's day would've been more pleasurable." He opened his eyes immediately, not knowing why he's so surprised, he expected this once in the opera house, and twice back in the hotel. Yongji wasn't even subtle about her eyeroll and Lanfan kept still on her seat.

They'll probably joke about this at night.

"I'm not interested in building a harem right now." He went straight to the point to see if it sinked down. Heh, his grandpa was wrong, they're already pestering him.

"Surely this doesn't prevent the two from meeting?" She insisted, Ling straightened himself, more awake now.

"No, it doesn't." And a son would be preferable, thank you very much. "But there's a lot going on and I'd rather build a harem when things are more settled. Hope you understand." He was more polite than he expected, which is good. Lady Wei only nodded, a bit bug-eyed which was funny but otherwise compliant.

The carriage stopped and they were greeted by the General of the Chariots, he bowed while clasping his hands in front of his head, and helped His Majesty out of the vehicle. He greeted Lady Wei who hid her face on her fan, which was typical, he offered to help her out and she accepted. From his angle Ling could see she was swooning over him and he changed his focus to his bodyguards who just hopped out the carriage, when he couldn't take it anymore he decided to break in.

"Thank you for accompanying me Lady Wei, I'll take your proposal into consideration." She closed her fan and bowed.
"It was nothing Your Majesty, This subject just wanted to have a talk." He saw some guards approach the carriage to bring it inside and turned to her again.

"Do you want them to escort you back to the hotel?" Now it was her men’s turn to come to her side, all mounted and one of them – which he judges to be her personal guard – had the reins of a spare horse on their hand.

"I'm honored but I must decline, after all," She mounted the horse and turned the animal in the opposite direction, having to look above her shoulder to face Ling now. "I prefer to mount a horse. Now if Your Majesty excuse me." Her group began to move and after a while they disappeared.

Ling waited a few moments before heading back to the palace, with his subordinates behind. Once he entered, it was at the second gate leading to the Outer Court that he saw his grandfather and Grand Tutor, standing in front of it as if expecting his late return. He looked calm but Ling could sense the overall air of disapproval, making him uncomfortable and unconsciously wanting to shrink, but keeping his dignity and showing none of it. When he got to the foot of the stairs he bowed out of respect for the elder, the Emperor must never bow to anyone, but he was a former emperor so he's an exception.

"Grand Tutor, this orphaned one didn't expect you." He did, but not here, of all places. Did he asked Yue for his schedule and thought he'd be here by five? If so how long did he wait? His grandfather scowled, not at all amused by whatever he did or said.

"I'm your grandfather too you know?" It sounded hurt, pouty even. Lord Xing turned his back and Ling followed him, his subjects concluded it was for the best to leave them be and went on to do their business. Now alone they both relaxed, Ling only after the former emperor did. "Why are your audiences starting at noon? Who had this idea?" He was baffled, which made Ling nervous to tell the truth, like some kid that was caught misbehaving. He knows that he shouldn't feel like this, his tutor is harsh but for his sake. Ling sighed in defeat, he better tell or else he'll confront his mom and then things will go downhill.

"Mom had." He confessed, but simply stating it without explanation made him feel like he wasn't doing his mother justice. "But she did so because my health dropped, it recovered now so I'll change it back later." He felt hopeless, it's like he always need to appease him, because he owns him, or else he's wronging his grandfather and predecessor.

"Good. You don't want your subjects thinking you're an invalid, they did in the past. Did your mom told you? How even your own father didn't believe you'd make it past ten? But you did, you proved him wrong, and I'm proud of that." This managed to get a smile from him, deeper inside there's a
part of him who wonders how these people must feel now, with him not only alive, but ruling over them.

They walked in silence from now on, the yard of the Outer Court is extensive, meant to hold the entire capital on the first day of the New Year's Festival, when he makes his speech. He remembers last year, he thought he'd nail it – he already made speeches for an army before and even trained for such back at Wa – but what he saw that day made every speech he made until that day pale in comparison. Ling wasn't on top of a horse or a dais, he was one store above the citizens of the capital, hundred thousands of them, and he faltered, boy did he falter, his voice didn't came out in the first two attempts and he isn't shy.

"An order to hunt the Qin and Ruan families." Xing Quan commented idly and this bought Ling's attention to him. "Is this some sort of game? They might be rebels, but they're not animals Ling, I thought you knew better." He said it so calmly you could hardly say it was a reprimand. But this wasn't what concerned Ling, an order to hunt both families, he doesn't remember giving said order so it must be from the Empress Dowager, he rubbed his temples. She likely did it in one of the meetings she had to attend in his place, in a sense, it's his fault.

"I-"

"What are the five virtues of an emperor?"

"Benevolence, uprightness, honesty, integrity and politeness." It came off automatic and lifeless, the result of repeating these same words countless times and being educated in these lessons during the last reign of his father. 'It's for the well being of the country.' The disciplined part of his mind tells him, it always does.

"You're straying from the first one. Be careful, the common folk won't see this as the Emperor punishing rebels, but as the Emperor, who have ultimate power, lashing on the poorer clans unfairly." He shrunk, there's weight in what he's saying. He'll have to talk to his mom when he have the opportunity. Had he read the report thoroughly, he'd have a different conversation with his mother earlier.

"I'll try-"

"It's too late now." He admonished, as gravely as he did in the first year, when he was inexperienced. "The Court gave its final verdict and the Great Court revised the case. There's nothing you can do now." Ling lowered his head, he was mortified, all of this happened because he was being a lazy bun fooling around with Greed and leaving the bulk of the work to his mom. It
was for the best that he left for a year. He felt a hand on his shoulder and only now he noticed they stopped, his grandfather was trying to comfort him and it showed on his voice. "It's okay son, people commit errors. Now you need to learn from it to not commit it again you hear? I'd be surprised if your first years of rule went perfectly. C'mon, raise your face."

He did as Lord Xing requested, with him asking one more time if he was alright just to be sure. They continued their walk to the Hall of Harmony, talking about his childhood or Lord Xing's memories of his father's rule, they also talked about their families, with his grandfather talking proudly of his cousins.

Once they arrived in their destination the first thing of notice was the bulk of people in the throne room, they were gathered in what appears to be a circle. Most of them were members of his secretariat, with some unknown faces and others he faintly reminds to be from the third branch of the Censorate. Ling was about to ask what was going on when he heard Feng and Judge Zifa arguing with the Minister of Justice, the thought alone was alarming and was enough to urge him to push through the horde of people.

If they are together it means something urgent happened and they need him now.

"What happened?" They acted like they've just saw a ghost, with the first one to brake from the trance being Feng. He rolled his eyes and approached him, ducking his head. It's in moments like this that Ling is glad he's emperor, three years ago he'd push him by the ears if necessary.

"Thank goodness you're here to grace us with your presence Your Majesty." This passive aggressiveness promised a night long of chiding, the kind nobody is willing to hear. Feng nodded in the direction of a woman sitting in a chair put there for her, her hair was tousled, clothes ragged and torn apart, from there he could see callouses on her ankles and other deep bruises, like a cut on her lips and swollen cheek, there's more, he's sure of that, but he doesn't want to see, doesn't have the courage. Whatever happened to her is a case of utmost importance, or else Zifa and Xiang wouldn't be here. Once their eyes met the woman's eyes widened in shock, this must be the first time she saw the current emperor, she tried to kowtow, but Minister Xiang stopped her, claiming she's too bruised to do so.

"This is Concubine Ruan, mother of Princess Ruan, the censorate found her tied down to a bed in a rundown shack. We gave her food and water, but she's having problem to eat." Minister Xiang explained, oddly sympathetic for someone who wanted to execute her entire family a week ago.

"Why the doctors didn't treat her yet?"
"Because Zifa thought it was best for Your Majesty to see her condition first to make a decision." It was a jab that she willfully ignored, instead opting to focus on a member of censorate, more specifically one of the persons who found the concubine.

"Bring Master Tao, he's not only a doctor, he's a waidanshuist. He can heal mistress Ruan in no time." He told the first clerk in the vicinity, they bowed and left to fetch his physician, with that out of the way Ling went to the victim. "Lady Ruan I called for my doctor, he'll be here in a few minutes to treat you, after this I want to know what happened to you." She nodded and after this Hongzi ordered his subjects to return to their jobs, the day hasn't ended yet and they're here skipping work because of something that doesn't concern them, fucking nosy people.

Master Tao appeared seconds after the throne room was cleared, bringing Mei with him. Ling grimaced, the reason he requested Master Tao was solely because he didn't want Mei to see this, but not everything go as planned does it? She was likely with him when he was requested and decided to tag along. They ducked their heads in his presence and almost jumped when they caught sight of mistress Ruan, with Master Tao automatically turning to His Majesty.

"What happened here?"

"This is what I want to know." Hongzi nodded in her direction and Tao went on to draw a circle on the floor, later asking Feng to relocate the concubine to it's center. Mei found her place by his side and would peek at their grandfather at times, once Master Tao finished healing Lady Ruan she kowtowed.

"Oh thank you, thank you Your Majesty." Her voice was weak, almost braking, like she was trying really hard not to cry. Hard not to when you're rescued from certain death, in a sense, his mom's order to hunt them down saved her. Ling kneeled next to her, to get near her eye level as well as to show sympathy.

"Like promised tell me, what happened to you? Why you were locked in that shack?" He tried to be as delicate as possible when asking her and she avoided eye contact, slowly lowering her head, Ling went on to reach her for comfort but stopped in his tracks when he heard a sob. She started to cry and he was lost, it was then that Lord Xing kneeled beside her, giving gentle strokes on her head, like a parent would with their child.

"It's okay my dear, whoever did this to you won't be able to reach you here in the palace. You're safe now, so you can tell us everything without fear." This did the trick as she raised her head, Mei offered a handkerchief to wipe her eyes. She was still sniffing and looked as lost as Ling is right now.
Mistress Ruan looked at Ling, then Quan, and then to the three law officials, she was hesitating, but a pat on her back seemed to reassure her. "...my daughter, she..." She stopped to wipe the fresh tears. "My own daughter, she...she did this." And then she started to cry again. He faced his tutor, who turned to her again, still puzzled by her claim.

"Princess Ruan? She beat you?" She nodded with the kerchief still on her face, she was too ashamed to admit such things to this many people and it hurt to watch. He'd expect such from Prince Qin, but he didn't know Ruan was violent too.

"She assaulted me once in the past, my daughter, she, she has violent mood swings..." She stopped to breathe in deeply, trying to stop new tears from forming. "I didn't approve, her rebellion, so she...she..."

"She attacked you." Ling finished for her, and the concubine broke into tears again, this is proving to be too much for her and he decided to call it off for the day. "Feng, take her to the harem quarter, she'll rest there for a while." His cousin bowed and reached for the mistress hand, asking if she could get up, however, before she took his hand she approached Hongzi.

"Your Majesty I must reveal that something is not right with that kid, she's crazy and unpredictable! Your Majesty will only endanger the ones who'll be close to her once she's exiled. This uncultured one is begging, don't take her from jail!" She was frightened out of her mind and this made his stomach turn, what the princess did to make her this desperate to keep her locked? He avoided delving too deep in his thoughts and concluded it was best for him to see Princess Ruan himself.

Feng helped concubine Ruan to her feet and led her to her temporary room to recover. Once they vanished from their sights Judge Zifa was the first to talk.

"What are we going to do with her? She's from the immediate family, but she's apparently innocent." Both Minister Xiang and Lord Xing were offended by her words, the minister crossed his arms and glared at her.

"Apparently?"

"She can be faking it." That was harsh.

"Do you have any proof of it?" Now his grandfather asked and Zifa put a hand below her lips,
trying to find anything to prove her point.

"No. But-

"Then don't claim things Zifa." But she isn't claiming things, his judge obviously thought the same, because not only she looks wronged as she also glanced in his direction silently requesting support. As harsh as her statement was Ling can't admonish Zifa like they're doing, he's been to Amestris and if he learned anything from there, is that not everything is what it first seems to be.

"She'll not be exiled like the rest of her family. But she'll not be forgiven until proven innocent, I want her in the palace at all times until we find out everything." They're all shocked by his verdict, but he doesn't care, his words are final and he believes this is the best course of action for now.

"But Your Majesty!"

"Guilty until proven innocent, it's cruel but what Zifa said is valid. Now if you excuse me." Ling left them there without waiting for a reply, he has better things to do like confronting his mom, and there's also the case with concubine Ruan and if anybody here know anything about the former harem, it is the Empress Dowager herself.

Chapter End Notes

So how's the new chapter? => hope it doesn't dissapoint. (hope it isn't indelicate too...)

For Ling's other grandpa, yeah he's a former Emperor, he's alive and well because Ling's father forced him to abdicate, I won't explain more than this because it's spoilers.

Comments and feedback are appreaciated. ^^
All of his brothers gathered on a private room on the Palace meant for family meetings, they just arrived from their father's funeral in his homeland, as it is tradition to bury the emperor in the lands of the clan they hailed from.

Also as another tradition, he's seating nearest to the ramp leading to the throne, because he's the oldest prince, to the right of the oldest princess with enough room between them to make a corridor. Emperor Changwu is dead, the war of the princes "over" and the court decided on the new Emperor, he's yet to make his appearance.

There's chattering and this overall air of anxiety, most of them doesn't know who the new Emperor is. He knows and he doesn't like it, for one he's too young and idealistic and the thought of someone like this ruling over his country urges him to roll his eyes to the back of his skull. There's a silver lining in this, someone this young is easy to groom. The Imperial clerks showed themselves, two in front of the new Emperor and two other behind him, they settled themselves above the ramp and he had to kowtow.

"Introducing Emperor Hongzi of Xing!" It's an interesting name, depending on how you look at it. The same clerk bowed while clasping his hands in front of him, now talking more privately. "You, the Holy and Exalted One, must decide what to do with Your Majesty's brothers."

"Why he's the Emperor?!" The first to complain was Lanhua, which was no surprise, they always fought. "He didn't cure father's illness!" More princes voiced their opposition and this made him smirk, now he too can show his disagreement. Ling just stared her dead on, his face told him that he already expected this to happen.

"I distinctly recall the late Emperor saying 'whoever finds a way for immortality.', not 'whoever cures my disease.'., any other complains?" Ugh, this attitude, he hates it so much. With that said he stood, it was the perfect chance to voice his problems with this stupid decision and the perfect chance to bring followers to his side.

Introducing some of Ling's siblings. \(^{(°”)}\) I'd recommend keeping the name of the two discussing strategy in mind but my fics became a monthly fic by now so, yeah, idk.

I'll try to update faster next time.
"Yes I have! Why we should listen to the orders of a child who's barely sixteen?" His runt of a brother glared, a silent warning to watch his mouth. He smiled triumphantly and turned to his brothers and sisters. "I don't know about you ladies and gentlemen, but I, oldest son of the late Emperor Changwu and representative of the House of Yin, the same house of our illustrious father, refuses to bow down to someone who'll be hiding in his mom's skirt for the first three years of his reign!" It was a total uproar after he said that, a good number of princes cheered for him and showed their agreement, some, like the ever so stoic Prince Sima, stayed silent the whole time, and others, like the useless Princess Chang, were baffled. He faced Ling again, waiting for his response, but to his dismay, the kid was deadpan.

"You leave me with no choice, everyone who cheered for Prince Yin will be exiled and their titles revoked." If he haven't angered them with his presence on the throne alone, he did now, Princess Xue was pretty much restraining herself from attacking him while Princess Zhong was giggling. Bitch. "And you, who proud yourself so much for hailing from the same clan as Emperor Changwu, will be moved to the farthest land from Yan, so when you die, you won't be buried alongside father." It was like his world was falling apart, death would be better than this. He was in a state of shock, the nerves with this brat.

"You can't-"

"Tell yourself that." The runt snapped his fingers and someone from the Guardians of Yao appeared. "Take the rebel princes from my presence, put them in house arrest until their exile locations are determined." More guards appeared and took every single one of the rebels, moving them out of the room. "As for everybody else who stayed loyal to me, you'll retain your titles and live in the Imperial palaces from your respective land. My only order is that you are prohibited from entering in governmental and military jobs." It was the last he heard from Ling.

After this incident his clan revolted and became a rebel state, freeing him from his judgement, other clans did the same with mixed results, with the ones who succeeded joining their cause.

From that day forth he swore to enact his revenge on his little brother.

"Isn't our little brother the sweetest thing ever?" Dai threw the newspaper in his lap, the front page reads that the Qin and Ruan clans will have their immediate family exiled and their titles removed, in other words, what Ling wanted to do with his brothers two years ago. Shuang rubbed his temples, this wide-eyed idealism of his will be his downfall, and he'll relish in every second of it.
"He is your ‘idol’ after all." He chuckled and propped his forearms in his armchair.

"Are you still angry that everybody prefers my plan over yours?" He quipped, too close to his comfort, and Shuang wanted to punch him in the face. He's not in the mood, not after remembering that blatant disrespect to his person.

"If things had gone my way we'd be in the later stages of our plan." He grumbled, Dai chuckled and straightened himself, in all his flamboyant glory.

"Then people wouldn't respect us, something easily taken is easily lost, and also." He sauntered to his side, clutching the newspaper and shoving it in his face in victory. "My plan is working." He pushed his brother to the side and leaned on the balcony, letting the autumn breeze calm his nerves. He wants to smoke, and he wants to fish, preferably at the same time, but he needs to capitalize on their victory, it is what respectable leaders would do.

"Call our allies..." He faced the lake below the house, a though coming to his mind. "Actually, I think I want you to bring me a single orchid. Think you can do that?" Dai smiled, good, he understood.

"So we're not hunting tigers?"

"We leave this for later." He shrugged his shoulders and turned to leave.

"I'll do it, but don't complain if the owner refuses to answer your request."

-------------

Ten days in and he thinks he'll die anytime soon, his training has no breaks and Greed doesn't think he has been this fatigued before. He does have an hour of pause – an hour and a half if you consider the time he spends meditating – but it isn't enough, yesterday even he was throwing up from how exhausted his body is.

'It's bad, but after the second week you'll feel rejuvenated, just see.’ His master's empathy is touching.
Greed is now on his living room, doing a surprise test by his teacher Ding Mi. His teaching techniques are similar to Su's, speaking xingese is his priority now, and everything in the house has a paper with it's name written both in xingese and how the hanzi is pronounced. Not only his dorm, but the entire mansion and even the dojo have those.

The test Greed's doing now is calligraphy, and being able to read certain things and finally make sense out of them gave him newfound confidence and optimism, even if they are only numbers and colors for now. That said though, he still feels uneasy about all of this, sitting down doing what is told to him, as much as it is freeing to be out of the dark this isn't him. Better yet, it is, but in the time he served Dad Dearest and this is nothing but distressful. The good thing about it is that once this is over he can do whatever he want in the palace and people won't be able to belittle him freely anymore without getting called out.

Greed finished his test and reached for the house plans and other illustrations below the center table, these images were provided by his teacher to help him learn family members, colors and numbers. They were obviously meant for children but he has the literacy of one right now, so they're welcome. He heard the window open and the chill dusk air infiltrated the room, Xiong invaded his quarters, again.

"You're still doing it?" He whined referring to the test, he already finished his job? C'mon.

"You need to have your sight evaluated." He peeked curiously to the papers on the table and then to the ones in Greed's hands and beamed, like a kid who had caffeine for the first time.

"Took you long enough." Excuse me. "Hey, quit class early, I want to show you something nice!"

"Is it your sister?" It was like his energies died out, he tilted his head to the side, like a confused dog.

"N-"

"Then I'm not interested." Xiong dropped his shoulders, bummed by his rejection, he leaned on the windowsill with his arms bent over his head, he still can't believe Xiong's older than him.

"You're boring. I never took you as the studious type," and he isn't. "not after I was told how short-sighed and irresponsible you are." He slammed the papers in the table and this made him jump.
Irresponsible? Yes; short-sighed? Hell no. Xiong must have thought this anger was directed to him as he waved his arms quickly to show innocence. "I don't think that! Actually I think you're quite dedicated. A smartass full of bravado? Yes, but nothing ill."

"Xiong." This stopped his blabbering, they faced one another, Xiong was lost and Greed smirked. "You know what? Let's skip class."

It turns out the place Xiong wants to show him is in the mountain, past the dojo and up, then walking all the way to the other side. From this place he can see another part of the city he didn't know existed, a less rural one, the sun isn't out yet so there isn't any lights out either in the mountain nor the city. They strolled for a while until they reached a canopied walkway lodged on the side of the mountain, it was like the external hallways of the palace with it's fences, columns and roof. Greed leaned on the rail to look down and saw a small valley with some rock formations and the occasional tree, in other words a nice view if you're not acrophobic.

The lights on the walkway were on and he wondered what or who lights those things, but all of this faded into nothingness compared to the view of the sunset from the bridge. The sight was somewhat obstructed by the columns yet it added to the scenery which was oddly satisfying. At the end of the bridge stood an elevated stone dais accompanied by a short tree with golden foliage, Xiong hopped to the top of the platform to looked down at the city.

"That is where I work." Greed jumped on the rock and stared at the city, it was different from this angle and now he could see railways under construction. He knew Xiong must do something – he is the governor's son after all – however it never occurred to him to ask what is it that Xiong does.

"And that is?"

"Law enforcement." He then looked at the sun and gasped. "The sun is setting."

"You don't say." They snarked in unison and looked at one another, Greed was taken by surprise, he didn't thought Xiong was capable of snark, said overactive mutt patted his shoulder on the way down and Greed followed.

"We must hurry, or else you can't enjoy my surprise fully." Greed wanted to ask out of reflex what is this surprise, but now that he knows Xiong does wisecracks he'd probably be answered with snark.
By the time they reached a corridor full of the same golden trees – apricots, Xiong said while admitting to get some whenever they're mature – Greed was met by a weird structure that seemed to belong to a fantasy world, Xiong checked on him, all ecstatic about his reaction and even more eager to show more about this surprise. The former sin's gaze was everywhere, trying to understand just what this thing is.

"What is this?" Greed's awe was apparent and this added to Xiong's excitement.

"A waterwheel." He raised a finger while he moved away from his guest. "Wait here, the best part has yet to come." He entered the building and must have kicked the thing to a start, water started to flow and the gears moved, making everything move in harmony. Seeing all the intricacies of the craft took the words from his mouth, having this waterwheel be surrounded by apricots gave it this whimsical aura and whoever had this idea deserves nothing but respect. This person knew about aesthetics.

Xiong exited the place and stood by his side, not once taking his eyes from the wheel. "Where all this water goes?" This made him look in his direction.

"To the next thing I want to show you." He winked and moved past him, Xiong's getting more comfortable around him, which is good, maybe he'll step down on the hyperactiveness.

This time the walk was short, they passed by some religious statues and stone lamps and a lonesome pavilion, which according to Xiong was a waymark. His suppositions were proved right when his peer revealed the existence of a temple and other minor ones around the mountain, now abandoned and used mainly as refuges for the rain. The greenery also changed from trees to bamboos and Greed could see steam flowing high in the air and that was when he knew they reached the place.

"Welcome to the Baishe Hot Spring, the best place in the mountain and also the best spot to look at the city." The way he introduced the place felt like déjà vu, he is Yuan's son. Xiong pushed him inside the cottage by the shoulders and lit the lamps once inside. He gave him a quick lesson on hot springs and Greed nodded and went to the shelves to store his bag, now he understands why he had to bring clothes, for a while he thought Xiong wanted to show him a lake or something of the sort.

His peer pointed to the washing area, which are all private thanks goodness, and he did as instructed. He wasn't, however, used to the idea of washing himself while sitting on a small bench, even less using a small bucket to pour water all over himself as a recreation of the shower. There's a translucent paper door here too and Greed's been here long enough to know they lead to the outside.
When he slid the doors open he was greeted by the sight of a giant pool of steaming water on the edge of a cliff, the sky was dark and it lifted his spirit. Greed turned around to see how the cottage looked from here and things started to click, since he arrived the place seemed familiar and now he can point out why, Ling's outdoor spa in the garden is a miniature version of this. He heard water splashing and saw Xiong on the water moving to the edge of the spring, he likely jumped off the platform.

"You have to take your towel off!" He shouted from where he sat. He suppose Xiong's far away enough, he guess, so Greed stripped off his towel and immersed himself in the pool. Immediately after this Xiong beckoned him to sit by his side, when Greed came closer he pointed towards the cliff, he propped his arms on the rocks and gazed beyond the cliff, the city was lit now and the atmosphere changed. It was like gazing off at Central from Wrath's base, only better. "What do you think?"

"Relaxing. Is this how you seduce people? Because it's working." He purred, joking, Xiong approached him coquettishly and ran a finger in his forearm, playing along.

"Oh, you know, I love to please." His voice got deeper and suggestive and Greed raised his eyebrows in surprise, usually he's so conservative that this is a welcome change. The realization wasn't enough, though, to stop him from splashing water on his face.

"Back off you're not my type!" He told humorously, Xiong cleared the bangs from his face and mimicked Greed, splashing water with as much, if not more, strength than him.

"I know right? You like the cuter ones." He breathed slowly to stop his laughter and soon turned back to his normal self, resting his chin on his arms, eyes distant. "Do you know who you'll be writing to for the Autumn Festival?" His voice was as distant as his eyes now, not only distant but woeful too.

"I don't know, Ling, and maybe Lanfan, but she hates my guts." He also thought about his caretakers but shut down any wishful thinking, it would be naive of him to think they'll forgive him for abandoning them, and even if they did he doesn't know their address so this is a moot point. "May I know who you're writing for?"

"My father and brother."

"You have a father?" This is news to him, Yuan never talked about her husband so he assumed he was dead, guess she hates him, still not an excuse to not at least mention her son.
Xiong chuckled "We don't know much about one another do we?" Greed looked up in the sky, more so to reflect on what Xiong said, and how true it is. What he knows about Xiong? Yuan's oldest child, a police officer, a beast when fighting and the one who quelled the latest rebellion, basic stuff but not what you want to know from a… a….

Possession, yeah, that's the right word.

"Be my guest."

"Sure." He started to talk about his family first, and doing so lifted his spirit. His previous stance made sense once he discovered his missing relatives are hostages to the Yao clan, working in nice jobs as a pretense to have them near the Emperor and regional Lord respectively, kinda like what happened to that cocky alchemist he can't bother to remember the name. It was also funny to discover his sister was looking forward to be part of the Imperial Harem just to discover Ling won't build one, this also made him remember of the first time he and the kid bothered to learn about one another.

'Imperial Harem? So you're telling me when you become Emperor I'll have all the women I want? Why didn't you told me so? You'd have sold me on your pathetic little plan from day one." The brat stared at his projected face, deadpan. Because of their shared mind space he can tell Ling is surprised but doesn't know why in the first place, since he expected as such from a hedonistic monster like Greed.

'Imperial Harem, beast, as in 'for the Emperor' and not 'for the parasite possessing his body.' His frustration was translated by their body rolling his eyes.

'Such a killjoy...Know what, screw you and your harem, you're sterile now anyway.'

'Good because now I have an excuse to not have one.' They kept staring at one another, Ling now smug because he knows he won this round.

'Cheeky bastard.'

Good memories.
Greed mentioned his dysfunctional family and even had to clear the misconception that Bradley, of all people, was his father. They soon changed the subject and chatted about more pleasant things, like street performances and their favorite kind of music, they found a common ground on card games and Greed promised to teach Xiong some tricks and shuffle techniques. Xiong also suggested to help him sneak away from home to watch a street performance once and got curious about pianos, getting even more curious about the fact it can play two separate melodies at the same time.

They remained in this comfortable chatter for who knows how much time, but it stopped once Xiong looked at the position of the shadows. "We should return, or we'll be late for dinner." Greed nodded, dumbfounded by this ability, one day he asks about it.

Once in the cottage they choose to dress up in the same room they stored their bags. Greed chose to bring a hanfu this time, wanting to give it a try, he was tying the sash when Xiong talked to him again.

"This isn't a sash." He remarked, amused by his ignorance and suddenly memories from when he changed Ling's clothes came to mind. Greed didn't want to know what this is, he has an idea and he's not looking forward to be proved right. He asked anyway, because curiosity is a bitch.

"Don't tell me this is an undergarment."

"Oh, you know what a fundoshi is? Have you used one?" Technically yes, not that he's telling him this, so he shook his head. "This explains the confusion. It begs the question though, how do you know this is an underwear?" Greed was fishing for anything that could replace the loincloth in his bag, no luck, he really mistook it for a sash. He rubbed his nape and turned his head in Xiong's direction.

"I was given some back in the palace, of course I questioned what they were." He glanced at the cloth in his hands in discomfort, if he noticed everybody will. He'll have to give up on tying the hanfu and it is getting cold outside, he can't walk back to the manor shirtless.

"Here, you can borrow my shirt." He offered out of nowhere and took Greed by surprise, the shirt itself a tank top that reminded him of the one he dressed Ling with, but unlike that one it had a brocade design in the upper half. It didn't match the rest of his clothes as much as he wanted to, which is a shame since he really liked the top.

"When is this Autumn Festival?" Greed asked halfway through the walk back, everybody in the manor is hyping it up for almost two weeks now and he's lost. Hell, Ran even asked what flavor
Ling likes best to him on one occasion, he just said he'd be surprised if she did something Ling wouldn't like.

"In five days. Talking about the festival, you won't have a training session in that day, so I wanted to ask if we could spar in the morning? Nothing complicated, just a friendly spar to warm up." He quickly added in the end when Greed grimaced at the thought of exercising in what will likely be his only day of rest until the new year.

He sighed and put on a confident smile. "Count me in." Xiong eyes brightened at his answer and he nodded, happy to have a sparing partner.

The walk home was peaceful and uneventful. They did, however, receive an hour long lecture from Zhou Ren and consequently had to wash the dishes for making everyone wait for them.

-----------------

Servant with lanterns lit the path to him, an underground dungeon below the Bureau of Justice of Lianyang, near the capital. Hongzi sat on a makeshift throne of wood, above a dais, Lanfan and Yongji were beside him on plain sight, a clear warning to not even dare to get near him, that is, if the captive manages to break through the line of armored soldiers interposed with the lantern holders.

Four guards appeared holding the former princes by the arms, Prince Qin was thrashing in their grasp, cursing anyone who decided to take a peek at him while Princess Ruan looked dead inside. Once they were close enough to His Majesty the wardens pushed the traitors to the floor and stood behind them with their spear firmly planted on the ground, Huo hissed and glared at the jailers for their rough treatment, not that they cared.

What puzzled Ling was how Ying was too compliant.

"Ah, if it isn't the Child Emperor himself!" Huo provoked, doing an over-the-top kowtow, and when he did so Ling flinched. Not because of the outrageous attitude coming from the Qin Prince, but because when he bent he could see scars on his shoulders that must go all the way to his back, and he thought, briefly, that this was the same fate Greed would've faced had he not come to question him. "Came to make fun of us? Isn't your rule enough of a joke?"

It was so fast untrained people wouldn't see it coming, Yongji had her tantō dangerously close to
Huo's throat. He gulped hard but made eye contact with her anyway, defiant to the end.

"If you're going to kill me, Yao dog, do it. It's cons better than the idealistic shit this brat will put me through." To bring his statement home he got even closer to her blade. This brought Ling to the edge, he doesn't want Huo to die, the coward still needs to answer to his crimes.

"Yongji, stop." She lingered there for a second before returning to his side. If he could sigh in relief he would, Yongji was this close of murdering him. The good thing about having a guard who served previously a borderland Lord is their dexterity in facing the wildest kind of people, the downside, they lose any patience they had for pettiness.

"So you think it is idealistic to exile your enemies instead of executing them? Even if they share part of your blood?"

"Yes. Threats should be eliminated, regardless of source."

"Too bad I don't think the same then. You and your family will be stripped from all your titles and be exiled to different places, the same applies to you Ruan Ying. Guards, take Qin Huo back to his cell, I'm done talking to him." With a dismissive gesture of his hand the jailers grabbed Huo by the arms and dragged him away, the same rebel shouted profanities until he couldn't be heard anymore. Ying remained silent thought the whole ordeal, it felt surreal to him.

"...my mother...will she be...exiled too?" She was fidgeting her fingers sheepishly, Hongzi couldn't make half of what she said.

"Talk clearly."

"Will my mother be exiled too!?" There's the mood swing. The emperor frowned, is this even the way to talk to the Son of Heaven? And more importantly, her mom is her first concern.

"What is your interest in Lady Ruan?" She...kowtowed? Once she raised again it wasn't the timid woman he saw minutes ago, but a desperate kid.

"She manipulated grandpa and rallied the clan! Mom is the one behind the rebellion. I didn't want to abject your claim! I was with the princes that stood by your side-"
"And this is what hurts so much!" She recoiled and lowered her head. He's not having it, she won't paint herself as a victim. "I thought you were my ally but suddenly your army is assisting the traitorous Qin, if it wasn't for the Sima and the Zhou do you have any idea how many lives would've been lost? I don't care about what you think or what your mom supposedly did, I care about what you did."

She kowtowed again. "What I did is a sin that cannot be cleansed, but Your Majesty, believe in me when I say that Lady Ruan is deceptive! Only now jailed that I'm finally free from my mom's influence, she's jealous and manipulative, Your Majesty need to find her." Ling was skeptical to everything she said, so she doesn't know about her mother's whereabouts. The emperor leaned on the arm of the throne, his chin propped on a closed knuckle, the sheer audacity she had to lie to him like this, as if she could still deceive him, was enough to make him open his eyes.

"And I did, yesterday even." She raised abruptly, shocked. "Funny how you say Mistress Ruan is deceptive when you have the courage to lie to your Emperor. She's the one behind your defection? Then how come you were a general in that battle while she was nowhere to be found?" Ying's eyes widened, as if frightened at the thought that he may know the truth. She was visibly shaking when she bowed again.

"Your Majesty I can explain!" She cried out.

"She already did." He back talked. "Not only you betray and lie to me, but you also spit into the face of filial piety, you disappoint me, Ruan Ying." He waved his hand and the guards took her back to her cell.

Ling stood there, unmoving, listening to his half-sister’s constant calls for him.

Chapter End Notes

Now that I think about it, it has been three chapters since Ling and Greed interacted. (Four if you count the next chapter, but hey it's still a first draft so who knows) σ^_^; Chapter ten for sure will have an interaction, so don't get mad at me please. (__;^_^A
Wenchang's Tears

Chapter Summary

We learn more things about the Ruans, the Zhous, and how the harem structure works.

Chapter Notes

Lanhua means orchid, just bringing this up to clarify things.

I posted this one faster, yay *throws confetti* and now the cities have names! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was chilling in the stairs of the dojo eating some snacks as he watched Greed in his strength training, seeing him trying to deal powerful blows to the dummy whilst being restrained in the last minute was captivating and nostalgic. It made Xiong reminisces the past when he was a kid not even ten, getting comically frustrated for not managing to kick the doll properly, only going as far as a wimpy kick.

It was his cousin who happened to visit Wenchang that day who encouraged him to not give up and keep trying everyday, he still remember the joy that consumed him when he kicked the dummy with the same strength he’d do while unrestrained, and feeling this sense of enlightenment at seeing the results of said training when he noticed the difference to his kicks after it.

He looked at the sky solemnly, if his cousin was still alive, would Ling even be the Emperor today? Most people he knows, himself included, always felt that Prince Zhou was like the sun, ever shining and unreachable. He was probably the only son Emperor Changwu loved and this proved to be his downfall.

A messenger arrived at the dojo and bowed while clasping theirs hands in front of them before closing the distance between them and Xiong, instead of announcing what news they had for him the person told their master privately. Whatever that messenger confided wasn't pretty, if Xiong's disbelief is anything to go by. Xiong gave the hold fist salute to Master Xuan before informing that an emergency has occurred and he and the other person stormed off the building, Greed was readying himself to seat in the waterfall when he saw Xiong explaining something to their master and scurrying off. His master approached him, his concern apparent as he kept staring at the gate.

"Some insight for the ignorant foreigner?"
Master Xuan groaned. "Troublemakers, from what he told me one of the amestrian engineers were kidnapped. I don't need to tell you how much of a problem this is." He could comment on how clever it was to act near a holiday when people's guards are likely down, but Greed refrained from that.

"Huh, had no idea Hongzi asked for Amestris' help on that, it makes sense now." Greed gave a half shrug. "But why these people are bitching so much? isn't it better if there's qualified people supervising everything?"

"I think so too, the problem is that a lot of xingese don't. There's no problem in being proud of your country, but when it gets on the way of rational thinking." Master Xuan sighed, stopping his mini rant there. "If only Prince Zhou were here, I'm sure he'd convince our people to accept Hongzi's idea, or at least not to be violent about it."

"Where's he then?"

"Buried in this mountain." It came like a slap. Greed cupped his nape and looked everywhere but his master's eyes, he fucked up, why he's always so insensitive? Greed tried to say anything, but his voice refused to come. "It's okay lad, I moved on a long time ago." Greed sighed in relief, he's not mad at least, tension set aside however, gave him a newfound curiosity.

"What happened?" His eyes were unreadable as he stared at his pupil, Greed maintained eye contact this time, he wants to know.

"Poisoned by concubine Ruan, his death encouraged the other clans to hunt down rival princes. I think after his death, the most sought after prince was Hongzi. The perks of being the child of a favorite concubine." He stated sardonically. So the emperor's relationship with a lover have some influence over his decision for a successor, interesting. His master looked at his watch. "Enough chattering, head to the waterfall."

Greed collected his essentials and did as told. To be honest he hadn't expected the amount of pressure the waterfall gives the first time he attempted to meditate below it, Greed sprinted to the body of water in record time, the path now familiar to him. After putting his things in a safe place he moved to the same spot he sits on everyday.

The autumn water is still warm from summer and now that he is somewhat used to the constant stream of water down his shoulders the ex-homunculus admits to look for this part of the training,
it is also good to rest and cool off from the relentless exercises before it. Greed was sitting in a
lotus position and once he pulled it off a smug smile tugged in his lips, almost two weeks in and he
is nailing it.

One thing he can't grasp, however, is the Dragon Flow, not that he expected to read it in two
weeks. He understands it is something royalty must learn since young, Ling wouldn't even be here
otherwise, and curiosity struck him again, how long does it take for a child to read it? Does an
adult learn faster? Or because there's a lot of shit going on in their heads it takes longer? What
about blind people, do they learn faster than anybody else? And for that matter, do they learn it
automatically?

Greed brushed all of this aside, the reason he needs to meditate is to reach nothingness, not to feed
his mind.

The roaring water helped lull his mind and soothe his body, emptying his mind but not completely.
His concentration shifted to how the water felt in his body, how painful it was compared to now, it
was fascinating how his mind sharpened when nothing occupied it and for a moment Greed felt
that this must be how Ling maintained his sense of self when he took over.

He opened his eyes slowly and met not only with his master awaiting across the lake but Ran too,
this is the first time he sees her in the mountain. A shock, but a good one.

Greed followed them back to the dojo, now with all the enhancement training done for the day it is
time to improve or learn new moves, whatever his teacher wants today, which, knowing him, will
be both. In a way this is similar to learning music, repeating the same thing over and over again to
work muscle memory.

Ran is sitting in the same place her brother did half an hour ago, coincidentally, and is shouting
words of encouragement, which is a big contrast to Xiong who like to mock him half of the time.

"Keep in mind that some of these moves aren't as practical as others and may be more trouble than
it's worth, but with a bit of creativity and a touch of your own you may find a use to them." Was his
bit of advice for today, Xuan was a couple feet away from him and Greed knew he had to ready his
stance.

Like he predicted Greed had to redo all the previous moves before learning the new one, this time a
counterattack, one that stuns the enemy's arm shortly by hitting the joint in the armpit, it is brief
but with enough time to deal a more powerful attack. He proceeded to repeat the same movements
until his master was satisfied, and then learned another version of the same move, only now an
‘against a smaller person’ variant, hitting the shoulder instead.

By the time Xiong returned the former sin was resting on the deck of the dojo, laying beside Ran. Master Xuan walked towards the young lord to greet him and Ran used this opportunity to sit closer to him, Greed opened an eye as she scooted over and saw she moving a basket with her, making him wonder how he never saw it til' now.

"What is that?" He nodded to the basket and she hugged the thing, smiling sheepishly.

"Food. I wanted to bring you something, since you stay here for too long." Greed tried to lazily reach for the basket but she moved the container to the other side. "But first I want to ask you something." He dropped his arms and grumbled, she giggled. "Accompany me to the city tonight?"

"Is this a date?" He teased, supporting himself on an arm, then he raised an eyebrow. "Or is it a ruse to know more about our handsome Emperor?" She blushed at the mention of Ling and hid her face, he wanted to press but she shoved the basket in his direction before he could say anything.

"Just eat already!" She tucked her legs and embraced them, resting her chin on her arms. Greed opened the container and grabbed the first food he saw, a rice dumpling. "I want to show the city to you and you assume these things." She fumed, then softened her tone. "Do you accept or not?"

Greed finished munching his food. "Sure."

"Stop flirting my sis and come face me!" Her brother jested, making Greed grin.

"Get lost brat I already defeated you." He mocked, bashful. Xiong put his hand on his hips, feigning indignance.

"I was taking it easy on your sorry ass! Now come here or I'll tell Your Majesty you've been cheating on him."

"Oh no, anything but that." Greed made a mock-frightened gesture and got down the stairs, greeting Xiong in the way.
"I'm not taking it easy in front of my sister, be warned."

"Don't start crying if I kick your ass anyway." They stayed still, focused on one another, Xiong’s expression was different from his usual happy self, more confident and bashful, like he’s about to reveal something, it was unsettling.

Xiong started by going for his throat and it was the perfect time for a counterattack, he didn't expect, though, for him to counter that and grapple him, throwing Greed on the floor. He recovered fast - faster than his first day - and did a low sweep kick to distance Xiong from him. Xiong continued his attacks and Greed realized he can't block because he counters even that, was he serious when he said he was taking it easy on him? Greed resorted to evade, running in his head ways to counter his counterattacks or else he's fucked. Now he knows why those punks cowered in fear with a simple threat of his.

This and he's a cop.

“Halt!” Their Master had a sword in each hand and threw the weapons in their direction. “A soldier must know how to fight with weapons. Continue.” Xiong whined, just when he had the advantage they must sword fight, if it was a halberd he would still maintain his momentum. Greed noticed his discomfort and grinned, sensing a turning of tide.

Now it was Greed’s time to take the offensive, fencing is different from Xing’s sword martial arts and so he have a hard time predicting his moves, not all moves are foreign to him and Xiong can defend himself just fine, it is when Greed thrust the sword that he most of the time fails to counter or defend poorly, so he abuses it. This time he managed to counter his attack and Xiong used this opportunity to back Greed into a corner, one thing he likes about Greed is how much of a good sport he is, he doesn’t like it when his adversary don’t put up a fight.

Xiong’s eyes widened in shock, he got distracted in his musings and barely noticed that Greed defended his last attack and retaliated.

The slash came out of nowhere, almost imperceptible, and he'd thought Greed missed the mark if not for the tip of his fringe being cut off and the stinging pain of metal cut in his cheek and ear. This is what he meant by being 'raised as a weapon' by his father? No, his face isn't telling him that, he's surprised and remorseful.

This was involuntary.
As if to cement his statement, Greed threw the jian on the floor in anger and shame and faced their master, eyes full of conviction.

"I want you to start the psychological training." Greed looked at the weapon he just threw on the floor with unreadable eyes, he clenched his teeth and returned to face their master again. "Train me on the halberd, I'm not using a sword until I learn how to control my impulses." Master Xuan frowned, puzzled but curious by what brought this.

"You mess up once and want to give up on your weapon? You're good with a jian, why do you want to change to a weapon you have no idea how to use?" He approached Xiong and sealed the cut by just touching his cheek, in a side glance Xiong could see the drawings on his hand. Greed cursed under his breath.

"Exactly! I don't know how to use it so my reflexes won't try to kill the moment I panic." Okay that was weird, all three of them looked at Greed as if he was crazy. He scratched his nape and turned to the side, looking up the sky in nervousness, Ling never talked about any of this. "It's muscle memory, my entire training was with the intention to kill anyone trying to approach my father's house. Xiong you remember how I said Father groomed me since young to be a weapon." Oh, that's what he's talking about. Their master also understood him, because his reaction was the same.

"If that's the case then yes, I'll start your psychological training, but you'll not abandon your sword, you'll just train with a dummy. Is that comfortable with you?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll change the time you spend meditating to the calmness course, it'll start tomorrow, and I'll teach the halberd martial arts, you better not disappoint."

-------------------

Sitting in a chair on the lake pavilion accompanied by a bottle of wine after a stressful day of work was magical, even more with his precious younger cousin training with his dizi with determination, he does trip sometimes and there are parts were he stretches the note for far too long because he forgot the next part, or even parts where he outright misses the key and the song sounds off. He's tripping but still moving forward, and that is what matters.
The song he is playing is 'Gifts of Springtime', an odd choice considering the season yet it helped settle the mood in this evening. He knows he left work early to practice, because after Lord Xing decided to move here for who knows how long Ling hadn't had a decent practice session.

Feng should chide him but honestly, he doesn't care, not now that Ling is stressed, and certainly not now that he is finally relaxing. These last days weren’t the best, that’s for sure, specially after they visited aunt Linyu in her study.

“You’re curious about the harem?” She said, glancing up to her son and nephew, she looked busy writing and reviewing all these paper, but their issue was urgent.

“Yes mother, this child and subject wants to know everything, specially the concubines.” She raised her eyebrows, confused, then soon frowned, she is suspecting something and he is not feeling comfortable anymore.

“What happened? Don’t lie to your mother.” Ling maintained his dignified posture, and before explained the chaos that occurred in the Hall of Preservation, he sat on the cushion opposite of hers.

“The Censorate found mistress Ruan beaten up in a cottage, she confessed that her daughter is the culprit.” She scoffed and returned to her papers, Ling lowered his head, for whatever reason. “However Ruan Ying said the mistress is deceptive, I believe she’s lyin-”

“She’s not.” The Empress commented without taking her eyes from her work, this took both men by surprise.

“What?”

“She riled the other concubines to murder Lady Zhou and made it look like suicide, using her son’s death as a cover. While the culprits were disgraced and their children lost any chance they had at the throne, she left unscathed” This felt like a blow to Feng, he loved the man, even if he never met him, as hopeless as it sounds. Heck, his assassination is what made him interested in law and investigation. “And she was friends with mistress Zhao, you know, the harpy who put poison in my food while I was pregnant of you.”

“So you think she feigned that?”
“Not really, Ying was always a bit... off, for lack of a better word. Could be retaliation, her mother only saw her as a tool, or pure evilness, who knows. Discovering the truth is the Censorate’s job not mine.” Ling nodded and clasped his hands in front of him.

“Thank you for dissipating our doubts mother.” He bowed and Feng proceeded to do the same.

Once out of her mini palace His Majesty ordered Feng to start the investigation, which resulted in days interrogating both Princess and concubine Ruan. To say they're easy to deal with is the understatement of the year, one is pretty much crazy and the other – because he doesn't know if she's faking everything or not – can't be addressed in an indelicate manner. It stinks, because Feng is sure she is the one behind Prince Zhou's murder, and, from his assumptions, she killed him to raise the chances of her daughter becoming Empress, who's to say she didn't manipulate her own clan? If only Ling ordered a reopening of the case to confirm if she is indeed the culprit or not, could be evidence against her.

"He plays well." Alphonse commented, as fate would have it Ling played the wrong note right after it, making them both flinch. "For someone who hasn't played for two years." He added, sounding apologetic. His cousin stopped immediately after he finished talking.

"Ai!" Ling turned to Alphonse's direction and the kid jumped. "Be more quiet." He chided and his friend apologized. He finished the music and started over again, unsatisfied with his performance.

It's funny to see him repeat the same part over and over until he gets it right, and it's cute to see him frowning when he's struggling but relaxing when he's winging it. Feng is curious, however, is this the music he'll play to his "friend"? Because there are way better songs out there, not that 'Gifts of Springtime' is a bad music.

"She looks peaceful now." Alphonse whispered this time, Feng changed his focus from Ling to Xiaoji, the toddler moved in her sleep and he caressed his daughter's hair, smiling fondly at the child clutching his blouse.. "She played a lot today so it's no wonder she's asleep." This statement made him feel guilty, it has been days since he hadn't spent quality time with his daughter, and such she is mostly hanging around the forges, for whatever reason, and with Master Alphonse and his bodyguards. At first Feng was uncertain if he should let her with them, what with two of them being half-animals, but since he discovered Jerso has a daughter he became more comfortable with the idea.

"When I look at her I think of my daughter." Jerso commented, taking him out of his thoughts. "To be honest, part of me is afraid, if we return to normal, what guarantee that our family will welcome us? Sometimes I fear she'll hate me for leaving her." He confessed. Feng wasn't entirely sure how to respond, but he didn't want to keep quiet, it looked impolite to do so, as he was about to say something Alphonse patted his shoulder.
"Even if you two end up in bad terms, if you can get your thoughts true I'm sure she'll forgive you. Right?" The last part was directed to him, which was unexpected, but now that Ling's friend opened the conversation he can add something.

"I agree, besides, I think, no, I believe it's more likely for your daughter to be happy to see you alive. You should be focusing on returning to normal first." He hopes this can cheer him up, Jerso was staring at his cup, reflecting on what they said. That is until Zampano butted in.

"And then you can work things with your wife." This disrupted his thoughts, Jerso was visibly uncomfortable and Feng started to relate to him.

"Can we not mention her?" Alphonse and Zampano bursted into laugh and Ling stopped again, making them still, Feng saw him smiling and didn't liked where this is going.

"Hey Feng, you found a buddy!" He was all silly and bubbly and so his guests resumed their badinage, this time trying to pry in his private life, and worse, Ling responding for him. This is getting out of hand.

"Now that I remember." He interrupted, not wanting to dwell in the subject of his wife, it's not as bad as Ling is painting it to be anyway. "Have you decided where you're going next? Some of my waidanshu books mention the existence of animals that can take human form in the east, considering that their alchemy is based on ours you may find something." His information took them aback, and as a consequence gave them hope.

"Why you didn't told us before?" Zampano questioned, confused but otherwise excited.

"I just reviewed my books recently."

"But, is there a mention of a chimera returning to it's original state?" Jerso pressed.

"There's an account of a princess turning into a snake demon and her alchemists doing everything to turn her back, but the writer wasn't there to see the end of the history, so you'll have to find for yourselves." It is not a real answer, but it will have to make do. The trio exchanged glances, coming to a consensus.
"This is a start. Which country is it?" Al was serious now and Ling can see why. From what he gathered, the Elrics are hungry for knowledge and, if this story ends with the princess returning to normal, it will be something they never heard of. He can even picture Al sending a letter to Ed talking of his findings.

"Minh, easiest way is through Wa." Al tried to contain his grimace after hearing this information and Ling felt a bit guilty but also defensive, his hometown is a beautiful place and it's image shouldn't be soiled by his grandpa's hijinks.

"Before going to Hedong I suggest visiting Ruosheng. It's in Jiao to the north and your travel will take longer, but that city is know as a waidanshu hub, maybe you can find additional things there." Ling suggested, wanting to be helpful for his friend.

"We'll think about that. We just need to set a date now."

A servant appeared with a letter in hands, once they were close to Feng they bowed and offered the letter with both hands, only straightening themselves when his cousin took the letter. They remained in silence as Feng read the parchment and once he finished, he gave a tired sigh and poured himself more wine, manners be damned.

"What happened?"

"Xiuying is returning to Gushan, as convenient as it sounds, will arrive in time for the festival and she wants Xiaoji back home by the time she arrives. I'm not doing what she wants."

"Why?"

"Yeah, this is inconsiderate of your part."

"Unless she sends escorts for her I'm not doing it. The rebels and their militias are more active than never and I'm not risking my daughter's safety." His reasoning stopped their doubts and once more they remained in silence. This is a problem he needs to deal as soon as possible, he doesn't want his people suffering at the hands of his brothers, his pride won't allow it. He must talk with Yumei.

"What if we escort her home? We're going to Hedong, might as well stop at Gushan. What do you guys think?" Alphonse proposed and his bodyguards nodded, Feng wasn't convinced, he gave one
more glance to his daughter, then to the four men in the pavilion.

"Two ex-soldiers and bodyguards, and a prodigious alchemist..." He thought out loud, and then. "If anything happens to her, you're dead, am I clear?" Feng quipped, this drastic change of tone is a shared family quirk, Al probably noticed it too, if his face is any indication. He nodded, regardless of the threat.

"Now that this is decided, we need to set a parting day."

"If you decide to go to Ruosheng you'll have to part tomorrow." Ling pointed out. Al struck a thinking pose and later nodded.

"I'm curious about this Ruosheng, so we'll be parting tomorrow."

---------------------

Like he promised Greed is accompanying Ran out in the streets he saw in the mountain two days ago, it is raining lightly yet this is not bothering the business in the area nor is it affecting it's night life. The place is already prepared for the Autumn Festival, with paper lanterns going as far as the eye can see and osmanthus flowers adorning the stores. Sometimes the rain would reflect the light of the lanterns, making soft glows appear alongside the brightness of the paper lamps. It added this sense of novelty to the whole place.

Wherever they went eyes followed them, maybe it is because of Ran, a westerner would think, but it is because they're sharing an umbrella. It started to rain suddenly and he hadn't bothered to borrow an umbrella before going out, so now people think their princess have a lover. Great.

"Where are we going?" In time his nose picked the savory scent of broth and turned to the direction of a restaurant, his feet wanted to bring him there but Ran pulled him to the opposite direction, to a clothing store.

A bell announced their arrival and a woman behind the counter turned to their direction, smiling brightly at the sight of the maid beside him.

"Welcome Ran!" Her eyes drifted to Greed and all happiness vanished from her face, being replaced with wonder, must be his eyes. The woman soon stopped to bow, smiling after returning
to her original pose. "Welcome sir. We finished fixing your dress." She directed that last part to Ran, the girl almost jumped from happiness, she is Xiong's sister.

"Really? Thank you!" Greed wandered around the store, checking the different clothing options it offered. Their voices were distant and once he made a turn to the other side of the store he saw it, a changshan exactly like the one Xiong borrowed him the other day. He didn't thought twice about it and took the top to a changer to prove it.

"Greed?" Ran went after him, which was no problem when she can trace him with the Dragon's Flow. She peeked at a corner and approached the screen he was in. "Gree-" Before she could finish he stepped out of the screen, showing off the shirt he just found.

"What do you think?"

"You look good, this changshan matches you better than it does my brother. Will you buy it?" Greed nodded and went to the woman behind the counter after dressing in his regular clothes. After paying her they exited the store and Ran guided him to another place.

In the midst of their walk Greed noticed the dress in her hands, it seemed to be made of lighter material than the rest of her clothes and such he became curious. "That's for the festivals?" He nodded to the bag and she followed his gaze, immediately becoming excited.

"Yup, it's for the dance that'll happen, I like this festival's dance because anyone can join, unlike the Double Seven one that is meant for couples." 'And since I'm meant for the Emperor.' Is what her face is telling. It is sad, because people think Ling will build a harem so she can't pursue romance, and even if Ling did, their previous conversation implies he would neglect his harem, so yeah, no romance either.

Their next stop was at a grocery store, as she liked the experience of baking mooncakes and wants to make more, after asking what filling he would like best they finished shopping. During their walk Greed saw at a distance an enormous building and stopped, only when Ran felt the rain on her hair she noticed she left him behind. Once the princess returned to the refuge of their shared umbrella she followed his gaze.

"That's Wenchang Palace."

Greed faced her. "Palace? All cities have their own palace?" Ran shook her head.
"Only capitals do, each palace belongs to an imperial prince. Come, I know a place with a better view." She nudged his arm and they resumed their walk, Ran guided him to an uphill street where a lonesome pavilion rested, the closer to the construction the less buildings were found.

By the time they arrived he rain has stopped, the pavilion was tall and slim and wasn't decorated like the rest of the city, but like promised, Greed had a greater view of the palace. He leaned on his forearms, having settled the bags on the floor while Ran rested her body on a column.

"Is that place occupied?"

"No, only imperial concubines and imperial princes can live in those. By Emperor Hongzi's orders, my cousin would be living there had he not been murdered." She was distant, but oddly not sad like his master early.

"Do you miss him?"

"I never knew him, so I don't know how to feel." She said, then moved away from the column to stretch. "I may sound like a terrible person, but I didn't want him to be emperor." Ran confessed, shrinking in guilt, like she was expecting to be talked down by him. Greed remained indifferent, well, to each his own.

"May I know why?" Now she blushed and lowered her head, whatever the reason it was embarrassing even for her, so he did the asshole thing and assumed shit. "Don't tell me you always fawned over Ling, so much that your clan be damned?"

"No! I...I'd have to marry my cousin, be his first wife actually and...and bear his first child. I freak out just to think about it, but I'm supposed to be honored instead. Not that I'm glad that he died, before you think any of this, I just..." She stopped her yammering and he respected her space and stopped prying, but, wow.

"That's messed up."

"Yeah."
"Isn't Ling technically your cousin?"

"Yes but, if I have to marry a cousin I'd like to at least be married to a distant one, and preferably
the less awful of the bunch."

"Is there anyone you'd refuse to marry?" She looked down, for few seconds then faced him again.

"The Yin Prince, not only he kickstarted the rebellion, he's an awful person through and through." Huh, now he wants to ask Ling of this brother of his. Greed clicked his tongue and propped his jaw against his palm.

"Who are the rebel clans? Just to have some idea."

"Yin, Zhao and Ming are the main ones, Qin and Ruan were put down and the Qing are torn
between siding with the Emperor or the former First Prince. There may be more, since most clans
are neutral." She mouthed an 'oh' and turned to him. "Do you know the flower camellia?" Greed nodded. "If you see someone with a camellia emblem, avoid them, they're likely a member of the Guardians of Yin."

-----------------

The chrysanthemums flowed gently with the night wind, but she cared less about it, all that she
wanted was to vent her anger, and there's nothing better than a practice session to help her with
this. Her jian was like an extension of herself and the only thing keeping her for losing her mind on
such monotonous life.

The only time things had changed was when grandpa employed Mu, that handsome foreigner and
apprentice physician, just when she thought they had something going on grandpa caught them on
the act and now he's missing. Remembering the whole ordeal made her lash out on a nearby tree,
this is so vexing! If only she wasn't exiled she could be free to do whatever she wants.

If only she had put her hands on the Philosopher's Stone, if only she had remembered such thing
existed. She still can't believe Ling beat her to it.

"My Lady."
"Wenlian." Her bodyguard approached, letter in hands, she gave the thing a dubious side-glance before eyeing her guardian. "What's this?"

"A letter from Master Qing Dai." Her mood brightened by hearing his name and so she snatched the letter from Wenlian.

"Big brother? I wonder what he wants from me?" She singsonged, opening the letter while humming.

"Big brother had an urge to see an orchid, I would be honored if you showed him one."

The girl handed the letter back to her maiden, smiling maliciously.

"Bring my kagemusha, and prepare me a horse."

Wenlian bowed. "What Master Qing Dai wanted?" She questioned, worried.

"Nothing, he just mentioned how much big brother missed me."

"Lady Lanhua."

"Prepare my horse Wenlian, big brother wants to see me, who am I to say no to that?"

Chapter End Notes

Yay the Festival is still not happening, fantastic! /s

It'll happen next chapter (and the other) I promise! Sorry for taking so long to show the damn thing, I really needed to establish certain things before it could happen, I should have organized this better. Again sorry. ( >人< ;)

Here's the music Ling is (trying) to play (and the music is played with a dizi, yes! :D)
Chapter Summary

Finally it's here, the Mid-Autumn Festival: Ling's side.

Chapter Notes

Hope you guys enjoy it, I know I did. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Listen to everything the misters have to say to you." Feng said to Xiaoji and the kid nodded. Seeing her with a fur collar duopeng in the middle of autumn made him pity the child, it looks suffocating. "Treat her as if she was your own daughter, don't hesitate to reprimand her if she misbehaves."

The station was packed with civilians making their last hour travel to their hometowns, as such Ling had to disguise himself in order to see Al and the others off.

"We'll call once we arrive in your home." Alphonse assured him and they embarked on the train. Ling and Feng followed them from the outside, they spotted the gang not long after they found their seats. Al was in the window seat and when their eyes met he smiled. "And don't be too taken by what your friend told you, sometimes things aren't as complicated as you think they are. I recommend you sit down and analyze everything thoroughly." Ling nodded, still lost in thoughts which was likely the reason Alphonse felt the need to reassure him.

Feng distanced him from the locomotive and it didn't take much for the train to take off, the smoke started to plague the place and it encouraged him to exit the platform. Zhongjian Station is big, just as big as the Central Station in Amestris, from what he remembers it was built using Aerugo's architecture as basis and it shows in its more classical look. It does need reforms however.

"What was Alphonse talking about?" Ling found himself unable to face his cousin, his apprehension so suffocating it was tightening his chest, should he tell him his worries? It is none of business but he wants to talk, he's just hesitant about it. Feng rolled his eyes and took them to a more private place in the station. "Nobody's here, now you're going to talk?"

The sky was clear in the morning and his schedule has yet to return to what it was originally, as
such his mornings are still free and he intends to enjoy every second of it, and what better way to start the morning than with a sparring session in his private garden?

He excluded Lanfan and Yongji from the list of potential partners because they're going to kick his ass and Ling doesn't want to start his day sore, Mei is in the Azure Palace and the time it takes to go there and return will make him lose all interest in practice, so of course his other option was Alphonse.

At least, that was the excuse he gave him.

"I'll not hold back just because you're the Emperor."

Ling had to admit, Al is better than Edward when it comes to fight, and their fighting style always intrigued him. It's from Xing, he's sure of it, from which province he has no idea, but one thing he's sure of, it's offensive and also uses the opponent's strength against them. Of course this means it is ineffective against the mostly defensive Yao Style, Al noticed that too, as he had changed his strategy.

All in all it was a fun experience, but was far from being his goal.

"You're a good fighter." Ling offered a cup of water from the tray left there by his servants, Al muttered a 'thanks' before accepting it. Ling sat by his side on the stone bench, once Alphonse finished drinking the water Ling handed him Xiong's letter he had read in the morning.

"What is that?"

"Just read it." As Alphonse read the letter Ling felt something build up in his body, his anxiety so strong he couldn't tear his eyes away from Al, who was solely focused on the letter.

According to Xiong, Greed sometimes move faster than he usually does, involuntarily, needless to say Ling immediately recalled the day Lord Xia mentioned something similar. There's also that day when they pillow fought, he was indeed faster than he remembers and now he fears the possibility of King Bradley taking control of his body. He is the only homunculus he knows that is capable with a sword and moves fast, and considering how everyone is inside of him now... He prayed from the bottom of his heart this wasn't the case, but a voice inside of his head kept reciting his fears, telling him things he refuses to acknowledge, things he doesn't want to dwell into.
"Wow, this is...weird? I've never seen him fight so I can't say much but, maybe this is muscle memory?" Really? That's the only thing he'll talk about?

Is he overreacting?

"But he abandoned my sword when he possessed me!"

"He lived for two hundred years, when you consider this we don't know much about Greed. What are you fearing?" He doesn't know much about Greed? It was the truth and yet it hurt to acknowledge. And they're supposed to be soulmates.

"Remember when he said the other homunculus are inside of him?" Alphonse nodded. "I think Bradley is taking control in these short times." Al stared him as if he was a lunatic and Ling felt mortified, it can't be that Al haven't made the connection. "What?!!"

Alphonse sighed and looked up in the sky. "When I recovered my body it couldn't keep up with my mind so I was unable to fight properly. But the more I trained it started to catch on, sometimes I'd have these crazy reflexes that I couldn't for the life of me replicate a second time. Strange isn't it?" He chuckled and Ling looked down his lap to reflect on what he said, it made sense, it really did, but part of him is still wary. Is it just his body catching up?

"But I must confess." Al said, making him look up at him. "I'm curious about this mind sharing, I wonder how it works? I just assumed he had their memories and only that." It was like his words clicked something and now he understands what Al is talking about, the realization was short though, because now Ling's curious about another thing.

"Do you know anything about Amestris in the eighteenth century?" Al raised his hands.

"I'm terrible at history..." Ling glared, not taking it, Al gave a defeated sigh and tilted his head to the side, one closed hand touching his lips. "It was ruled by a queen, her regent was an alchemist and looking back to it I think it was Father, he was the only person we cared to read about, sorry." That was a letdown, he did say he was terrible in this subject, guess nothing can be done about it.

"Ah! He had a family, one daughter and two sons, two are definitely Lust and Pride. I have no idea who the third one is, I think you should ask him."
Ling nodded. "Yep, I'm going to do that." A courtier appeared minutes after announcing that Mei returned from the Azure Palace, they looked at each other and smiled, Alphonse got up and followed the servant. "Al." The teen looked back. "Thank you."

"Is there anything else in the letter? Besides Greed's odd reflexes?"

"Well, Xiong invited me to hunt and pass some time with him." Feng gave him a funny look and Ling felt embarrassed, he pushed his cousin in retaliation and huffed. "You're so immature."

"I'm just kidding sweet cousin, he's my boyfriend, forgot that?" He joked again, this time with sarcasm thrown in and Ling’s memories went back to the their campaign against the Sima clan, more precisely to the first time grandpa met Xiong, shouting across the camp to tell Feng he found a suitable lover for the future leader of the clan. Ling doesn't think he have seen Feng that mortified his entire life.

"Did he tell you which weapon Greed used to give him a new haircut?"

"A jian. But this is what doesn't make any sense to me, he threw my sword away..." Ling stopped abruptly as he noticed what he just said. A jian, his sword is a dao, a saber, of course Greed would discard it they're used differently, realizing this made the emperor rub his temples in annoyance of his own lack of insight. Way to go swordsman.

"Now that I think of it, isn't mind sharing pretty much what the chimeras are doing? I mean, sometimes they talk about their 'inner animal' talking to them."

"Yeah I think you're righ-"

"Good." Feng patted Ling’s shoulders and pushed him to the direction of his carriage. "We have a lot of preparation to do on this big day and were not wasting more time."

-----------------

The sun have set and the Emperor and his guests climbed the mountain to reach the Azure Palace, a stronghold to protect the capital from an advantage point, a place to lock troublesome princes until they learn to behave, the most advanced medical facility in the country, and the place he lived his entire childhood until he and his mom fled back to Wa after things became haywire in the
Being the highest place in the capital it was perfect for the Autumn Festival, his clothes were finer than his daily robes, but not the most opulent, those kind of clothes were meant for the New Year. The patio was already set when they arrived, with individual tables forming a rectangle. His seat is the one in the center—of course—with his mom seating in his left and grandpa to the right, the other guest would seat to the sides facing each other, with their order of importance determining who seats near to him.

Hongzi got up the platform and sat on the cushion in seiza position, now accustomed to it. The moon still had to rise high in the sky, and they were entertained by dancers and other performers before the food arrived. A normal person would by now be exchanging mooncakes between loved ones, but he isn’t a normal person now is he? The table was decorated with osmanthi and contained the complete set of tableware.

When the band finished playing their last song the sky was dark and the moon shining brightly. Servants walked in row from the palace, each one with a pale yellow lantern, they walked behind the Emperor's guests and released the lanterns, providing an awe inspiring view to those below. Another set of servants appeared once the previous ones retreated back to lit the candles on the tables and now Ling got excited, the best part of the Festival is to begin.

A handmaiden poured osmanthus wine in his cup and Hongzi raised it to toast. "To the agriculture that’s raising since the end of the War of the Prince’s, and to Liangxinghe, Goddess of the moon, that her act of selflessness be an inspiration to Emperors to come!"

"To Liangxinghe!" His officers chorused and began to drink.

There were more toasts between meals and the conversations were for once peaceful, overall his guests are merry and laid back, befitting the festive mood, she's glad for that as now her Young Master won't get stressed over petty things. He was laughing but she could see that deep down he was unhappy.

Yongji was sitting cross-legged on the floor, yawning, Lanfan rolled her eyes and kicked the girl on the thigh. "We need to do something."

Her peer tsked and rubbed the sore part. "And what can we do? It's not like we can simply take him out without them lashing on us, and I want to keep my job."
"You sure show that." She leaned on the column nearby and proceeded to access her options, he could fake illness, but Lanfan knows how well this usually ends. The best option is a kagemusha, but who? Her eyes wandered until she found Feng watching the banquet from the second store. This time Lanfan nudged her friend's arm. "I have an idea, help me out." Yongji faced her then Feng and seemed to understand where she is going.

As they climbed the stairs Ling and his officers quieted as handmaidens walked in rows each with an elaborate small box and he, like Lanfan, was puzzled by the contents inside of them.

"Let me clear your head, my child, since you've become an adult this year all your wives-to-be from each clan prepared for you their own set of mooncakes. I hope you enjoy." He felt cheated, the best part of the day ruined by this game of chance. Fantastic. Ling looked around, masking his bemusement as best as he could, and all of his guests – clan representatives – looked back amused and expectantly, as if this was an innocent courting gesture between teenagers. He decided to face his mom and she was smiling, it wasn't a regular smile, but a 'behave yourself or I'll kill you' smile.

"I'm afraid I drank too much and now I'll have to excuse myself for a bit." Hongzi bowed and left for the building, sighing when he got to a reasonable distance from the banquet. Yue awaited in the entrance hall and bowed when he passed by her, following him to his destination. "Why you didn't told me about the mooncakes?" He whispered, accusing. Yue continued walking by his side, poised and taking none of it.

"Because I'm sure you'd have found an excuse to not attend today's banquet if I did." She pointed out.

"Killjoy." He lamented.

Yue sighed. "We treat you like an adult but you're still a teen, you still have a rebellious side." She said idly and Ling quieted down, reflecting upon the first part of her sentence.

-------------------

"Let me get this straight." Feng started, annoyance oozing from his voice. "You want me to pose as Ling? They'll notice since I'm hotter than him."

"You mean older." Feng death glared Yongji and she avoided his glance, she wants to beat these two.
"Yes, I want you to replace His Majesty." He was still in doubt, so she pressed. "I just want him to enjoy the festival, that's it." Feng put his hands on his hips, unconvinced. Lanfan stared at Yongji.

"Please Feng, you know how Ling's health is frail and stress only worsens it. We just want to help him as his friends." Feng's resolve was swaying and Yongji insisted with her puppy eyes, crumbling it in a bat of an eye. It's a good thing he still sees her as younger sister, or else the plan would've failed.

Feng looked down in defeat before facing them again. "Alright I'm doing it, but only after he eats half of the cakes." And as if to make his intentions clear the future Yao Lord untied his hair to copy his cousin's hairstyle. With this part done she needs to inform her Young Master of her plans.

Lanfan caught Ling on the hallway to the patio, the personal guard kneel before her Emperor first of all, cueing him to ask what was the matter. She ducked her head before answering. "I wanted to bring Your Majesty to the city tonight to enjoy the festivities as a common civilian." She dared look up to see his reaction and discovered that His Majesty looked unsure, Yue turned her back to the scene which means she'll act like this never happened, good.

"Look, Lanfan-"

"Just do it." Feng butted in, his hair now done. "Only do me a favor and eat half of those cakes." Ling nodded, now resolute in his decision. He started to walk but Yue stopped him.

"I'll call you back once you're finished." The young emperor muttered a 'thanks' and returned to his table to do as promised, once Yue called – claiming that there's an issue he had to address – he changed places with Feng, but not before taking one mooncake from different boxes and placing them in a bigger one, confusing his guests to what his intentions might be.

-------------

The streets of Zhongjian are bustling with energy, from bars to shops, they're all still open and selling different kinds of food and drinks. The long street leading to the palace was so bright it was obfuscating with it's lamps and flowers everywhere, music was heard in the background, an Ode to Liangxinghe, contrasted the vivid atmosphere they were presented in.

Ling hopped from shop to shop, buying every snack he laid his eyes on, one shop sold amestrian
sweets and it was like he and Yongji were seven again. Their enthusiasm was contagious and Lanfan felt pride in the decision she came with, part of her is still confused, however, by the box her Young Master bought from the banquet. She understands that it contains some mooncakes from the princesses, but she thought he hated them.

"Here are your orders sir." The man handed Ling a box, Lanfan peeked through Yongji's shoulder, getting curious about the sweets. Her master opened the box in her face, revealing an assortment of cookies and small animals made of sugar, neatly arranged in the middle were six mooncakes, which puzzled her. Didn't he bought some from the Palace? Lanfan eyed the mooncakes, then her master, hoping to show her confusion towards his decision.

"These are filled with chocolates!" He voiced his excitement, Lanfan went back to look at the modified sweets with new eyes, curious and anxious to feel how the savory sweet tasted with the familiar, oily dough. She wanted to talk, ask if he would be sharing them in the first place, but...

"Hurry or else we'll be late for the play!" They heard someone say to their companion, the mention of said play perked Ling's interest and he followed the couple. She walked behind him in tow, feeling her heart beat faster at the mere thought of these strangers recognizing his voice and jeopardizing his disguise.

"Excuse me, I just heard you talking about a play?" They eyed each other before returning their glance to His Majesty.

"Ah yes, Zhongjian Theatre is going to perform for free in the main plaza, the play is 'The Epic of Heaven and Earth'." Her young master nodded and muttered a 'thanks', after the couple left they had a talk and agreed to go see the play.

'The Epic of Heaven and Earth' is a story based on the life of waidanshuist Ru Jin, who traveled east to find a cure to an illness plaguing her village, making various friends and enemies in the way, like a chimera general who ended helping her in her quest, or vile alchemists creating soldiers made of clay, powered up by philosopher's stones.

They were eating on a table provided by the theatre and like she suspected Ling shared the sweets. When the troupe gave a pause His Majesty laid the previous box on the table, both girls looked at the box suspiciously and after he gave them a malicious smile, Lanfan dreaded the contents of said box.

"Let's play a game shall we?" He opened the box. "I chose the worst mooncakes from the bunch I ate, only two are actually good. Who manages to eat a good one will be able to eat the chocolate
flavored ones." The temptation of eating the chocolate cakes was strong enough to make them face the challenge. Marvelous. He couldn't wait to see their faces when they grab an awful one, when he tasted them the first thing that came to mind was the potential to make this kind of game with them. Now if only Greed was here too, it would be awesome. An ass thing to do, but something to remember today for.

"You go first." Yongji looked surprised by Lanfan's blunt remark.

"I agree, you're younger so you go first." The girl pouted, resigning to the situation with an air of defeat.

"Can't be this bad." She idly commented – skeptical of what he said or to reassure herself, he doesn't know – and grabbed the first pastry she laid eyes on. Just to make sure Ling put on a poker face, else they look at him for hints. She started to munch and soon began to frown, slowing her chews until finally gulping it down.

His younger guard went for another bite and he snatched it from her hand. "A bite is enough." She sighed in relief, Ling turned to Lanfan now. "Your turn." She was more careful when choosing her sweet and gambled on the middle one, the moment she bit the thing his bodyguard grimaced, prompting them to laugh.

They took turns whilst he ate his own portion of chocolate mooncakes, enjoying not only the food, but their faces when they got a wrong one. Yongji was the first to find a good one, and it was like finding water in the desert. Lanfan took a bit longer to find the prized sweet and all her brooding melted away once she tasted the bought mooncake, and, coincidently enough, the Troupe returned from their brake.

The play resumed with people cheering for the actress playing Ru Jin during her battle with General Lei, with some even cheering for him instead. Lanfan and Yongji were exchanging random trivia about the Tiger general, like from which clan he'd be if all these events happened during present day. Seeing firsthand how popular the story is for nobles and common folk alike gave him the idea of gifting Greed with a copy once he learns how to read

---------------------

The banquet had ended and now, in the late hours of the night, Linyu is stretching her legs, strolling down the outdoor corridors of the Purple Palace. She isn't outside to only walk though, Yüfan was on guard duty the entirety of the banquet and she hadn't had time to gift him. Some servants are yet to sleep judging by the lights still up on certain rooms, the outside lamps are still
lit despite the moon providing enough light.

The Captain of Imperial Guards was leaning against the rail, smoking while facing the Harem Quarters. "You should be in your room by now." He puffed out smoke, she wanted to back talk but stopped when Yüfan tensed, turning sharply in the direction of the garden, attentive, to then relax. "They returned." He commented nonchalantly, the empress closed her eyes to concentrate, yes, she can feel it, three people sneaking into the palace from the garden. "You won't reprimand him?" She asked.

"Can't blame him. But this is beside the point." She joined him on the rail and handed her lifelong bodyguard a decorated box, he eyed the thing with caution and glanced back to her.

"Why you want me dead?" He joked and she rolled her eyes.

"I bought them, and if I wanted you dead I'd resort to quicker methods." Now he accepted the gift, bowing in gratitude next. "I bought your favorite flavor, not that it was hard, you only like almond flavor." The captain shrugged and opened the box, unceremoniously chugging the first cake he saw, yet before he proceeded to eat one more his eyes caught something in the square behind and this drew her curiosity.

"What is Lady Ruan doing out there?" Linyu frowned, she doesn't like that woman since their days in the harem, she and her group were vile woman and to think she's now living under the same roof as her son. She will give her a piece of her mind, just because her son The Emperor thinks she is this meek lady who needs to be protected it doesn't mean she thinks the same, and if she dares to hurt him she swears Ruan won't live to see another day. With this new resolve the Empress Dowager headed to the stairs. "Where are you going?"

"Talk with mistress Ruan. You don't need to follow me." She ordered and went after the wolf in sheep clothing.

As she approached the harem she felt a prickling sensation on her skin, this was never a nostalgic place to her, more like a hodgepodge of bad memories, just seeing the green roofs and pink peonies reminded her of Empress Dowager Yin and she had to shook the memory off. If there's one thing she can genuinely praise Emperor Changwu for is his respect for all the cultural differences between clans, as subtle as they can be. Mistress Ruan was now within view so she straightened herself, this is no time to be distraught over past experiences, Linyu was about to reveal herself but...

"... It nice, Lady Ruan?" An unknown voice teased the former concubine. Her heart started to race,
there's someone with her? They're concealing their qi so they're not courtiers, who she's talking with? She is honest to goodness hoping Yüfan is seeing her body language right now, if it's an assassin she's in trouble, this dress isn't fit for fighting.

"...yes." Again with that meek voice. "But."

"But?" They parroted, entertained.

"It was only by Lord Xing's benevolence that I'm here." She confessed. "But I'm afraid! I saw him, one of the Zhou is in this palace. If he sees me-

"Shhh. We'll deal with this." They stopped and everything went silent, that's when Linyu remembered she didn't hid her qi. "But first, there's a pending issue needing to be addressed." There is an overall air of sick enjoyment in their voice. This is bad, she needs to back away.

When she turned, however, another assassin was already behind her, arms crossed and face unreadable.

"Now, My Lady, isn't it improper to eavesdrop?"

-------------------

The first thing he did as he entered the Heavenly Apartment was to browse the books in his study. Ling should be going to bed however he fears he's going to forget to do this once he wakes up tomorrow, he wants to see if he have a copy of the epic. Yes, he could buy the damn book and give it to Greed, but what guarantee that the fool will like it? Also this is the perfect excuse to have him in his study to give him company once he arrives.

Suddenly the phone rang, making him jump, Ling turned quickly, staring at the thing accusingly. He approached his phone whilst wondering who calls this late at night.

"Yo." He felt all his anger slip away at the mere timbre of the his voice, feeling his body relax, Ling sat on his cushion and leaned on the table.
"Hey." He missed him, more than he'll admit.

"Sorry for calling so late." He sounded apologetic from the other side of the line and this made Ling breathe out a laugh. Now he bothers with it? Dork.

"No problem. But you never called before, I was starting to develop abandonment issues." He feigned a hurt voice and heard laughter.

"Yeah, sorry for that..." He had to hold his chuckle, it was so weird to see Greed apologizing. "I tried to! But every time I called Yue was the one answering. What are you doing at nine?"

"Bathing." He hummed.

"Ten?"

"Supper." Now he couldn't contain his laughter, specially after hearing him muttering a curse.

"You're fucking kidding me. Help a man out mice, when you're free?" What he called him?

"Mice?"

"Yeah, Ran told me." He could feel the smirk even from here, and it's not a mice, it's a rat, thank you very much.

He'll not let him get away with it. Two can play at this game. "You're not the only one who learned things about your partner, Mu." Greed groaned and Ling puffed his chest triumphantly.

"Can't believe you discovered that."

"I'm the Emperor, I know everything." He joked. "Jokes aside it's a good name, it can mean a lot of things depending on how it's written. Wood, eyes, yearning."
"Do you know how it feels to have the same name as the sound the cow makes!?" He bursted into laughter from how unexpected that was, it amazed him how easy it was for Greed to make him laugh. The emperor breathed slowly, now he wants to tease him more.

"Well here in Xing it's actually the pig." He pointed out and giggled when he heard an exasperated sigh.

"That's even worse! Good, we’re a couple of pigs then."

"Hey!"

"What? Have you seen you eating?" He frowned, there's nothing wrong with the way he eats. "I've sent you a letter, did it arrive?"

"For the festival?" Greed hummed. "Aw, I wanted it to be a surprise."

"My call is the surprise." He said, and Ling could feel that usual air of confidence. Suddenly memories from earlier flashed in his mind, making him remember something important.

"Hey, Greed, there's something I want to ask you." He shifted his tone to a serious one.

"Sure."

"Did you lived in Amestris during the eighteenth century?"

"Yes." So the other son was indeed him. "Why you're asking?" He inquired and Ling felt his body tense, part of him doesn't want to tell Greed that he saw him as a potential threat, he doesn't want to hurt him and sour their friendship. But would he like if Greed lied to him for the same reason?

Mustering his courage, he came to a conclusion. "I've been told about how good you are with a sword, and I feel like I know nothing about you." He sighed and then silence, he seemed uncomfortable knowing that he knows such thing and this made him feel bad, as much as it is good that he does know about those things.
"You heard from Xiong or Lord Xia?"

"Both."

"Yeah I knew fencing, know fencing as it turns out, pretty much obligatory in the time I lived, I never thought I'd remember it, must be Wrath talking to me." He meant it as an offhand comment but Ling's heart skipped a beat hearing this, all of his fear flooded back into his mind and the next question came out automatically.

"Do they have control over your body?"

"No." Words cannot express the relief he is feeling right now. "They act more like instincts, I doubt my family have conscience to be honest, I do dream of their experiences though." His body finally let itself relax, breathing steadily once again, he's glad to hear that, very glad, Ling feared the notion of Greed being dangerous like Lord Xia suggested, he feared having to doubt his friend constantly thanks to his family. "Hey, Ling." There was a tinge of worry in his voice. "Don't worry, if my family had any sort of control over my body I'd do everything to take it back, you know I don't like to share."

Now reassured Ling felt himself smile. "Yes."

"I would never let them hurt you." The confidence, the conviction in his voice and how true that statement is made him forgot how to talk momentarily, Ling blinked, trying to come up with something, anything to respond, but nothing came. "Happy Mid-Autumn Festival."

"Happy Mid-Autumn Festival."

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up: mices and rats are different animals, and I had to choose between 1899 and 1900 for Ling's birth year since Arakawa isn't precise with it (she dates it as 'after Edward and Winry (1899), before Alphonse' so I had to choose and I ended with 1900 for two reasons: a) I like to think he's from the same year as Al and b) this way he's from the year of the rat, instead of the pig (though a pig would fit better. xD)

Also I didn't know what rodent Greed would call Ling, it had to be something cuter
than rat, I though about guinea pig because, c'mon, these things are hella cute, but I stuck with mice because they're smol and even cuter.
The ballroom was full of people and the Queen had yet to come, the orchestra playing in the background and his glass of champagne his only companions for the night, or actually, her companions, more than once a man would present himself and then ask for a dance, only to be rejected. That's how he knew he was seeing things in his dear sister's point of view.

After her fourth rejection Lust moved her way to the nearest balcony after catching a glimpse of the tall figure with his back to the party.

"What are you doing here all by yourself Henry?" There was a silence, he knew what she was going to say next. "Or should I say Greed?" He sighed and turned his head, not fully committed to confront his sister wholeheartedly.

"What do you want? Father doesn't need me right now."

"But I do, the ladies are requesting your presence, go talk to them."

"For what? Killing them later?" He spat, still remorseful. Lust didn't budge however, and instead just crossed her arms and smiled.

"You're like a kid who can't abandon it's toy." She remarked and his frown deepened. It was her usual patronizing tone, but he felt a tint of amusement in it. Greed closed his eyes to calm down, he
wanted so much to give her a piece of his mind.

But his chance vanished, since the herald announced the Queen’s arrival. They both turned to the room surprised and he must admits that it’s refreshing to see her caught off guard for once. “You know what you have to do.”

“I was born for this.” He grinned to his sister, feeling his confidence rise again. No way in hell he’ll let Lust have her way with him, he remembers how he was already getting tired of Lust’s and Pride’s shit at this point and his part of the plan haven’t even started. Talking about the runt where is he?

The dream is playing exactly like his memory’s, Dad Dearest introduces him to their monarch and Greed plays a song in her homage – her favorite song, Father knew that much. The girl is young and impressionable and immediately becomes interested in him, which is a no brainer, he is that irresistible.

The orchestra resumed playing and Greed joined his guests in the center of the room. ‘The dream is exactly like his memory.’, scratch that, it’s almost exactly, and Greed noticed that when he caught a glimpse of a pattern he never saw in Amestris.

It can’t be.

And if that wasn’t enough to throw him off his next dance companion sure did the job. There he stood, a few feet from him, Greed swears he has never seen the pissant this groomed before, this counting the time he possessed him. Ling smiled, clutching his layers of hanfu – the frilly one – like it was a ball gown whilst bowing; while he did so Greed paid attention to the hairpin tying his bun, it was intricate and unlike anything he saw the kid using, he looked different. Stunning.

"He song you had played was so beautiful." He closed his eyes like he always does when acting bubbly and he felt himself free from his gaze, and if his heart is beating faster, it is because he’s dancing, nothing too complicated.

“What are you doing here?”

Ling tilted his eyebrows upwards. "You invited me silly, have you forgotten?"
"And why are you in the woman's spot?" He shrugged.

"They saw a flower in my hair, makeup and a dress and assumed I was a woman." Huh.

"That doesn't make sense."

"Your country doesn't make sense." He rebutted, Greed shrugged it off to focus on their dance and other things, like how Ling was the perfect height for this, or how the music felt like background noise.

"...the festival." Is...is that what he thinks he's hearing? Dear god.

"Did you hear that?"

Ling tilted his head. "What?" Someone nudged his hip and he looked down to meet Pride. So there he is. They stopped and Greed raised an eyebrow, even in his dreams Pride is a killjoy. The brat stared him with a face that reminded him of an annoyed cat.

"Wake up."

---------------------

"Wake up or I'll jump on you." Xiong threatened in a playful tone.

Greed opens an eye, not fully determined to get up. From all of the things he could be greeted in the morning of course it is the brothers nagging him nonstop. Great.

"I'm tired, leave me alone." And also he wants some time alone to process everything that happened in that dream. Did he seriously considered Ling, that slouch, stunning?

To be honest he is good looking.
Crap.

"But today is the big day." Ran tried to reason. Greed got up, having had enough of this hype.

"Why is this festival so important?" He inquired, hoping to have passed his frustration along. The siblings stared at one another and now they looked calmer.

"It's the first time in years that Xing had a bountiful harvest." She confessed and his anger subsided, now he's feeling like a dick. "The constant civil wars took a toll on our country and a lot of people died, this is the first time in years we have a genuine reason to commemorate this holiday." This blows, he should have asked earlier to avoid this.

Greed rubbed his nape. "I'm such an ass."

"This isn't news buddy. So, care to spare?"

"About that, mind to do so with staffs?"

"Sure." Greed got up and the brothers left, he proceeded on finishing his daily routine and readying himself for his sparring session with Xiong. Ran guided him to a patio on the east wing where the oversized mutt waited for him with staffs in hand.

The young lord threw the weapon to him. “I’m actually happy to introduce you to a long ranged melee weapon, they’re my personal favorites.”

“Why?”

“They have a wider range of attack and protection, which is good for someone of my height.” He pointed out and Greed made a sound of understanding, this is something he should consider. “They are slower than swords, but it’s nothing you can’t work around with timing. First I want to show you a presentation.” Xiong first showed him the basic form and extended to easy-to-follow moves, they’re impressive nonetheless.
It can be because Xiong's performance is flawless though.

"Come, accompany me." He repeated the last moves slower this time so Greed can copy him, they kept doing this until Greed could do all of them without Xiong's guidance.

They started the battle simple, holding their strength to not give any major injuries to one another. While they were keeping it slow Greed was able to keep the same pace as Xiong, but this little children's game wouldn't last forever, as Xiong accidentally hit him in the head, making both brothers gasp.

"I'm sorry! I didn't meant to." Greed rubbed his temple, he looked annoyed for a split second before returning to his usual smug self.

"You hit like a little girl." This insulted Xiong, and knowing her big brother he is going to hit harder now. He started his assault and not only he was faster, he attacked with more strength, as was apparent by how loud the sound of their chang guns were. She thought Greed would have regretted this decision but his smile says otherwise. The first to land a hit was Greed, but Xiong didn't fell behind, the bruises made way to a strong red and this made her heart beat faster.

"You're going to hurt yourselves!" Her plea fell to deaf ears as they continued their little spare, now she can even hear the sound of their swings and as much as she is worried, it looked like they were having the time of their lives. Ran let herself calm down, they aren't idiot enough to inflict deep bruises on the other, yeah, she should just rest.

Greed was going to make a vertical swing with his staff but Xiong swung his staff in Greed chest, he dropped the weapon and hissed.

He likely broke a rib.

Greed recoiled but without letting go of Xiong's staff, he pulled the weapon, taking advantage that her brother was still fazed by the last attack, bringing Xiong with it. Greed grabbed him by the collar and head butted him, her brother pushed Greed away and cupped his nose.

He definitely broke his nose.
"That's it!" She had enough of this fight and drew a circle and a star on the ground, in the corner of his eyes Greed saw Ran initiating her alchemy, creating a wall to separate them. "Look at what you two did!" She approached her brother and pressed her fingers between his nose, the sparks appeared in her nails and moved to his nose, curing it.

Greed was sitting on the floor thanks to Xiong, Ran kneeled down next to him and touched the center of his back and chest, this is the first time he sees her doing waidanshu, and the first time he payed attention to her nails. After she finished he touched the damaged rib, if he could he'd learn this, it is too similar to his (sadly) former regenerative powers.

"What are you boys doing?" They heard Yuan on a window above them.

"Teaching Greed gunshu."

"Isn't he going to learn daoshu? Why are you teaching him gunshu?"

"It's the same principle!" She didn't leave, which puzzled her son. "Mom, did something happen?"

"Your grandfather is missing. Can you three find him?" Xiong groaned and Ran was visibly bummed, which confused Greed a lot, the old Zhou never seemed like trouble to him, sure he sometimes found him sleeping on his bed or chilling in his balcony – uninvited might he add – or playing the erhu in unusual places around the manor which makes him think the guy might be rather senile, but it's not like the brothers don't invade his room from time to time. They did it today.

"Now don't act like this, you know your grandfather can't walk around all alone." Ran raised to her feet and they muttered a 'yes' with a hint of shame in their voices, and so after tidying up they set off to find the former Zhou patriarch.

"Why you're not so eager to go find your grandpa? I understand he have some issues but...you know, he never came across as trouble." Xiong sighed and crossed his arms behind his head while Ran gave him a 'you have no idea what you're talking about' look.

"Last time this happened he forgot I was his grandson." This sounds bad.

"And when I went after him he thought I was a member of the 'White Snake Bandits' wanting to
capture him as revenge. The fuss he created on the street." This sounds bad.

"So he is senile?"

Xiong nodded. "Approach him with calm and be patient, grandpa can be quite the pain but he's a good person." Greed hummed, Xiong put his hands on his hips and beckoned his sister to come closer. "We split up and in an hour return to the manor. Understood?"

After coming to an agreement Greed opted to search the suburbs near the train station, work paused after the incident and god knows when it will resume, in the corner he could hear a group of people talking about the station and how the kidnappers should have been executed for what they did, coupled by an off-hand remark of how soft Ling is, and then toppled by another one calling the brat useless, being too dependent on his Grand Tutor, whoever that person is.

He could tell them how well Amestrian Government's popular image is thanks to the wanton killing, but they're different cases.

His feet led him to a lot of different places yet the old man was nowhere to be found, he found, however, and old lady trying to carry a crate – of all things – full of oranges? Mandarins? Whatever, and now he is facing a dilemma, should he help her bring this home? And as if heaven itself wanted to answer his question she starts giving in to the weight and almost drop the damn thing if he didn't come to help and lift the crate out of her grasp.

"Ma'am this is dangerous, you should ask for someone's help the next time." Greed admonished, with the crate now in his shoulder were it's safer, she had to tilt her head up to look him in the eyes, the entire time she was bewildered. Yeah yeah, he's a foreigner can't people get over it already? He could feel he was frowning but relaxed when the former sin noticed she seemed to recognize him.

His fame precedes him.

"Thank you young one," she bowed and for a second Greed felt distraught, he doesn't want anything weird happening to her back. "My you're more handsome than my son described." She chirped and he got confused. Son? Oh please don't tell him Zong is her fucking son or he'll have a stroke.

"We're should I take this?" He gestured to the crate and she asked him to follow her home. The walk was brief and once there Greed remembered himself. "Have you seen the Zhou patriarch?"
"Yes, in the morning, I think near the brothel, he was playing his erhu, earned some changes from tourists who didn't know who he is." Sounds like him. "I told my son about it, he isn't home yet?" Greed shook his head causing her to gasp, she was really worried about his condition. "You need to find him! Normally if a citizen find him they bring Lord Zhou back home." Ok this sounds alarming.

"Thank you ma'am, I'm going after him right no."

"Wait." She vanished into her house and brought back with her a box of sweets, offering it to Greed, he pointed to himself and she kept smiling, cueing him to accept the box a go on his way.

First thing he did after this was phoning Yuan and after long, aggravating minutes she picked up. "Your father escaped in the morning?!"

There was a long stretch of silence. "Did you find him?"

"Answer me fir-" He heard someone banging on the booth and was almost going to tell the person to stick it when.

"Liang? Laing it is me your grandpa!" For fuck’s sake.

"Know what I found him." He hang the phone and opened the booth. "Grandpa what's your-"

"Meiying? Is Meiying with you?!" He clutched his top, his voice was desperate and full of hope and Greed felt really uncomfortable in this situation, suddenly having an idea of who Liang and Meiying might be. Greed grabbed Lord Zhou by his shoulders, giving him a reassuring smile.

"We need to go home grandpa." He froze on the spot, facing him, Lord Zhou blinked a few times, coming to a sudden realization and dropped his face.

"Ah, it's just you Mu." The desolation in his voice was palpable, Greed ignored it, not knowing how to deal with this, and stood behind him, placing his hands again on his shoulders.
"Let's go home. Your family is awaiting."

"You know, sometimes I dream they're still alive, but when I wake up...it's hard, not hearing their voices or seeing their faces. I miss them. You understand it, right Mu?"

Greed's view shifted from grandpa to the road ahead, eyes distant as memories flooded his conscious. Painful memories he pushed to the back of his mind.

He understands.

-------------------------

It's nightfall already and a lot of families gathered in a glade on Baishe mountain, that just now he discovered translates to 'white snake', and even then only now he also discovers why it's called that, but it isn't the time nor place for that, Greed had to help his hostess set up the table. Unlike the rest of the citizens also looking to dine outside, they're stationed on an elevated stone platform – likely created with alchemy. The ex-homunculus glanced at Xiong's granddad and lowered his gaze, he feels better now but Greed still feels bad for not saying anything to comfort the man, seeing as he also faced something similar.

Yuan got on her feet to search around the glade which prompted Greed to do the same, Xiong and Ran have yet to come, busy dressing up he guesses.

"Look who's here!" Yuan announced and for a second Greed thought it was her children, but nope, just Ding Mí and...is that the grandma from earlier? His teacher and the grandma bowed and now he is looking at him.

"Thank you for helping my mother earlier Greed." He bowed in thanks and he just nodded, a bit dazed. So she's not Zong's mother, that's a relief.

"You told your mother I was handsome?" Not that having people enamored with his looks is any surprise, he bets the maidens at the palace are all missing him right now, it has more to do with the fact his teacher was talking about him to his mother.

Yuan was chuckling and his teacher glanced in her direction before facing him again. "That wasn't my exact words, but yes." He's butthurt Yuan is laughing at his comment and this is admittedly
funny, now he wonders what is their relationship like.

"Where is your family sitting?" She asked and he pointed to a place near some trees, it's close to them, Yuan hummed and before she added something her eyes peeked something in the entrance, and judging by the smug smile on her lips, her kids are here. "Any later and I would've started the banquet without you two." Yuan teased and the two members of the Ding family bowed in the presence of their princes. Ran wore the dress she retrieved earlier this week and he must admit, she looks lovely.

"Everyone is here, Yuan, if you may." Zhou Ren said and his niece nodded, then he put his attention on Greed. "Are you used to this table setting?" His other teacher asked whilst Yuan made a speech about the growing harvest, the moon goddess and the Emperor for saving their clan

"The one where I lived was simpler." He felt a sudden shame but elected to ignore it, there's no point in dwelling in it right now. "But I remember a similar one in the palace, when I dined with His Majesty."

"Do you remember what each of these utensils are for?" He nodded. "Good, if you have any doubts just watch what any of us are doing." While Ren was busy talking to him Xiong decided this was the perfect time to steal something from the table, it didn't work and he got a slap in the hand for it. Yuan sat down in time to see her son rubbing his hand and pouting like a spoiled child. A twenty-four years old adult ladies and gentlemen.

"Let the kid be informal Ren, it's thanks to him that our clan gained recognition in the court." Xiong was embarrassed and tried to tone down his achievements in Ling’s campaigns for modesty sake, a pattern he notice in almost every xingese that is praised for anything.

The dinner went smoothly and they were surprised, Greed included, by how much he knows about table etiquette. He was also glad to recognize almost all the dishes on the table, as some of them were specialties of the east or exclusive to Wen, like the stir fried fish. The dinner started formal and all until drinking was involved, and then a table challenged another in a drinking game and now all the tables joined, ground for a fiasco if he ever saw one.

With the game now finished – a table unknown people won – the party dwindled to mere chatting and occasional cake exchange. Greed watched the city below with a bottle of booze by his side, sitting on a big rock in the middle of nowhere. He heard steps on the stone path but elected to ignore it, only when the person stood by his side he discovered it was Lady Zhou all along.

"Why are you moping here all alone?" He's not moping.
"Eh, I don't think I belong there anyway."

"My family likes you, that's a start, give it a month or two, they'll get used to you." Then she looked up. "Or you're just feeling homesick. Who were they? Your parents?"

"The real ones or the xingese ones?"

"My definition of parent is someone who cares for their children." Sounds fair, still it could've saved some time just saying 'the xingese parents', Yuan sometimes reminds him of himself, being dramatic and all.

"He's a pharmacist and she's a physician." This information perked her interest, Greed looked down when she didn't respond with a witty remark and he could see that now she was regarding him with different eyes.

"This explains your initial xingese." She said to herself, then faced him. "Did you learn anything from them?"

"The basics, and also what certain plants do." She nodded as she took this information and brushed her lips, she is considering something and now he is curious.

"Do you want to learn waidanshu? This'll boost your reputation and will come in handy in fights." Wow, earlier today he was interested in that, talk about coincidence. He grinned, a chance like this doesn't come too often, and also, if it means having a semblance of his regenerative powers he's up to it.

"Of course."

"Then when you learn how to read the Dragon's Flow I'll personally teach you, both waidanshu and neidanshu." Nei what?

"Neidanshu?"
"Remember when I accessed your jing? The ability to do so is called neidanshu, actually, the ability to read qi is also neidanshu." She stopped, having remembered something. "...so Master Xuan is teaching you this... I'll expand your knowledge of it. What do you say? It's a great tool both for medicine and alchemy."

"I couldn't be asking for a better opportunity! You can sign me in." She looked satisfied with his answer.

"Your parents will be so proud of you! Even better, His Majesty will love the transformation we gave you, the perfect gentleman." She mused to herself the last part. Yuan was stuck in her own mind envisioning the potential Greed had as a gentry that she haven't paid attention to the mood shift he went through. "Greed?" Since she's here, he better clear his doubts.

"Yuan, tell me something. What happens to one's parents if they commit a crime?" She frowned, knowing her she already pieced together that he's talking about himself.

"What you did?" She began to smoke her pipe, bracing herself for whatever craziness he'll throw at her.

"I was employed by Lord Xia to be a servant to Lanhua-"

"My condolences." She cut him off and he glared in response, godammit the apple doesn't fall far from the tree does it? She looked unaffected by it and simply shrugged. "What? That girl is an annoying prat."

"Boss caught me on her bed, accidentally cut off the arm of one of his bodyguards." Yuan looked bewildered by his statement, not that he blames her.

"How do you cut someone's arm accidentally?"

"Reflex."

"Continue." Well she accepted that easily enough.
"If that happened to Ran, what would you do with the person's parents?" She puffed off smoke and looked down to reflect.

"Boy you have problems." He knows. "Now to answer your question, I'd tell them that they raised a good-for-nothing son and they should be ashamed. You don't need to worry, really, a criminal's family is only punished in case of treason, your parents are safe." She assured him with a smile and he smiled back, the guilt weighting him down being finally lifted.

"There's another thing I want to ask you. Your father called me Liang, then asked for a Meiying, is she your sister?" She breathed deeply, returning to smoke her pipe for comfort.

"Yes, she was the most beautiful woman in Changwu's era, he himself though that." Her voice was so full of love when she talked about her sister, it made him wonder if that's how he acts when talking about his... his... Friends.

There, he said it.

"He was a massive cockhead, but she loved him." She released smoke and sighed. "And he loved her, and they loved their son. It looked like the perfect couple." Her voice was on the verge of breaking and she breathed out a laugh, like it was her coping mechanic. "Of course he also liked that stunner our Empress Dowager, which on close inspection means His Majesty is a stunner too. You probably agree with me on that don't you?" She joked and thank goodness he wasn't drinking or else he would've choked on his wine. Also thank goodness it's dark because his face is heating up, time for more alcohol.

"He mistook you for Liang? Makes sense, he loved to wear black too, I think you have the same height."

"How old was he?"

"Eighteen, seventeen...he was the second Prince so he was fairly older than Hongzi. Poor kid, wasn't even ten when he was forced to flee the palace." Greed wanted to say something but music started to play from the glade and Yuan's children came running in their direction, Ran stopped once close enough to catch her breath while Xiong looked like his usual big-ball-of-sunshine self.

"The dance is about to start, come with us!" He invited and all eyes were on him. As curious as he
is about this dance Greed doesn't even know any xingese dance, he'll make a fool of himself and that is a big no. He'll have to make up an excuse.

"I'm not dressed for it."

"You look good, come." Ran insisted.

"We should return anyway, so go."

Greed looked to the brothers, than faced Yuan again. "What choice do I have?" He resigned to the situation and handed the bottle to the matriarch, hopping off the Rock and slapping Xiong on the shoulder, if he's going to do what they want he can at least lead the way.

People were on the dance floor by the time they arrived, kids to elders but mostly young adults, Greed hesitated for the last time before being pulled by the Zhou brothers and to his surprise, the dance they are talking so much about is actually from Aerugo with minor tweaks to better match their country. It's not a couple dance per se but sometimes they end in pairs and to be honest, Greed is enjoying it more than he wants to admit. Ran appeared close to him and he lifted the girl temporarily, in sequence holding each other's hand From opposite sides.

"You're more handsome when you're having fun." He'd provoke her to expand on her praises but Xiong came out of nowhere and exchanged places with his sister.

"My sister's off-limits." He teased.

"Then are you available?" Greed purred, enticing a chuckle from his friend.

"No." He quipped, smiling wide.

The dance stopped and they bowed to the other. After that families were leaving one by one with Yuan's being the last one, once home Greed went directly to his balcony, which, to his non-surprise, was occupied by none other than grandpa himself, playing his erhu. It's a good thing there's two chairs here.
Greed let himself relax as he let the music grandpa was playing fill the quietness of the dark, it was calming and honestly if all of his nights were like this he'd personally invite him everyday. He's certainly the best option when Greed wants to rest.

"Isn't there anyone who you need to call on this fateful day?" His voice was calm and soothing, matching the song he played, Greed looked at the sky, today was harder to see the stars.

"Yes there is." He breathed a laugh. "But he never picks up the phone."

"You should try anyway, everyday, chance is a weird thing. You should always let those dear to you know how much they mean to you." He finished his song. "Before it's too late." Greed stared at the old man as if he was another person, he looked like another person. He stood there with his mouth gaped, his words struck like lightening, and it hit home on how true they were.

"Yes I should, thank you grandpa." He stood up and headed to the door, but before he opened it.

"Bang, you can call me by my name." Greed looked over his shoulder to meet Bang's stare, he was smiling. "You're a good kid, Mu, more than you let people know." Then he opened his eyes, and looked around confused. "What were we talking about?"

Greed gave a defeat sigh, there's no fixing this. "Go to your bed grandpa, it's late." He helped him out of the armchair and saw him off, he supposes Bang can walk to his room by himself, now to test his chances again.

The former sin entered his living room without bothering to lit the lamps and faced the phone on the cabinet, wishing to even if just today be able to talk to Ling, he put Ling's number on the phone. Once it started to ring he became anxious, wishing once again to not be Yue answering it, and finally, when someone picked the phone on the other side.

"Yo."

Chapter End Notes

I decided to add Neidanshu in the equation, consider it the part of xingese alchemy/studies were they focus on the three treasures (if you remeber ch. 4, the thing Yuan did to Greed), right now I showed Jing and the manga taught about Qi, the third
one will appear in time.

Also sorry for not posting Greed's thoughts on their conversation, it felt redundant to me. But next chapter they interact again, so yay! :D

As always, feedback is appreciated.
Rekindled Fire

Chapter Summary

We finally know some characters' family trees.

On a more important note we discover what happened to Ling's mom.

Chapter Notes

This is by far the longest chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Mid-Autumn Festival has ended and people resumed their lives like usual, this also applies to His Majesty. He had awaken easily enough, and better, without his mother's help. Ling is in his study right now, taking his time to read the essays, he has two more weeks to review them and he's halfway done.

He hopes to finish the bulk of work before ten and spend the rest of his free time reading the letters from his family and friends. It's a good thing he can read fast, because each participant wrote about seven different things: agriculture, urbanization, economy, the clan system, the 'no names', foreign relations and lastly, what they think is reason for the fall of Heng – the empire before Xing. He made a self imposed rule to read only five essays per day and such he sighed in relief when he finished reading the last one, looking at the clock revealed he took more time than planned, so much for wanting some rest.

Ling fished through the letters and stopped when his eyes scanned the name 'Leibo', he stood there, dazed, he haven't seen him since two years ago, on Fu's burial. When Ling had the time to go pay respects for his former guardian the ritual had already finished and everyone returned home, and the only person there was Leibo, making a flower crown whilst talking to his grandfather like a lost child. After that day Lanfan refused to talk to him, and he still doesn't know the details.

"Long time no see, how long has it been? Two years? Sorry for not writing, your grandfather Lord Yao Cheng gave me permission to write only today so."
While I'm locked here in Gushan Tower I reminisces the past, the days we, Lanfan and Yongji played when we had the time. Remember how we used to play demon tag? Sometimes grandpa would play the devil. Good times.

On another note, how is my father doing? Does he talk about me? Does he even care?

Ling closed the letter and took time to concentrate, feeling something weighting him down, he needs to write him back, anything to help with Leibo's inferiority complex, he also needs to reassure him that yes, Yufan loves him. He needs to ask Lanfan on what happened that day, Ling has a guess – he may have been disrespectful towards Fu on his funeral, why else grandpa would lock him? - but it never hurts to confirm your claims.

The door opened revealing none other than Feng, he wanted to joke about his predicament of yesterday but his eyes killed any will to do so.

"Ling." Feng pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to calm himself, this is bad. "Look, I have bad news." So what? He's Emperor he's used to that by now.

"It can't be something I can't handle." He pointed and moved to another letter, Xiong's.

"I'm not kidding Ling." He said it gravely and now he paid proper attention, Feng barely uses this tone of voice, Ling felt as if time stopped as his trepidation took over. Feng's eyebrows were tilted upwards, and now he doesn't know if it's an act of sympathy or the news is too much to even him. A myriad of scenarios played in his head, did something happened to Greed? Grandpa? There are too many variables.

Feng gave a deep breath. "Your mom was kidnapped."
"The pose you're now is called 'seiza'." Greed was sitting on his heels trying his hardest to not show the discomfort on his legs, his back and shoulders were starting to ache too, it has been a long time since he sat with a proper posture and now it came back to bite him in the ass. Five minutes in and his body is already giving up. "Usually foreigners have some leeway and are allowed to sit cross-legged, but you'll be a member of the court so it's best to avoid scrutiny." Even maintaining a straight face is difficult, Zhou Ren walked behind him, a stick in his hand.

His teacher looked over his shoulder. "This is good for now, you can rest." Greed sighed in relief and laid down on the floor, hissing in pain once he touched the cold surface, the skin on his legs are prickling and he should shake them to let the blood flow, but the feet joint is hurting like a bitch. "Now on the hierarchy of Xing."

"I think I should've learned this first." Zhou Ren scowled, feeling affronted to be told what to do by his pupil.

"But I think you should've learned manners first." He reasoned, slapping Greed with his stick. "Since apparently that's still lacking." The ex-homunculus rubbed his elbow, he hit there on purpose, to hurt, what a stick in the mud. Ren displayed a large paper with a diagram, showing the structure of the govern.

"First we have the Emperor, he holds absolute power. Next come the Regent, which happens to be also his mother, Empress Dowager Yao, and his Grand Tutor, our former emperor's predecessor, Emperor Kuanzhi, but now we refer to him as Lord Xing, you ought to remember that."

"He was an emperor?"

"Yes, Emperor Changwu forced his own father to abdicate, now he's the Duke of An and Grand Tutor." So that's the Grand Tutor people were talking about, the one Ling seeks advice on how to proceed with things, in a sense, the man behind the man.

Sounds eerily familiar.
"What a Grand Tutor does?"

"He advises future emperors, but the Duke of An is more of a Chancellor in every practical sense, he's good in his job, convinced the Xue and Xia to comply with Hongzi's orders and exile their princesses. They both are clans you don't want as your enemies, the Xue are a strong military clan and the Xia controls the southwestern commerce." Greed hummed, he remembers Lanhua complaining about her gramps ditching her for the Emperor, he remembers how livid she was and how much she hates Ling.

She really was a spoiled brat wasn't she?

Also Lord Xia's decision was a sound one, no matter how much he love his granddaughter he can't simply cut the commerce with his own country – which is a fucking monster – because of sibling rivalry.

Greed glanced over the hanzi below what he presumes is 'Empress Dowager' and pointed at them. "Who are these?"

"The Censorate, they roam the country collecting information for His Majesty-"

"Uncle!" Xiong all but slammed the door. "We have problems!"

"What's the matter?"

"Lady Ruan was considered innocent, so grandpa locked himself in his room!" An eerie quietness engulfed the room, Greed faced his teacher and all color escaped his face, then, like thunder, he slammed the floor, waking both youths from their stupor.
"Where's the courtier's testimony?! The colleague of the one who poisoned the tea? We can show it to His Majesty!"

"If Ling doesn't reopen the case there's no point in showing it to him!" Xiong cried out. The commotion bought the others residents of the house, accompanied of Ding Mi. They all, including Xiong, entered what is usually the dining room. Judging by Yuan's expression they already know the news.

"Actually my Lord, if we show the letter to His Majesty he'll have no choice but to reopen the case, the rest will be the job of the Censorate to confirm the legitimacy of the letter." Ding Mi corrected and silence settled once more, Ran mouthed an 'oh', seemingly coming with an idea but stopped short, as if coming to the conclusion that whatever was her plan, it was hardly helpful.

"Xiong my son," Yuan called and he met his mother's gaze. "Call you father, give him permission to show that letter, she's going to jail, one way or another."

"But we must give justice to cousin Liang!" She raised her hand, what she said was final and her expression showed that.

"Just do it." He was reluctant but excused himself out of the room nonetheless, Greed and Ran watched as he exited the dining room. "Greed, you're dismissed."

Ran decided to follow him back to his dorm, they stayed in the living room while an awkward silence stood between them. Gramps is feeling unjustified right now that his grandson's murdered got away, and again Greed is feeling like he should do something for him, for them. He faced Ran, who was sheepishly playing with her hands, and then faced the phone behind him, Greed went to reach for the phone but stopped abruptly, like a string was pulling him.

He is hesitating, just like when grandpa shared his pains, Greed won't deny that sometimes he feels out of place here, and that is the feeling he's blaming right now for his incompetence, he knows how much this sucks, he knows how it feels to see the person who destroyed your life to go on
with theirs untouched. Greed clenched his teeth, cursing himself for being such a coward.

"You know I was about to suggest my brother to convince either His Majesty or Master Feng to reopen the case, but it felt wrong, to abuse your contacts like this, people would start thinking bad things about Xiong." But isn't it what you do with contacts?

"Say, what is the content of that letter?"

"Hongzi's in danger." He turned to face Ran, his anger clear in his features.

"Why something this important is only brought up now?" She raised her hands, as if to stop him, and muttered a 'I can explain'.

"If we showed it too soon she could have discovered and flee. But with things going as planned there's nothing for her to fear, now with Lady Ruan on the palace there's no way to flee once His Majesty knows the contents of her letter." This calmed him, if only because it made sense, he grinned, followed by a brief, malicious snicker.

"Let's bring justice to your cousin." Greed had already got on his feet and grabbed the phone, Ran eyes widened in realization.

"Are you sure this is okay? Your reputation will sink if people discovers you're abusing you relationship with His Majesty." Even she if tried to dissuade him a smile tugged on her lips, this was indication enough that she was thankful for his action.

"Ran, you can't lose what you don't have." He grinned and the girl giggled. "Tell your mom to send the letter to His Majesty. A week, in a week we'll bring justice to your cousin."
"Such disgrace can be only purged with death!" Yufan was kowtowing before him, Ling was furious, he's the man his mother entrusted her life with, the man who sacrificed an eye for him, he can't believed Yufan failed to save his mom, and yet, Ling can't bring himself to hate him.

"I agree!" One of his officials said. "How could the Commandant of the Guards fail in such simple task! You compromised our Empire Yufan!"

"You must decide his fate Your Majesty." Lord Xing reminded him, he's certain Lanfan is looking at him now, pleading with her eyes to spare him. "I agree with most of the court – with the commandant himself – with the Empress in the hands of the rebels they have the upper hand, this is a slide we can't simply ignore." His world was spinning and his body felt numb, everything was falling apart and he doesn't know what to do. Ling's mind was everywhere, trying to seek answers and just a hair from shutting down, so he nodded in response to Lord Xing.

"First things first." Grand Judge Zifa butted in. "We must know what happened, Yufan if you please."

"Our Empress wanted to talk to Mistress Ruan. She stopped midway through, she heard someone talking with Ruan. When I noticed her body language I sent my men to check and followed behind." He recounted while his eyes where cast down on the floor in shame, the whole incident took a toll on his pride as her personal bodyguard. Yufan looked so weak and hopeless, it pained Ling to see.

By the way Yufan talked, it was implicit that there was more, it didn't stop the General of the Chariots from voicing his opinion. "And yet you failed to protect her? How can you call yourself her personal guard?"

"General Kui, wait till the Captain finishes his testimony."
"I killed the assassin threatening Her Imperial Highness, but more assassins came and some fled. When My Lady saw the assassins fleeing she ordered me to go after them and ignore her, I had to withdraw from the fight." Ling nodded, feeling a semblance of order in his tumultuous mind, so his mom sacrificed herself to save someone, sounds like her. This doesn't mean the news is less hurtful, their guardians should've been able to save her.

"Yufan look at me," His childhood guard shifted to a seiza position as he looked up. "from your testimony I presume My Royal Mother wasn't the target. So I must ask you, who was?"

"The Imperial Clerk Ding Guizhang." Silence fell on the room and his officers changed glances. Hongzi stopped breathing from the shock, only recovering when his cousin put a hand above his to stop his trembling – that he noticed just now.

"That's Xiong's father isn't it?" Feng queried, the emperor nodded – it was the only thing he could do – his body stopped while his brain tried to process the information, someone is after the Zhou, but who?

They heard steps into the room and none other than Yue made her way to the throne, her assistants had a phone on a tray and Ling stared at the thing quizzically. He prayed to heaven that his grandfather hasn't found out his favorite daughter is missing.

"Your Majesty." She bowed. "This subject have a call from your dear friend." Greed? He doesn't have a time for him, Hongzi waved his hand dismissively but his Imperial Secretary stood her ground, she was frowning and nodded to the phone.

"Greed?"

"Oh, so you picked, good. Do you have any news for me?" He can feel his smirk and he's not in the mood for this.

"If this isn't important I'll hang up, I'm in the middle of an important council, our talk can wait."
Greed snickered on the other side and this puzzled Ling, Greed is up to something, he knows it. "What do you want?"

"Like I said, I want news." There was a pause. "No, wait, I have news. Let's play a game shall we? There's a rat in your house, can you find it?" After some silence he resumed his talk. "On second thought this can be quite hard, I want to give you a hint."

"Go straight to the point." He snapped waspishly, first thing he'll do when Greed comes back is smack him in the face. His officials were puzzled by this turn of events, exchanging with themselves their own share of theories.

"A bow and two legs. Can you find the rat? Oh, and one more thing, reopen that case, you know the one." He hanged the phone. A hanzi? Does he know why Guizhang is being targeted, so soon? Greed's charisma is a weapon, he'll give him that. Still it's quite an achievement to charm an entire house in little more than two weeks.

Imagine him in a court.

"Yue." His secretary bent her waist to get to his level. "A bow and two legs. What hanzi is formed out of these radicals?" She brushed her lips, trying to solve that idiot's puzzle, Feng bent too, curious about what Greed told him and Ling made the same question to him, he is a sleuth, so he may come with an answer faster than Yue will.

"Two and legs is the hanzi for the Yuan clan." Lord Xing intruded, and Ling's grateful for it, that's one piece down.

"But with the added bow it becomes..." Yue trailed off, then she faced him. "Ruan."

"Bring Ding Guizhang here immediately!" She ducked her head and walked out of the room. It took more than his patience could take for his secretary to return with the requested clerk, but when they did, Guizhang had in his hands a letter, he handed the paper to Yue and kowtowed. The
Imperial Secretary climbed the stairs and handed the letter ceremoniously with both hands. As Ling read the letter he felt as if someone had poured freezing water on him, he noticed in the corner of his eyes that both Feng and his grandfather were reading with him, they looked as incredulous as he was.

"Guizhang is this true!?!" His tutor inquired, the clerk bowed in respect before answering.

"You can check her seal if you're doubtful my Lord, my son’s men intercepted the letter from a Ruan messenger."

"What is written on the letter?" His judge asked, as lost as the rest of the court.

"Mistress Ruan conspired with the Zhao to enter in the palace as an informant, she lied about her predicament, to abuse His Majesty's benevolence." Feng explained as he was too dazed to do anything. Ling was so livid he was shaking, she lied to him, she actually had the guts to deceive him. The worst of it all is that his mother was captured because of this. His mom sacrificed herself to indirectly protect him, someone could have shot him and it would hurt less.

"And what that stupid brat was thinking? Concealing such important information? Does he know he was endangering The Son of Heaven?" Master Changmi complained, clearly outraged at the supposed carelessness of the future Zhou Lord.

"If you paid attention to his plan it's actually brilliant, Master Changmi." Feng talked in his defense. "Now that she's here, there's no place to escape."

"So, what we're going to do now, You Majesty?" Zifa asked, with this added information he knows Yufan's trial will be delayed, now they need to focus on Ruan, because this is a more pressing matter.

"Zifa, I want you to reopen a case, you know which one." She kowtowed and excused herself. He still remembers, the day he met her formally, how she had confided in him that if there is one thing
she hates, is straying from her ideals as a law official. How she had to gloss over certain crimes or turned the blame to innocent people, consequently killing them because that was the will of the Emperor. He still remembers how she had, has, hope that Ling will be a righteous and just Emperor unlike his father.

Because he had a tendency to overlook the flaws of the people he favored, even going as far as cover them, that is one of the reasons Ling thinks so low of his father as a person and ruler.

"What we do with Yufan?" Lord Xing asked him more privately, he wants to deal with a thing at a time, also.

"He's member of the guardians of Yao, this is a Yao business as much as it is an imperial one. Yue, call Lord Yao, he's to bring his council, we'll do a joint trial. But first." He waved his hand, beckoning his secretary. "Mark a private council with Lord Yao." She nodded and disappeared, when she did so he dismissed his court.

---------------

"Lanfan, you can spend your day with your father, I won't judge."

"My Lord, I-" He turned to face her, clasping his hands on her shoulders, she looks as sheepish as ever.

"Do it, I don't know if grandpa will pardon him or not."

"What about you?"

"I took your grandfather from you, I will not take your father too," her eyes were shining with
gratitude and this drew a smile from him, a genuine one. "And besides, he did what mom told him to do. I don't know what mom will do to me if she discovers I executed Yufan for following her orders, nor I want to find out." He tried to brighten the mood, with little success. This is an argument in his defense, he'll not lie, but just to be sure he'll have to consult Feng, he's way more acknowledged in law and more impartial than he is. His bluntness is good for once.

"I'm worried about father, but what about you, Your Majesty? You must be distressed." He dropped his façade, there's no use in lying to Lanfan. "With everything that happened so far." She added in the end, he looked down, trying his hardest to push his anger to the corners of his mind. Ling still can't believe he was exploited like this, if Ruan Ying's betrayal wasn't enough. If it wasn't plainly tyrannical to do so he would hunt all of them down and cut their heads like the traitors they are.

It's in times like this that he wants Greed back. He would calm him, or feed into his homicidal thoughts, one or the other.

Lanfan left them so he turned his attention to Yongji. "Tell Master Changmi that I want a full serving of puddings," She nodded and turned her back to him, but he clasped her shoulder before she could left. "And bring Mei with you to the garden."

They found Ling on the land pavilion, as beautiful and exotic as the lake pavilion is it doesn't have all these colorful trees surrounding it. The place was littered with cushions like he requested, all of them with different, bright colors, anything to improve his mood. Ling have changed clothes before coming to the garden, just a plain slipper and harem pants and the changshan he ordered recently.

"I saw Grand Judge Zifa on the library, did something happen? Only that the entire court is erratic." Mei sat on a cushion, he still can't believe she's almost his height now. Yongji sat down as well, now only the dessert is missing.

Ling rubbed his arm in discomfort, not sure he is adequately recovered to confide in Mei, he eyed Yongji, hoping to pass the message to her, She stared for a while before nodding and facing Mei instead.

"The case of Prince Zhou's murder will be reopened," Mei smiled from ear to ear, it's astonishing
how loved his older brother was, from the praises he used to hear in his youth from the things he hears even today, it's enough to make Ling jealous. "And Her Imperial Highness was kidnapped, Lady Ruan is involved and the court wants to execute Yufan." Her smile dropped and she immediately faced Ling with worry in her eyes, he nodded to confirm.

"This is terrible! So this is why Lanfan isn't here." She concluded, then faced her half-brother. "How are you feeling?"

"Awful."

Food arrived short after and to his surprise it wasn't only his request sweet that was brought up, aside from the creme caramel Greed "taught" his cooks, there was a green tea variant, along with the southern doufuhua and Nanjian's – Mei's hometown – specialty: coconut pudding, needless to say her eyes (and Xiaomei's) sparkled at the sight of said nostalgic sweet, they brought other snacks too, all amestrian, and tea to follow. It was a pleasant surprise and he must thank Changmi for this, from all of his officials she's probably the most acquainted to him, so she must have come with the idea to comfort him with all kinds of sweets. It worked.

They were halfway through their "meal" when something came to Ling's mind. "Mei, how was the Zhou Prince?"

"He was the only Prince I considered my brother, Liang always protected me from our older siblings and he didn't have prejudice against no names or fallen clans. I remember he was very charismatic and studious, I'm sure he had some flaws, although I always felt that he was what our father should've been." Ling hummed "What about you, do you have any Prince you considered family?"

"Princess Han, she visited me everyday in the Azure Palace and we played a lot. When things became dangerous on the harem her mother decided to flee just like mine, unfortunately they didn't had the same luck we had." It is such a bitter memory, the news of her death, Ling still remembers how devastated he was, and even today it always felt so unfair. The Han are a fairly powerful clan, more powerful than the Yao, that's for sure, but she had no real chance at the throne. If anything her death was likely due to pettiness and this is what stings the most.
This is getting to sober, and the tightening in his chest is what he's attributing this need to change the subject. "You weren't able to see Al off, did he send you a letter?" Mei sipped on her tea and the way she smiled answered his question. Yongji eyed Mei, puzzled, then faced him.

"Al?"

"A boy my age, about Greed's height, golden hair and eyes."

"Very, very handsome." Mei added. His guard raised an eyebrow at this commentary and reflected on her tea.

"That boy Lord Cheng wanted to promise to your cousin Lady Mixi?" Ling nodded, trying his hardest to conceal his smile, made even harder by Mei's angry pout. He apparently failed, because the next thing she did was smack him in the head.

"Ow!" He placed a hand on the bruise, but now he's laughing.

"This is not funny!"

"It is." Yongji affirmed, obscuring her smile with her palm, she's second from laughing too. Mei returned to her seat, arms crossed and fuming, her panda just as irritated as she is.

"I want to see someone offering your boyfriends to someone else."

"We need to have a boyfriend first." This dropped the subject and Mei returned to her tea.
'I still can't believe he parted so early, we barely had time for ourselves." She whined to her cup, Ling stopped midway from sipping his when she said that. He placed his cup on the table, facing his sister deadpan.

"Al stayed here for *six months.*"

"And in these six months he wanted to learn waidanshu and mostly that." She paused to finish her pudding. "Just because I wanted to be with him for the Lantern Festival. What if he's out for a year? I want to celebrate the Double Seven Festival with him too, last year rained so we had to stay indoors."

"Rained? That was a downpour!" Yongji corrected.

"And nothing stopped you two from "celebrating"." Ling said the last part suggestively, raising an eyebrow. Mei's face reddened in embarrassment as she realized what he's implying whereas Ling and Yongji proceeded to laugh at her expense. He didn't even noticed the particularly heavy cushion being shuffled at him, and in consequence he fell on the floor.

Yongji was hysterical.

----------------

"Enter." He heard Feng's permission after a servant knocked for him, the same person opened the door and let him in, bowing all the while. An ornamented screen placed between the door and his desk partially blocked his view of his cousin, who was deep into his readings, this time a letter, Ling managed to caught sight of the black satin ribbon, accompanied by a begonia pin.

Wait.
"Am I interrupting something?" He thought Feng was joking yesterday, he even used sarcasm, don’t tell him they fought? He wouldn’t be surprise, it’s Feng they’re talking about, when he isn’t tired he is an asshole.

"I wouldn't tell you to enter if that was the case." He was smiling and carefully opened a wooden box sitting alongside the tossed ribbon, Feng grabbed the thing carefully, almost reverently and showed it to him. "Isn't it beautiful? It's from Xiong." He chirped, then followed by opening the iron fan, clearly meant for fighting, the accessory has fine metalwork and the drawings engraved on it are beautifully done. The art on the sturdy paper is ink painting, a plum tree near a waterfall. It's custom made for Feng and he doubts this fan is a friend's gift.

"Xiuying knows?" Feng tsked and put away his fan.

"Of course she does, wouldn't even be doing this without her consent."

"So she let you have your affairs and you tell her to sod off?" Ling teased, Feng threw him an annoyed glance before putting away his things. Makes sense, it's nine already. The future Yao lord returned to his chair by the desk, he's having none of Ling's teasing.

"I told her 'nothing is keeping you from pursuing your dream'. Not my fault if she wants to read some nonexistent subtext." He complained. Ling crossed his arms, Feng could be so stubborn when he wanted, this or a lack of self-awareness, Xiuying isn't the first nor will she be the last person he hurt with his bluntness.

"You know she misunderstood your intentions because of your snark, you should apologize." His cousin gestured at a chair nearby and Ling rested on it, their conversation won't be long, he hopes, he still have things he wants to do before going to bed, it's just that the young emperor can't see himself sleeping without first making sure that Yufan won't be executed.

Feng leaned himself on his desk, looking down to contemplate on what he just said. "I really should." That settles their disagreement. Still, it's quite amusing how putting Feng and Xiong in the same regiment two years ago would result in this development. Grandpa would be hysterical if he knew.
"To think you went through with what grandpa suggested."

"Well, it turned out he was handsome." His cousin shrugged in resignation, that much is true. Feng propped his jaw on a closed knuckle. "Though I must confess grandpa has a good taste for men. We do have the same taste as him, of course that would happen."

"We?" Feng grinned, that same cheeky, self-righteous grin he does when he one ups him.

"Yes Your Majesty, we, don't think I didn't know about your "friend's" last day in Zhongjian." Feng turned to face Ling better, hands clasped on each other. He changed his voice to be as close to his as possible, and then, in a mock-innocent tone. "It's his last day here, so let me dine alone with him in the most romantic place this palace has to offer and then bring him to my room. I'm surprised you're a still virgin after that." His last words flared a chill down his spine, Ling opened his mouth to defend himself, to tell how absurd everything he said was, but the only thing he could do was keep his mouth gaped, since words had stuck in his throat. Feng smiled at him, a smile that said 'gotcha'. He's heating in embarrassment, he's blushing, he knows it. It's karma for teasing Mei, no doubt. "You're not here to talk about my affairs are you?"

Good, a more comfortable topic.

"About Yufan."

"He did what your mother told him to do. He won't be executed, that's for sure. He'll more likely be demoted and if the court decides to physically punish him, and let's be honest, they will, you can decide you want Yufan to be lashed or beaten with the bamboo stick." He'd rather go for the bamboo stick, it's less painful from what he read. Something Ling can't ignore is the possibility that the court will want both punishments, like they did with Greed.

"There's another thing I want to ask of you. Since you're intimate with Xiong, try to convince him to spill everything he knows about this alliance between Lady Ruan and the Zhao clan."
Feng agreed with his request and Ling bid him goodnight, he had to hurry his steps to reach the Heavenly Apartment in time, he’s late for his bath, and more importantly, his supper. There’s another thing he want to do before this day ends.

Ling had his supper delivered in his study, a small assortment of light, vegetarian dishes. He left the rice noodle soup for last and after he finished it the young emperor went to his phone, Greed's letter has his number attached and as much as he was angry at his soulmate – it wasn't misguided, that idiot was getting on his nerves – he did help and he must thank him for it.

"Greed?"

"Oh, hey. Now that's a sweet surprise, finally realized you can't live without my sexy voice?"

"Says the one who tries to call me everyday." He said with a light sarcasm thrown in, he decided he'd need more than tea to help calm him tonight, and usually bickering with Greed does the job. "I just wanted to thank you, for earlier today."

"Talking about earlier you were very stressed, something happened?"

"You have no idea, I'm calling right now just to see if I can steady myself enough to sleep."

"Let me guess, your butthurt subjects had gone too far." If only. "About the information I've sent you, that woman is going to be punished right?" It wasn't intended, but the mere mention of Lady Ruan brought back an anger that shook his very core. He hates treason with a passion, but that woman managed to outdo everything his brothers did until now, not only she deceived him, his mom is at the hands of the people who once tried to kill her thanks to that bitch. Feeling homicidal again. "Ling?"
"Yes." He tried to control his anger, fuming right now won't be of any help. "I want to sentence her with the worst punishment."

"This sounds oddly sadistic. Something happened?" And when he took too long to answer. "Ling, you know I'll be here for you, you can confide in me."

"Mom was kidnapped, no, Greed, wait, let me finish." His voice was a hair from breaking, this is the last thing he wants happening today, he doesn't want to embarrass himself in case a servant decides to walk by. "It's all thanks to that bitch! I, I feel like an idiot for believing her! I'm angry and I'm lost and I feel like a fool, if it's me paying for my own idiocy it's alright but...do you know how I feel?" Greed only said 'yes' on the other side, yet it felt like he said a lot. "We'll have to plan a rescue mission, that is if she's still alive and my mind keep coming back to this possibility as much as I don't want to acknowledge it." His voice finally broke, and he hates himself for that. "I'm so afraid Greed, I wish you were here with me." He opened up, and as much as he hated to show his weaknesses, it felt good, it felt good to voice his fears to Greed.

"If you want I can return to the palace, it'll delay the training but if it's for you I'd be more than glad. What do you say?" He felt his heart stop for a split second and then beat with enough strength to hurt his chest.

"No, I don't want you to stop your training."

"Li-" he gave an exasperated sigh. "Are you sure?" Greed asked with maybe more aggressiveness than the act required.

"Yes. I, I have my other friends here with me." So why he wants Greed the most?

"So I'll be calling you everyday to make sure you're alright. You know how I am, wanting my things in top notch." He said, his bravado palpable in his voice, this managed to humor him somewhat. Then his voice shifted to a softer tone. "In all seriousness, you're my most precious friend, don't want to see you suffering. So, tomorrow, at this same time."
"Yes. Thank you Greed, thank you very much."

"No problem partner."

-------------------

"I can talk with the clans neighboring Bai province to see if they will lend their help." His tutor suggested and Ling nodded, lost in thoughts on his conversations with Greed, today will be the third day they're talking in a row. Greed is fond of him, that much he noticed, or better yet, is zealous of his well being, all of his friends are, and they've been nothing but comforting. He's glad to have people like them by his side.

"I don't think you're in the right disposition for today Hongzi, you should rest."

"But you yourself said that an Emperor must act like an example to his people, if he isn't willing to work why should his people?" Lord Xing sighed inwardly,

"I admire your conviction lad, but an Emperor is no good for their people if they're incapacitated. You should rest."

"I'm not made of glass." He rebutted.

"Hongzi-" Whatever his grandfather wanted to tell him goes unsaid, as he stopped abruptly when the Internuncio entered the throne room, bowing in respect once to Lord Xing and then kowtowing to His Majesty. She stood on her knees, one hand clasped in front of the other.

"The Yao council has arrived!"
The plot thickens (finally), and if you're wondering if any of the festivals Mei mentioned will appear I tell you: of course, they'll be great for a romantic chapter. But first they must realize they love each other. :B

I had so much trouble deciding if I wanted Yufan as Lanfan's father or uncle, I was already sure that he was Fu's son and Leibo's dad, but not his relation to Lanfan, my sister picked dad so dad it is.

About the Xia: how come in chapter 2 Ling and Lanfan get suspicious of Greed when Feng mentions he worked for Lord Xia but now I say they're actually allies? They didn't want at first, and the Xia are that kind of ally you must keep an eye 24/7. It's just like what Ren and Greed said, Lord Xing convinced them and Lord Xia didn't want to lose commerce with his own country, being a clan dependable of trade.

Also if you guys happen to read the previous chapters and see that I changed Yufan's title from 'Captain of the Imperial Guards' to 'Commandant of the Guards', it's because this is the right title (I changed others too, like 'Master of the Household' became 'Household Counsellor'), oh, I finally discovered how to refer to an Empress Dowager, as you can see.

As always feedback is appreciated. :3
Onto a New Chapter

Chapter Summary

Greed finally starts the hardest part of his training. The trials of Yufan and Lady Ruan are finished.

Chapter Notes

Took a while because I was drawing chibis of the Zhou clan. Forgive me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How could you fail on your only job? You’re a shame to your father Yufan.” His grandfather’s chancellor admonished, it has been so long, he doesn’t remember his name right now, but he knows for a fact he’s one of the first generals from grandpa’s army.

“To his father? To the whole Guardians of Yao, who knows what the Zhao are doing to our dear Lady Linyu right now! Your man failed in their task, hope you’re ready to be punished.” Now it was Yongji’s grandmother’s – Qiu – turn to give a piece of her mind, she’s the leader of the Tiger branch of their guardians (who focus on power), with Yufan being the leader of the Leopard branch (whose focus is speed).

Ling is facing his grandpa with their places swapped from that day he admitted Yongji as his personal guard. The Yao council consists of Lord Yao’s most trusted generals and other officers, they’re seated on the sidelines as Yufan and his men are on the center. Ling looked over his shoulder to see Lanfan and, surprisingly, Leibo, fliching at every insult throw at their father. In these two years Leibo changed, he’s more handsome and is resembling the late Fu in his young days. Lord Yao didn’t bother to seat in seiza, unlike his council, he had both his arms and legs crossed, his eyes shut as he listens attentively. Have he mentioned how this is another family quirk? Apparently his entire family hate their eyes.

“I believe Yufan has heard enough.” His grandfather has finally stepped in. “So, my lads, are you going to tell me why you failed to save my precious daughter? I’ll warn however, if I find the reason to be utterly stupid I’ll be inclined to off your master.” He opened an eye and it sent chill down the spines of Yufan’s men, not only them, Ling felt it from across the room. One of Yufan’s subordinates bowed to Lord Cheng before making the hold fist salute.

“We were tracking the traitorous Zhao when a mounted rifle unit ambushed us.” The girl was
subtly shaking, if it is because of his grandfather’s anger or her master’s life on her shoulders, Ling is unsure. Still the mention of a mounted rifle ambush made his face contort in pain, this is not a type of unit you want to play with, he learned it in the worst way.

“Of course this wasn’t enough to stop you.” He heard a disgruntled sound from Yongji behind him, the one who spoke such insensitivity was Lord Cheng’s secretary.

“No guardian can keep up with a cavalry, I know this better than anyone.” Yongji defended her fellow bodyguards and Ling could see Lady Qiu’s saddened expression while his grandpa tilted his eyebrows in sympathy for the girl. As for Ling he felt a strong pang in his chest followed by a chill in his body, suddenly hearing with clarity the cry of horses and the beat of drums, and the Fire, and the temple falling apart as it was engulfed by flames. He gasping for air as Taocai lifted him out of the building, him falling down the stairs as blood gushed forth from his guardian’s wound and Yongji’s desperate cry-

Lanfan placed the cold automail hand on his and it brought him back to the private room.

“Never underestimate the power of a cavalry Qiang.” His secretary apologized to Yongji’s present family. “You can continue.”

“We had to retreat after some of us fell, and then we felt the presence of more soldiers. Since the kidnappers seemed as surprised as us, I believe they didn’t expect this additional help.”

“There’s a second clan involved?” His grandfather’s adviser queried, it makes sense, the Zhao are allied to the Yin and Shuang hates him.

“We’ll decide the rest with His Majesty’s court.” Lord Yao concluded. “Yufan, due to circumstances I’ve elected to spare you of physical punishments, but I’ll demand your demotion. A failure is still a failure, hope you understand.”

Yufan kowtowed. "This lesser official thanks you for your kindness my Lord." Grandpa decided to not punish his subordinates, this is good. Ling was sincerely afraid that he would lash on them because of mom’s fate.

Now to the joint trial.
"This meeting has ended." Hongzi announced. "Now we'll start the joint trial with the Imperial Court." They all got on their feet, some easier than others, and turned to leave, leaving only Ling, Lanfan, Yongji, and Leibo.

Lanfan stared at her brother with unreadable eyes and he returned the gesture. "What are you doing here?" He gave a nonchalant shrug.

"Our Great Master thought that maybe our father would be executed, so he gave me a chance to spend his last days with him. Fortunately that didn't happen, wouldn't you agree sister-mine?" She remained stoic, which not only made Leibo sigh, but made Ling even more curious to what happened in Fu's burial. "I regret what I did sister, you were right, what I did was selfish, can't you forgive me?" She turned away from him to think, and Ling could see a semblance of a smirk in her lips, good, things are returning to normal.

"Only if you best me in a game."

Yongji was all but bouncing on her feet. "We can make it boys versus girls." She proposed and Ling grabbed her by the shoulder, locking her head once she was close.

"Why?"

"Because Your Majesty need to take his mind off sings, if just for an hour."

"Then I choose an aiming game." Leibo proposed, puffing his chest in pride.

"You learned how to hurl a kunai?" Lanfan asked, unconvinced. Oh yes, he forgot how much Leibo sucked at being a guardian. Leibo immediately dropped his bravado and avoided her glance. Lanfan gaped her mouth in disbelief, virtually glaring. "You still don't know how to do that?"

"It's not as simple as you make it sound!" He tried to defend himself.

"Yes it is." Yongji commented innocently and this left Leibo facing both girls bemused.

"You guys stink, I was better off in that tower."
"I can tell my grandpa that." Ling teased and Leibo all but jumped, making them laugh. Leibo was pouting and Ling laughed so hard his voice didn't come out, but when his laughter died off. "We better go before Yue comes here and grab me by the ears. Mom really taught her how to handle me."

With that he went to the Throne Room, the three guards in toll. When Ling arrived all members of his court plus the Yao council were present, Lord Xing and Yue were once more by his side. Hongzi sat on the throne, praying to any God who will listen that this trial goes smoothly.

"We'll begin the joint trial of the Commandant of the Guards. Zifa." His judge kowtowed and members of the Great Court walked behind her, offering a folder and later kowtowing in respect to the Emperor.

"The Commandant did as ordered by Her Royal Highness, so he is exempt from charges of disobedience, execution is out of question." They exchanged glances and Ling nodded. The Great Court has the final say in all judicial cases, now that Zifa said this, the chances of his court suggesting execution are practically nonexistent. "This subject requests Lord Yao's input, since he is the Commandant's Master."

"I request his demotion to a simple guard and few weeks in prison, nothing more."

"With all honesty Your Majesty." Lord Xing interrupted and Ling turned to his direction. "We can't simply let this go like this-"

"They were facing a reinforced ambush unit, you want to punish soldiers for losing a hopeless battle? This is bordering on tyrannical my Lord." His grandfather mocked, the disdain in his tone and eyes were clear and right now Ling remembered how much he resented the previous emperor because of his older sister among other things. Sometimes it is off putting to know they're in-laws.

"I didn't know of this detail, if you want to enlighten the court, feel free to do so." He can feel the hurt pride in his voice, if they continue like this they'll start with the passive aggressive comments and the rest of the court will take sides and then the shitstorm will start and his head is not ready for this.

"The unit responsible to rescue my Royal Mother was ambushed by a mounted rifle unit." Ling decided to take action and answer instead, he's the ruler here, he needs to maintain order. It's what his mom would want. "They were reinforced by an ally army." His tutor was facing him, ignoring
completely his grandpa. Honestly they're about four times his age but act like preteens for crying out loud.

"I'll keep my first stance, a few days in prison is too light a punishment. Our Regent and Royal Mother is a hostage now, the power balance is tilted to their side, we can't simply ignore this."

"Does anyone agree with Lord Xing?"

"Your Majesty." His Chief Clerk called and Hongzi acknowledged him. "I'll side with His Excellency Lord Xing, even if the Special Corps were ambushed, it was an oversight of the Commandant to not consider that the kidnappers had reinforcements waiting for them." He has a point.

"Did you ignore the information His Majesty gave? He explicitly said a second army helped them." The Chancellor of Wa all but bristled, acting like his Chief Clerk was retarded. Half an our ago he was chewing Yufan out, but now that Lord Cheng pardoned him he’s defending the Commandant. Go figure.

"We don't know the size of that army, for all we know it could be a mere militia." His Minister of the Privy Treasury defended his Chief Clerk. "I suggest a corporal punishment for Master Yufan, eighty lashes on the back and fifty strokes of the bamboo stick." Part of the court tensed at such suggestion, Ling included. That’s too harsh for Yufan but his minister seems unaware of it. He is, however, very aware of how this affected the Yao council.

"Are you out of your mind? This is the kind of punishments to disobedient soldiers and bandits, last time I checked Yufan isn't either of those, unless you want to prove me wrong?" Lord Yao asked with clear intentions of it not being answered, all that he wanted was to humiliate his minister, if his patronizing tone was any indication, the man itself lowered his head, mortified. "I'm her father and I'm not suggesting these preposterous things, even our handsome General of the Chariots, who's very fond of my daughter, didn't propose such ridiculousness." He added with a touch of humor in his voice, said general practically glared to Lord Yao, embarrassed, but his grandpa answered by giving him a smug smile. Wait what?

He'd rather live without knowing about his mother's love life.

"All of this doesn't change the fact that Her Royal Highness is a hostage at the moment, do you have any idea how compromising this is?" His Chief Clerk argued. The air in the room was tense and he honestly wished another weirdo invaded the palace, at this point they’re just arguing for the sake of arguing.
"How dare you imply our Great Lord doesn't know such a thing? Have you forgotten the Battle of Hedong? The Conquest of Yata?!” Lady Qiu was livid, ah, the Great East Campaign, everyone in Xing and their grandma knows of these battles, but only a few know of the real sacrifices grandpa had to make to achieve victory. Great grandfather, with then Lady Wu and Xiong’s grandfather, Lord Zhou, made a coalition to conquer the neighboring country of Yata by order of Emperor Kuanzhi. The Battle of Hedong was grandpa’s first real military campaign and he was captured in it. In the enemy camp his wounds were tended by no other than the King of Yata himself, he had to be in one piece if he wanted to bargain for a truce. This is only the beginning of the history but after learning everything from Fu, Ling remembers that he idolized his grandpa when young. Still kind of does.

"Your Majesty should do something to appease both parties and stop this quarrel." His grandfather and tutor suggested. He likes this plan.

"I made a decision." This put all eyes on him. "Yufan will lose his title and be imprisoned for two months. As for corporal punishment, since my court is so vehemently in favor of it, Zifa, I want the lightest one. This trial is over." He could feel Lord Xing staring at him, but Ling's eyes were on his other grandfather, who only looked unfazed.

"We need to discuss a rescue plan. I'll contact the neighboring clans like I suggested."

"I'll do it." The Yao patriarch butted in.

"Beg your pardon?"

"The Han are close to the Zhao and we are allies since days yonder, they also have a bigger influence in the area overall, they'll have an easier job bringing clans to our cause."

"They have the more powerful Yin and Ming clans at their side, the Han is no match for them." Lord Xing countered.

"And we have the Sima and, consequently, the Zhong, and the Wei, we also have the skillful healers of the Chang and the mighty warriors of the Zhou. I fear no Yin or Ming traitors." He back talked, once again he can see the heat in their eyes. "My clan will handle this, we have more experience than anyone in this room. But this isn't my choice, of course, it is His Majesty's."
"I'll concede to your request Lord Yao, I hope to hear good news from you." With this the nightmare is over, now the Censorate just need to prove Lady Ruan's participation in Prince Zhou's death and he can return to his daily routine. According to Feng, Xiong's family have a letter they received from one of Zifa's subordinates, a testimony from a colleague of the servant who poisoned Zhou Liang's tea, that person feared that Emperor Changwu would erase the clue, so the Zhou stayed with it for safekeeping.

Ling knows he needs to stay in the throne room till six o'clock, but not only he wants to stretch his legs, he needs to talk to his grandpa, just so he knows what the hell was passing through his mind that he felt the need to act like such a douche in his court. He found him in the surroundings of the Hall of Tranquility, the apartment his mom lives in which imitates the gate and hall of harmony.

As Ling approached Lord Yao gave him a curt nod. "I want to talk to you." His grandfather looked around, his brows frowning in suspicion before he faced his grandson again, this time with a sincere smile.

"Then it's better if we do so in a more private place." He suggested which prompted Ling to mimic his grandfather and look around. The young emperor brought his elder to his study, very few people enter this room, and even less when he's in it. He offered an armchair to his grandpa while he sat in an opposing one.

"Why you acted the way you did?" Ling had his arms crossed. Cheng stayed still for a second before he spat.

"That man wanted Yufan dead, why? Never liked him and now he gave me another reason to." Cheng complained and rested his back on the backrest, arms crossed, he was fuming, still affected by Yufan's trial.

"I know it was exaggerated, to ask for his execution, that's the reason I asked for your council's input. But can't you keep your emotions in check? I know you can't forgive Lord Xing because of the Great East Campaign and your sister, but please!" Ling tried to reason, hoping his grandfather will listen. He stayed still for a couple seconds after Ling finished talking to move closer to the table, as if he was about to confide to his grandson.

"I don't trust him Ling, that's the thing. Your father named your mother Regent instead of him and he never liked this decision, isn't that enough of a red flag?"

"Father made they distribute powers between themselves when aiding me, he chose the title Grand Tutor, which is fitting. I know where you're coming from grandpa, rest assured, not everyone
would find it wise to put a former monarch in such powerful position, but I don’t think he wants to be Regent."

Cheng nodded and Ling felt relieved. "I agree, he wants to be Emperor again." Then he frowned.

"Can you stop being ridiculous?"

"I'm doing this for your own good Ling. The sooner you stop listening to him and turn Xing into a dynasty the better."

"Why it sounds like you want to manipulate me?"

"Cause I don't want you to marry one girl from each clan, that is a terrible tradition that should be lost in history where it belongs." Cheng sighed, a tired sound that revealed how done he is with this conversation, he let himself rest in the back of the armchair and faced his grandson. "So, that friend of yours, what is his name?" He was smiling but Ling still had that sour taste in his mouth.

"Greed."

"Greed?"

"Or Mu, your pick."

"Then Mu it is. That's a beautiful name, it matches him." That he can agree.

"He told me you were all over him last time."

"I was just admiring him!" He sounded baffled and this got a chuckle out of him. "Can you blame me? He's gorgeous. Which brings me to my other point." Ling frowned in confusion and his grandfather gave him a dirty look, urging him to roll his eyes. He'll talk about either Greed or marriage, he can feel it. "Traveling to another country to become an Emperor and fetching a lover on the way," He nodded, feeling proud of his grandson. His grandfather waved a finger in his direction, smiling cheekily. "no wonder you're postponing your marriage cricket, I'd do that too if Tsuruya had lived."
"Wouldn't he marry one of my grandaunts?" He leered but Ling just shrugged his shoulder in a sassy manner, it's the truth after all. "And Greed is not my lover."

"Aw, but I told our family you were bringing a hot amestrian guy to your bed." He what? Ling wants to beat his grandpa then dig a hole and never come back, this is too embarrassing. He can feel his entire face heat and he doesn't even know what is the worst thing, his family thinking he's having an affair with Greed or his mind agreeing that yes, Greed is hot.

It's a good thing Greed is in Wen right now because he wouldn't be able to look him in the eye after this.

"Talking about family." He started, trying to divert the topic from him. "Well, there's someone having an affair right now." Ling sangsunged and his grandfather scowled, now he knows where mom got that from, he can feel his whole body chill just from that.

"Tell me it's not a woman, I told him he can't have affairs with women because of illegitimate children." Wow, he doesn't need to say the name and grandpa already guessed it was Feng. Eh, who else it could be? And it's not like Feng isn't know for his escapades. He just hopes he doesn't hurt Xiong.

"Let's say your plan of putting Xiong in Feng's regiment that day went very right." All anger melted and instead his eyes widened as Ling's words sunk in, then his grandfather joined his palms in excitement, smiling like a child. It’s astonishing how passionate he is about matchmaking. Bless Fu for enduring it for so long.

"You're serious? This is the best thing I heard all day! That boy, he gives me so much grief and joy. I blame him for my hair turning white so soon." He shook his head but did so with fondness in his eyes, but dropped everything when he looked at Ling again with a telling look, one that showed the teen that he knew his intentions and he didn't buy it. "We're still talking about you though."

-------------------

After the testimony arrived it was only a matter of time for the Censorate to prove the authenticity of the servant's seal, thus proving the authenticity of the letter. Ling had ordered his grandfather to go fetch Lady Ruan, as he was the only one in this palace that she was comfortable with. Still, Lady Ruan abandoning her own clan to work with the Zhao? That's certainly shocking, but does he regret helping her out? To put it simply, no, because there was a chance everything she said was
true.

So now he's in the harem quarters, his wife Empress Yin ruled the place with an iron fist, and that he admired. She must be rolling in her grave now that her successor is that insubordinate brat that only gave her headache.

Quan had a couple of guards with him, you never know, and since things had gone this way, he'll have to inform his clan. He gave a hand signal to his guards and one of them played a tune of their flute, summoning one of his spies. They arrived almost immediately. "Inform my clan that I'll be staying here for a while longer." They bowed, but before they could stand he raised a palm. "Do they know of this turn of events?" His spy nodded. "Good. Now go." They ducked their head and left.

The walk to Lady Ruan's house was short and after a strong knock on the door by one of his guards the mistress answered the door, when she saw him her eyes widened but she quickly recovered and bowed in respect. "My Lord? I, I didn't know you'd come. Do you want to enter?"

He raised a hand. "Thanks My Lady, but that would be unnecessary." She looked puzzled, so he smiled to reassure her. "His Majesty wants to see you."

---------------------

He waited for mistress Ruan on his throne, both letters hid on the sleeve of his hanfu, Ling wants to test her, see if – like Ying – she’ll lie to his face. He is still angry, but this time a newfound one, had she not murdered Prince Zhou, the War of the Princess was likely to never happen – it was only because his father didn’t act upon his assassination that the other clans thought ‘if she can, so can we.’ and the hunting started – and because the war started, his only sister died. So now, to his eyes, she’s responsible for three deaths and a kidnapping.

His grandfather guided Lady Ruan to the center of the throne room, and judging by her face, she already noticed she’s going through a trial. She became restless and Lord Xing put a hand on her shoulder, murmuring something in her ear that made her face the situation with calm.

“I have a question for you, Lady Ruan. What happened in the day my Royal Mother was kidnapped?” She kowtowed and Ling had nothing but disdain for her, his acting on his emotions, he’s fully aware of this, and he knows it’s wrong, but logic be damned.
“Her Royal Highness was walking in the harem quarters when assassins ambushed her, I was watching but I feared for my life and hid in my house. Please forgive me for my cowardice Your Majesty!”

“I have another question.” His voice was as sharp as his eyes and she recoiled. “What is the symbol of the Zhao Clan?” She raised her head again and faced him with confused eyes and he glared in response. “Answer me.” Lady Ruan muttered a ‘sorry Your Majesty’ and bowed.

“A morning glory.”

“I’ll ask again, what happened in the day my Royal Mother was kidnapped?”

“I think she wanted to talk to me, but assassins captured her.”

“What flower is the symbol of the Ruan clan?” She visibly shook and looked at Lord Xing for reassurance, little does she know that for just acting like this she already draw suspicion to her. “Look at me, not to Lord Xing. What flower is the symbol of the Ruan Clan?”

“A…, a pansy.”

Ling took the first letter from his sleeve. “Like this one?” All color drained from her face and he felt a small sense of triumph. “Judging by your face you know this letter. So tell me once more, and now tell me the whole truth, what happened in the day my Royal Mother was kidnapped?” She was going to open her mouth, but he interrupted before any sound could come out. “Careful, depending on how you answer you’ll be buried like a commoner.” Her confusion gave way to a frown, and then to a scowl that was a blink-and-you-miss-it scowl, as she had lowered her gaze, as If coming to terms to her inevitable fate.

“I sided with the Zhao when I discovered that the Sima entered the Qin-Ruan Rebellion, Your Majesty is already aware of my job, but kidnapping your mother was never part of the plan.” She faced him again and her smile was unnerving. “It just happened.” He’s not going to burst in anger, it's what she wants, instead he breathed slowly to calm down and soon lifted from his throne.

“For the compliance in the kidnapping of Empress Yao, the assassination of Prince Zhou and the indirect participation in the assassination of mistress Zhou,” ‘And princess Han’ he thought in the middle of his sentence. “I sentence you to death. You’ll be imprisoned in Zhongjian, where you’ll receive a hundred lashes and eighty strokes. This is the end of your trial.” She looked again at Lord
Xing – Indignant with his participation, as consolation, or in the hopes he would do something to help her, he doesn’t care – and her eyes widened in shock, or perhaps realization, as she faced Hongzi once more.

"Wait..." Two guards walked until they were on her sides, ready to grab her by his command. "Wait! You lied to me!"

“Ironic isn't it.” He raised his hands and guards pushed her through the gates and out of his sight.

That's the last Ling would see of this woman and he's glad for that.

------------------------

This is Greed's first time in the east wing of the Zhou manor, he followed Ran to her room as she offered to help him with neidanshu. Her bedroom is divided in two by shoji doors, this side is her study and it's different from his in that the furniture isn't built-in and it resembles better the furniture encountered in Ling's study. It's less fancy but still similar. He can admire the little touches she gave the place like colorful fabrics and books, probably about waidanshu. There's also photos and knickknacks and he must say, damn this girl likes blue and pink, so unlike the rest of her family who acts like they either wear black or they'll die.

Kinda like his late family.

"Sis have you see- oh there you are." A beat then. "What are you doing in her room?" He can feel the protectiveness in his voice and Ran contained herself from face-palming.

"I'm just teaching Greed neidanshu." The controlled anger in her voice is a thing to behold.

"And if I wanted to do something with Ran I'd do it long ago." This made her blush and earned him a shoulder pad to the head. "Hey!"

"You must be ready for anything." Xiong teased after Greed leered to him. "So I was thinking, with that witch's imminent death and honeybee talking to me again, how about we go out to dine? My treat."
"Can't say no to that."

"Sounds like fun."

"Yup, so I'll hop on the bathroom to have a quick rinse then you two tell me what restaurants you'd like to visit." And with this he left the room, leaving them to process the information given. Five days, that was the amount of days that it took to fulfill his promise, and five weeks since he's talking to Ling to ensure he's not engulfed in emotional stress.

He wanted Ling to accept his offer, not because he wants to flee from his training, he's ahead in his lessons and is finally feeling the changes in his body, not to say that he is now capable of forming more coherent phrases. No, Greed wanted Ling to accept his offer because the moment he caught his voice breaking he felt as if part of him did too, he wanted nothing but to reach for him and comfort his partner in his moment of need. To, in his own words, be there for him. Really there for him.

"In the end it was Master Feng who contacted him." That is something he was wondering since that day in his room.

"Xiong is friends with Feng?" With Ling? Sure, it's how they became friends, but Feng? Feng always seemed to enjoy the company of nerds like the majority of the secretariat and members of the Great Court, not of, how Ran said the other clans views them as? Ah yes, snake-worshiping-fish-eating-brutes.

She scoffed. "Yeah, "friends."" She said cynically and he felt his eyebrows raise.

"He wasn't joking when he told me he was taken?" She shook her head and he mouthed a 'wow', and put 'wow' in that. They're polar opposites, Feng is always tired while Xiong acts like he's on high caffeine every waking hour, even their jobs while complementing each other are very different. Huh, maybe that's what drove them to the other.

"You better go change, my brother can be quite overwhelming when he wants something." She said before sighing inwardly and standing to go and do what she suggested. Greed got up and excused himself out of her room, he better not keep Xiong waiting if he wants his room free of invasions.

After some discussion they settled for a restaurant near a lake that Ran wanted to visit for some time, they're seating on the second floor because Xiong refused to abuse his power to get the better
Greed will enter the second stage of his training soon won't he?" Ran asked her brother and he too looked at Xiong, but with his usual uninterested face.

"There's a second stage?" He nodded, enjoying the idea a bit too much to his comfort.

"Yes, I don't want to spoil it to you, but here's a teaser: it's nightmarish." So that's the part Ling was alluding to, that is if he knew about it to begin with. Greed got a bite off the meat in his noodle soup, not really buying into Xiong's bullshit.

"I doubt it's that bad." Xiong gave a cynical laugh that diminished into a snicker and Greed had to look at him again, he could see the gravity in his eyes.

"I became a light sleeper because of it."

----------------

"Hello Greed, you're here for two months now, and since you're ahead in your studies I'll start the second phase of your training." His master announced the moment Greed made himself comfortable inside the dojo, it's getting colder so they moved inside to train these past few dayss.

"And that is?"

"You'll live in this mountain for six months, devoting your time solely to perfect your mind and body on all the lessons I gave you. You can't return home, as now you'll be treated like a trespasser and if you want something from there, you'll have to invade the house. Your belongings are the only things you brought with you today. Understood?"

He wasn't prepared for this, they didn't prepare him for this, which is very likely to be the point, and to think Xiong had to do this as a kid. But there's another thing bugging him, this is too soon and with no warning whatsoever, if he knew about this he wouldn't have made that promise to Ling. Maybe he can reason with his master.
"Wait, it needs to start now? I promised Hongzi to call him everyday can't you give me some time to tell him the news?"

Master Xuan shook his head. "If you want I'll pass the information to His Majesty. You can't leave this mountain." This won't do, Greed laid on the floor, bummed, he should've listened to the brothers, they did alluded to this test.

"I want to be the one to inform him." He complained nonchalantly, his Master was unfazed.

"Then you'll have to invade the manor." Heh, no problem, he's used to invade places.

Then he remembered that everyone in that house has mad senses, better than Ling and Lanfan, and the last time Xiong didn’t held back he couldn’t do shit but flee.

No, there has to be a better way to approach this.

"Are there pencils and ink here?" His master nodded, a bit confused by his question. Greed fished in his things until he found one of his white sashes and asked for said pencil and ink, writing 'Tell Ling why I can't call him today.' On the piece of cloth. "This pupil requests that you, Master, send this message to Xiong."

"You've learned a thing or two about etiquette, Xiong must be referred to as 'Lord' when not in casual company." He corrected and accepted the task, leaving the dojo. When he finished going down the stairs he turned his head. "I'll start your training right now. For my last piece of advice, a soldier must be ready for anything." And he left.

Greed left for a walk after this, hoping that Ling will understand why he didn't call. He could weight his chances and invade the Zhou manor but he doesn't want to test his luck against Xiong as enemies, with this settled he prepared for his self-sustained life in the mountain. Six months, alright, it can't be so bad. That's the mantra he kept repeating in his head.

Fifteen hours in and Greed doesn't know what Xiong was talking about, during the entirety of his first day he only had to hunt for food – mostly fruit he found on trees – find one of the various temples to seek shelter at night, try to find something that could qualify as a bed and mostly important keep himself warm.
Then he woke up the next day.

Tied to a tree.

His shelter ransacked.

Greed sighed, this is going to be quite a handful.

Chapter End Notes

Remember when Lanfan said the Zhou are qi (neidanshu) specialists? This is what Greed was talking about when he mentioned the family have 'mad senses'.

Yay, Lady Ruan's trial is officially finished, this mean we're entering the second part (hah) of the 'White Snake' (or Baishe) arc. Just a quick teaser, a very important character will make it's debut in this arc.
He needs to flee and fast, because he's being followed, he can hear movement in the trees. He needs to flee until he can find an opening, his eyes had accustomed to the darkness in the mountain, his breathing is erratic and his legs are burning, and they're still following him. Who are they? He has a hunch, Xiong and his men, although Xiong never climbed off a tree to fight him once. Why he thinks it's Xiong and his men? Greed has learned how to feel jing in a kick, and according to Yuan, you need to have an absurd amount of jing to pass through hell like he's doing right now and guess how much he's feeling from these mobs' leader?

It can be Master Xuan though, and the thought sent shivers down his spine.

One of the mobs jumped off the tree to attack him, Greed turned to defend the attack but lost balance and fell, taking the person with him. The former sin used this as advantage to punch them in the face and steal their weapon, throwing the person off him in the process. More people got down on the floor and Greed had to quickly get up and out of their circle, blood is rushing in his head and he can barely comprehend what is happening, his body acting on it's own.

He thought they would attack all at once but it makes sense that they don't as they'd only get in each other's way, the first person made it's move, both Greed and the person defended the other's attack until he clutched their staff while they defended, wanting to use this to headbutt them but another person came in to attack so he just pushed them to confront this new punk. Greed kicked dirt in their face and hit them in the head, cue to the previous person kicking him in the arm and sending him to the floor, Greed rolled off to the side and out of their reach, then he resumed running with them in toll.

They've been doing this for a week, these guys come and attack him in random times of the day, he can't even sleep peacefully. It's so frustrating, and taking his frustration on them is therapeutic.
It doesn't end there too, they sabotage places in the mountain to make things more difficult to him, like blocking the hot springs and the dojo, so he doesn't have access to weapons or a place to relieve stress.

A halberd was hurled too close to him and he stopped in his tracks, Greed turned to face his opponents once again, snarling like a feral beast, he's tired and he wants to deal with them as soon as possible. Their boss finally exited the safety of the trees and faced him, softening Greed's features if only because he's confused, his minions walked to the side to give them space and now things started to sink.

Oh well, time to know if it's Xiong or Master Xuan.

------------------

Visiting Amestris after two years is quite nostalgic, what isn't, however, is visiting the Fuhrer's Palace, this place only gave him grief, but this isn't the time nor place to be acting like this, Ling is here for diplomatic reasons. With him is Lanfan, Yongji and Feng instead of Yue for a couple of reasons, one is that he wants to conceal the fact he's having trouble with rebels and Feng was trained to conceal emotions, the other is that he's here to negotiate and Feng is quite the silver tongue so he can back him up.

Guiding him is a woman he doesn't know, she is visibly uncomfortable with his guards and this humored him a little. They passed by Hawkeye and she took her place. "Your Minister informed us of your visit Your Majesty, so how it is? To visit Amestris after two years?"

"It brings back memories." He left that vague on purpose, if she had a problem, she's not mentioning it. "Any news about Ed?" His mention drawn a smile from her and Ling became anxious.

"Edward returned recently and married Winry." He stopped from the shock, he should know something this important, and Al didn't told him. He should know of something so important as his brother's wedding. Hawkeye stopped some steps away from him and turned when she noticed the Emperor wasn't walking. "So you didn't knew." He was so dumbfounded by this he barely caught what she said.

"No."
"But they sent invites..." She trailed off and Ling suddenly came to the realization that the letters must have been intercepted by the rebel faction or lost. He'll have to speak to Yumei about this, but more importantly, explain this to Ed and Winry.

"I'll visit them later and explain everything." Ling reassured and Hawkeye smiled to herself. They were close to Mustang's office and when they encountered his staff, they seemed eager to see him. Correction, they were eager to see Yue, and when their faces fell as they noticed she didn't come with him Ling couldn't hold his grin.

"We're here." Hawkeye announced before opening the door to him. "General, Emperor Hongzi has arrived."

"Let him in." When Ling entered he saw Grumman and felt his body still, he doesn't know much about the new Fuhrer and now he fears his negotiations with Roy won't work. Roy offered one of the couches for him to seat on and Feng sat by his side, while his bodyguards remained on foot behind them, with the way they were seating, Ling was facing the new Fuhrer. Roy exited his desk to seat with them. "This is the first time you two meet, right? Fuhrer, this is Emperor Hongzi of Xing. Your Majesty, this is Fuhrer Grumman."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." 'First impressions are very important, people will judge you based on that.' His mother's words echoed on his mind, he must be polite and not show his anxiety, it exudes insecurity to people and this is the last thing he wants to show an ally.

"So young and so polite." He is amused so far, this is good. "But I always though your name was Ling Yao, what gives?" Roy stepped in to answer, seemingly as humored as his superior is.

"Xing emperors are referred by their era names at all times except when in casual company. I also thought it was confusing at first."

"An interesting custom, and he is?" He turned to Feng and only now it occurred to him that they never met his cousin.

"This is Feng Yao, my cousin and leader of the Censorate." This cued his cousin to bow, and they nodded in response.

"The Emperor's private investigation network right?" Roy asked, thoughtful, and Ling nodded.
Then he seemed to have remembered something. "Do you want tea? I can ask for coffee too or something to eat."

"Just tea is enough." Roy looked to Riza and she nodded before leaving the room, while they waited for tea, Grumman took this opportunity to get to know Ling and he reciprocated the gesture. In a sense he reminds Ling of his grandfather Cheng.

Once tea arrived Ling and Feng helped themselves with a cup, the beverage served was black tea and he's thankful for Roy's thoughtfulness, it's astonishing how much he studied about Xing's customs when he proposed an alliance. It can be because he doesn't want to offend a trade partner, or it can be part of his controlling nature, like Ling's. He finished his cup before Feng, and when both rested their cups on the table Roy started to talk again.

"So, in your letter you said you wanted to talk about sending more apprentices, did I get that right Your Majesty?" He could say it's taboo to refer to the Emperor as 'you', but elected to ignore it, they're in Amestris, not in Xing, it hardly matters.

"Yes, my officers aren't pleased with the current treaty."

"They think it's unfair since Xing is way bigger than Amestris, both in territory and population." Feng added to clarify.

"May I know the population of Xing?" Grumman queried, if he's like grandpa, there's a chance it wasn't only for curiosity.

"Approximately four hundred millions."

"So five hundred is indeed a small number." Roy said to himself while he brushed his lips, then he faced Ling. "You wouldn't know, but we were talking about this same thing weeks ago. I mentioned with the Fuhrer how you'd be likely displeased with the current situation regarding our exchange students. So what about we send a thousand students and in return you send four thousand? What do you say?" Roy proposes and Ling doesn't know how to react, he wasn't ready for this, didn't know things would go so smoothly, so he looked at Feng who looked back. Ling isn't sure if he should accept it or not and wanted to pass this massage to his cousin, Feng, in his turn, moved his eyes swiftly to the side. He knows what he means, he need to ask things.

"You're accepting more than you're sending off, are you sure your people will accept this?" He
pressed, while this deal is good, he isn't sure if the amestrians will accept this many xingese in their country, and if they don't, he doesn't want his people to be in danger thanks to bigots. Like what happened to that amestrian engineer.

"They'll accept better than your country did, I'm sure." While this jab didn't affected him much, it surely did Feng.

"If you're talking about the kidnapped engineer, he was rescued in the same day. Our police is competent." Feng talked back, adding his own bit of insult, Ling wanted to smack him but changed his mind when he noticed both Fuhrer and General smiling, he has a couple of guesses on why they're doing it, but he's just glad it'll end here.

"That's good to hear. About our offer, will you accept it or not?"

"I accept."

"Hope your officers will be pleased by this news, which brings me to another topic. The transcontinental train, how are things going on your end?" The mood changed drastically, they're serious and, for a while, he did forget about this train so now the guilty is clutching in his chest. Ling wants to curse himself, how he didn't notice that they were smiling and being easy and agreeable to throw him off guard when they make this question? It's pretty much the tactic he used against the Elrics the first time they met, you'd think he would saw that coming.

Time to do what they didn't and be convincing.

"We're having problems in the west, so things are delayed." The tension grew so much it wasn't far from being palpable and the young emperor had to fight his instinct to hold his breath, this is the truth, and it can't be helped, but he hopes they understand and the fear they don't is making his heart beat faster. Then, in a beat, they smiled.

"Ah, that's good to hear. I thought we were the only ones falling behind, now we're not pressured to rush things." Roy and Grumman laughed, it's a forced laugh, the kind when things go your way even tough you didn't expected it to and it left Ling flabbergasted, he never thought they could be this silly, but it helped ease his tensions and for that he's thankful.

"I have an essay instructing how to built railways in the desert. It's written by a scholar from Liang Province, they live in the desert so I trust their insight. I made translated copies so you could read it
too.” Feng handed the copies to their host and Roy gave one to his superior. Fuhrer Grumman, after accepting the book, stood from his seat.

"So our talk ends here." He nodded once to Feng and then to Ling and moved to the exit. They also got up and bid their goodbyes to Roy, but once they reached the door.

"Only, you mentioned that you're having problems in the west?" He's trying to pry, he knew it, he'd do the same after all. Ling felt conflicted, he didn't knew what to say to conceal the truth and sound convincing enough to the General, but then.

"It's desertification My Lord, nothing too complicated. We're a nation that depends too heavily on agriculture, can you imagine the damage it does?" Feng answered in his place and he wanted to sigh in relief, bringing him was a good idea. "Now if you excuse us."

While they exited his office Hawkeye entered, if only because her grandfather and Fuhrer told her so – in a very annoying and suggestive manner by the way, you can't choose your family can you? - and she handed him more papers to sign, which made him lose all enjoyment he had from his talk with Ling, as predictable as it is. She could tease him and say that it's worse once he reaches the top, but another topic came to mind.

"He mentioned that he hadn't received Edward's wedding invitation."

"And he mentioned having problems in western Xing, if a letter from Amestris reached Xing, it had to be from the west. It's not only desertification is it? Someone this young in such powerful position will create lots of enemies." Roy smiled. "I know this better than anyone."

"Do you blame him? For lying to you."

"No, I would also hate to be seem as powerless to others in my position just because of my age."

-------------------

It took Greed hours to figure out how to climb the stone barricade blocking the hot spring, but when he did, he spent hours relaxing in it. He doesn't think he has been this glad to take a shower in his life, there's a downside to it, his hair is down and he doesn't like it. Why? He looks like an older version of Pride like this, it doesn't help that most homunculi have the same eyes.
Father couldn't bother to base them on different people could he? No, that would be too much work for that lazy bastard.

He was on his way to another shelter when he found Xiong climbing the mountain, after a week Greed discovered it was easier to relocate his things between shelters, it doesn't help much since they can track him thanks to qi reading, but they take a while to search him and so the former sin have time to prepare. He should invest in a trap.

As for Xiong, it has been a week since Greed cut part of his fringe and he had to made an adjustment to his hair. Honestly he looks better this way, and now he can see the beauty mark near his left eye.

"Hey!" Xiong greeted as he got closer.

"What're you doing up here?" He asked before paying attention to the contents in his hands, flowers and food. "Can I eat that?"

"No!" Xiong laughed briefly. "These are offerings to cousin Liang and aunt Meiying. Want to go with me?" Greed looked around apprehensively, he needed to come up with a strategy for today and move accordingly, but on another hand, this is the perfect opportunity to know if Xiong is the one attacking him at night.

"Sure."

The place his late family members are buried at is a small temple facing his house, they didn't spent much as requested by his aunt before she too left this world unfairly, it made sense, his cousin was a frugal man. Xiong placed the offerings in their tombstones and smiled, finally, finally they received justice, and it's all thanks to Greed. It's amazing how easy it was for him to convince Ling, and being so natural about it while doing so, it's also inspiring how he seems to be so comfortable with himself, how Greed is so sure of him that he doesn't care about what others think of him. He's like a beacon that draws people in, and Xiong admires him for it.

"Thank you, I wouldn't be able to do what you did. If it wasn't for you." He stopped there, because he's sure Greed knows what he means.

"Nah, I was owning you guys, now we're even. Did you sent the message to Ling?"
"Ah, yes, he did sound a bit sad about it, but I invited him to go hunt with me, hopefully he'll bring Feng too."

"I'd never imagine you and Feng were a thing."

"Two years ago I wouldn't believe it too." He said matter-of-factly.

"Two years ago you battled that Sima clan right? Then you quelled a rebellion. Did you get anything from that?"

"The title 'General Who Displays Righteousness', honestly I was going after 'General Who Establishes Peace', but that's my ambition for now." He returned to stare at the tombstones and Greed must admit, he’s curious about what he did exactly to receive the title, even tough he’s sure Xiong told him that day he guided him to the dojo. He’ll look like an ass, but oh well, this is nothing new.

“How you got the title?”

“I told you that day! You’ve already forgotten?”

“Yes.” He sounded a bit too eager when he said that and this made Xiong grow suspicious.

“I’ll tell you again, only because it’s all about me.” He cheered and the mood changed to an easier one. “It was after Feng sent scouts to know everything about the Ruan army’s supplies…”

-----------------------

“Our scouts found the Ruan Army’s supply depot...” Feng trailed off, running his fingers through the map. “Right here, and here,” He pointed to a close spot on the map. “Is their storehouse.”

“We should burn their supply depot to draw their attention to it and raid their storehouse while their defenses are thin, we could use extra bullets. If they lose both food and weapons their fall is
guaranteed.” The Lieutenant-Colonel stated and Feng nodded, all generals agreed with that, but one.

“Your strategy is too obvious, Lord Kai, and worse, with people starving you want to waste even more food? This is insulting!” He knew he hurt his pride, the superintended was fuming and he could see their colonel raising his eyebrows in interest.

“Careful Zhou brat, if you continue with this insolence I’ll report your misconduct to the Great General Lady Yumei.” He bristled, the man was glaring but Xiong stood his ground, if he was trying to intimidate him it didn’t work. Feng was looking between them unfazed, he doesn’t think anything impresses this man, at least not wholeheartedly.

“Lord Zhou, burning supplies is a basic military tactic, I assume even you heard of that.” Another officer said, he isn’t an Imperial officer like Lord Kai, he thinks he works for the Yao.

“Yes, I did, which is why think it’s so predictable.” Feng hummed in interest and the council turned to him.

“Now I’m curious, what do you suggest we do then?”

“I’ll infiltrated their depot and steal their food, no need to waste it.” The council was in uproar after his proposal.

“This is ludicrous! I know you want to raise the name of your clan Zhou prince, but this plan is too much, even for you. Isn’t that right Colonel?” The Lieutenant-Colonel asked Feng, the Yao prince brushed his lips, considering his strategy.

“I’m not finished.” Xiong took a wooden piece on the map, the one representing the cavalry, and placed it behind the storehouse. “The cavalry will taunt them here, drawing their attention, then my men will raid the supply depot and give everything to our supply carriers.” He moved the piece representing his men from the depot to the storehouse. “then, after drawing all of them to the storehouse we finish everything with a pincer attack. If they lose both weapons and supplies they’ll have no choice but to surrender, if we treat the captive soldiers well we’ll lower their morale and raise the chance of more soldiers surrendering, finishing the war without risking our soldiers’ lives.” While he could see that some officers liked his strategy, he couldn’t say the same for Lord Kai, or worse, Lord Feng.
“These are military tactics on paper, how do you plan on stealing everything from a depot without drawing attention? Your furikazan isn’t exactly the most subtle of strategies.” Feng said, Xiong smirked.

“Trust me and my men My Lord, I can do it.” They looked at each other and after what felt like an eternity he relented.

“We’ll go with your strategy. If it fails we’ll go with Lord Kai’s strategy instead.” Xiong held his fist while ducking his head in gratitude.

“I’ll go notify my men.” Then he left the council, at nightfall they would attack, that’s their strategy.

When night came Feng’s cavalry was ready to execute Xiong’s strategy, as for Xiong and his men they were readying themselves for their stealth mission, dressing in all black and sporting only light, small weapons. After instructing his men on what to do the young lord exited his tent and he was greeted by the Colonel himself, he wasn’t going to participate in this skirmish, only if things failed, as such he was only dressed in a hanfu, his hair was down with part of it falling over his shoulders, the fire light was gentle over his skin and thank goodness he’s wearing a mask.

“C-Colonel? What are you doing here without armor? The enemy could attack at any time.” Feng breathed a laugh.

“I trust my guards to protect me.” He said in his usual calm tone, then he looked worried. “Can you guarantee your plan will work?” Xiong smiled, feeling his confidence rise, and clasped his superior’s shoulders.

“I’ll show you, the fifth will of war: shadow.” Feng’s eyes widened in surprise, not that it’s unusual, people outside the Zhou only know until the fourth will.

He left Feng there when he saw his men mounting their horses, their ride stopped midway through the path, until they saw the depot, where they proceeded by foot. Xiong signaled to one of his men, who, after receiving the signal, left to notify the cavalry. A scout appeared minutes after to tell the news he was waiting for, with attention on the storehouse the supply depot will be lightly guarded.

“Remember to always stay in the shadows, we must take all of them down, but preferably keep them alive.” They chorused a ‘yes’ and hey left to raid the depot. With the place lightly guarded thanks
to the Yao cavalry it was easy to sneak into the place and steal their food. Any person they didn’t kill was tied and taken with the rest of the supplies to camp. Xiong and his men took the dropped weapons and attacked the defending Ruan army with the ferocity of a raging fire, dealing a devastating blow that would lead later to their fall.

After this the Qin army fell to the might of the colossal Sima army. The stark contrast between how the Ruan family treated their soldiers as opposed to the Royal army led to a massive number of surrenders, ending the rebellion. Minister Yumei bestowed upon him the title of ‘General Who Displays Righteousness’ for defeating the larger Ruan Army while sparing the maximum number of soldiers. When the battle that would later be know as ‘The Qin-Ruan Rebellion’ ended the allied forces had an after war party. Ling was most pleased to know that one of his generals won by shedding the least amount of blood and became interested in Xiong, it didn’t help that Feng was praising him for who would listen.

Even if he liked all the praise and attention he was getting, what really satisfied Xiong was to know that his clan would finally be recognized in the court, and after confiding to Ling, the teenager confessed that he never wanted to be Emperor for power, but to protect his clan and reform the country before a massive rebellion starts and a new Empire rises, like what happened to every other empire before Xing. They also chatted about military strategies and which where their favorites, bonding over their mutual preference to win quickly and without their enemy knowing what hit them. It was after their second bottle of wine that things became weird, Ling went from cheery to sobbing in a minute.

“Y-Your Majesty? Um, did, did something happened?”

“Everything happened! All because I was too caught up in that shtupid fucking country, and for what? This shit that cost me two loved ones.” He showed him a golden bracelet, in it a bright red gem like no other. Xiong watched the gem with curiosity, is that the philosopher’s stone? If so now he knows why Ling is called Hongzi.

“You’re talking about that guy, Greed, right?” He nodded, a bit too fervently if you ask him.

“He died to protect me ‘cause of that cunt of a father he had. He lied to me, he, he lied to me and acted all natural about it. I hate him, I. Fucking. Hayte him.” He tried to touch His Majesty but he snapped again. “Why I loved him anyway, he wassuch a bitch! a selfish, shortsighted asshole that did nothing but try to act like he was hot shayt!” Ling breathed slowly to calm himself, and when that worked, his voice mellowed. “And I loved him, he was an idiot but I’ve grown to love him. It’s not fair, why he had to left just awfter we were starting to get along?” He couldn’t hold his sobs anymore and Xiong started to wonder how this Greed person may have been, judging by how low and high Ling holds him as a person.
“I’m glad I’m stuck with you’ he said, ‘We’ll fight together’ he sed, if I knew why he was being charming, If I knew he was planning to sacrifice himself. ‘Become Emperor pawrtner’ what’s the meaning if he isn’t here?” Then he broke and hid his face as he cried. Xiong was stuck there, not knowing what to do nor what to say, but one thing was sure, it’s amazing how he bottled all of this up just for their country. He doubts Ling had any time to grief his lost, what with two battles in a row, and by the way he talked this Greed meant the wolrd to him, the impact of his death is evident. So young and yet so strong, maybe it was sympathy, who knows, but Xiong embraced him and Ling reciprocated the hug.

“Let it all out, don’t hold this anymore.” He hushed, his Emperor nodded while still glued to his chest, and there he cried till he fell asleep.

“There he is.” Feng said behind him after Ling was sound asleep. He looked at his cousin, then Xiong and smiled. “He made quite the mess didn’t he?”

“It’s nothing, really. I’m glad I was here for him.” Feng seemed to accept his answer and went directly to his cousin, patting him on the shoulder.

“Ling wake up, you need to go to bed.” This did the trick and he went to his cousin after almost tripping, Xiong also offered to take him to the Heavenly Apartment. The party was still going on when they delivered Ling to his room, and after he stayed in the care of Lanfan, Feng turned his attention to him. “So, what are you going to do now?”

“Maybe I should go to bed too.” Feng looked anywhere but him, as if he wanted to say something, and when Xiong hummed he seemed to have summoned the courage to talk.

“I was thinking, I have this gift, a foreign wine, maybe if you can still hold your liquor we could drink it at my room?” He suggested and Xiong raised an eyebrow, he can’t believe his luck. Feng looked slightly flustered, by his gesture perhaps? And added. “You also need to change your clothes right?”

“I don’t think your clothes will fit on me.” ‘But I also don’t think you want me clothed.’ “But I accept your offer.” Satisfied, Feng asked Xiong to follow him to his room, they walked beside one another in the Garden of the Twelve Palaces, and even though the walk was short it felt like a lifetime. There they stayed in eachother’s company, drinking and chatting, losing track of time. Later, way after the party ended, they decided to stay in the other’s warmth till the next day.
“After that you two fucked?” Xiong nodded. “What happened after that?” His face changed from happy to bummed and he cupped his nape.

“I didn’t follow through. I, how can I tell you, we were under the influence you know? Part of me thought that was the only reason he even asked.” He stopped and avoided eye contact, then he glanced at his cousin’s tomb and he made a pained expression. “I also discovered he loved cousin Liang so, so I, I felt-”

“You felt like a replacement.” Xiong nodded and Greed felt bad for him, in a way, he knows the feeling. “But if you two are seeing each other again this isn’t the case.” He tried to reason, to cheer him up, but deep down he knows this must be an underlying fear.

“I told him that when I turned him off, but he said he felt something special that night and I told him we were drunk, that night didn’t count. He was visibly hurt and didn’t want to talk to me ever again. Pass some weeks and I start regretting that decision, he’s beautiful, you know how they’re beautiful, so I started to write him letters, it sucked because, you know, we clicked that night when we started to chat. Only now he’s talking to me again.” ‘That witch is going to die and honeybee is talking to me again.’ So Feng is that ‘honeybee’, what’s the deal with the Yao, do all of them have insect nicknames? What Xiong does in his spare time?

“What are you doing at night since I’m not there in your house for you to pester me nonstop?”

“Boring, mundane things. Oh, I know, I could visit you when I can, what do you say?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I can barely sleep.”

“I told you.” They heard a sound in the bushes and Greed nearly jumped, Xiong was tense too, but after feeling it’s jing whatever it’s in there can't possibly be human.

Then it revealed itself, a little fluffball that was trembling and whimpering, it tug at his
heartstrings, even more because it's qi was so faint he's sure it's sick and possibly dying, which is the reason it was abandoned, it's mother couldn't risk the rest of her offspring for a sick one. He couldn't bear to look anymore and focused on Greed and to his surprise, his friend was in a trance, completely ensnared by the puppy, he never thought Greed was a dog person.

"What it is doing here without it’s mother?"

"She abandoned it, it's sick, might not survive." He felt bad for telling him this, because his words clearly affected him, badly. Greed tried to approach the puppy, trying his hardest to look amiable, but the little thing made no reservations and fled immediately, and seeing how bad he felt Xiong noticed, Greed fell for that puppy, he wants to protect it. He felt himself smile besides the bad mood as he realized how soft his friend can be, so he decided. "I'll ask Master to cure it, and if he don't, I'm sure Ran will. For you." He could see how grateful he was by the look in his eyes and this boosted his conviction, he'll do this for Greed.

The gentry cupped his nape while he looked down – a gesture Xiong noticed he does when embarrassed or uncomfortable – and smiled to himself in resignation. "It can't be helped, I have a soft spot for animals."

"You own me this one." Now to find that tang dog, he was tracking the puppy's jing when he heard Greed talking in his back.

"If you save it."

He will.

----------------------

Ling spent the first half of his last day in Amestris doing shopping, mostly souvenirs for his closer subjects and some clothes for Greed, it was insightful of him to ask his tailor for Greed's measurements as it was easier to buy said clothes, and finally a chance to get a sneak peek of them. Most of the clothes he bought were things Greed had tried to put on him two years ago: leather pants, dress shoes, turtleneck tank tops, a translucent shirt, all kinds of douchey clothes, in other words, the usual. But there's a piece among them that will be either his best idea ever or his biggest regret: a fishnet shirt, the moment Greed proposed dressing him with one of those he all but wanted to take control of his body back and rip the monster out of his soul, but now that he have his own body.... His own body.
He likes to sort Greed's personality in two categories: annoying and charming, and while he could fall for his personality, Ling couldn't for the love of him ever find Greed as a whole attractive. Why? Because in the end it was his body, different face, same body, and it would say more about Ling than he could ever want to know.

But now he has his own body, a different, sexy body and just thinking on the amount of eye candy he'll get from these clothe-

He better stop.

"Your Majesty are you ok?" Lanfan asked after he stayed too much time glancing off on the window, he almost jumped when she touched him and in the corner of his eyes he saw Feng smiling slyly.

"Ah, yes. Yes, I'm good." He scowled to his cousin and he looked somewhere else, Lanfan also glanced in his direction before fully committing to His Majesty.

"We're near Resembool." Ling nodded, moving his thoughts to Ed and how much he misses him. He can't wait to catch up, or better yet, get on his nerves, Ling just hopes he is there to do so. Oh, and there's also Winry, he's looking forward to eat her apple pie, and she is a master in automails, she could give a look on Lanfan's.

"Should we tell him about Greed?" Lanfan asked after a time, and Ling started to weight the pros and cons of doing so. No, he doesn't think it's a good idea.

"We better not, let Al tell him the news." If Lanfan had problems with his decision she didn't said and instead nodded. The train stopped signaling the end of their travel, once in the station they paid a carriage to get them to Winry's house.

"This boy, he's Alphonse's brother right? What is his name again?" Feng queried.

"Edward."

"Eduard."
"Edward."

"Edoward?" It was now Yongji's turn to ask and while Lanfan was trying to keep a straight face Ling laughed unabashedly.

"Keep this pronunciation, I want to see his face." He said between laughs.

"We're here, the Rockbell's residence. You're friends with Ed? That boy, only after months did he settle down. He's lucky a pretty girl like Winry waited for him." The man shook his head, he must be an acquaintance, but then with a town so small. "You're in for a surprise." The coachman winked and after thanking the man they hopped off the carriage.

Ed answered the door and greeted him with a punch. "You're three months late." He complained and from the corner of his eyes he saw his cousin and Yongji had recoiled.

"I missed you too." Then he got up. "And about that, I have an apology and an explanation- you've grown." Ling was perplexed, Ed is his size now, he grew a lot in these two years. It's unfair how he's the only one who didn't grow.

Well Lanfan also didn't but that's beside the point.

Ed puffed his chest. "I know right? No more short jokes from you." Ling muttered a 'I never did that.' But it was almost completely obfuscated by Feng's question.

"He was small?"

"Very." This hit a nerve.

"Why you-"

"Ed? Is someone at the door?" Winry came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a piece of cloth, then she peeked through the door and practically beamed. "What are you doing here? Our wedding was three months ago!" She hugged both Ling and Lanfan while shaking the hands of the other visitors, then, without warning, she pointed her finger between him and Feng. "Are you two
related?"

"Where are our manners. This is Feng Yao, my older cousin, and this is Yongji, she's another bodyguard and childhood friend." They bowed out of habit.

"You two look very alike." Ed said, following by nodding to the door. "Come in."

"I'll prepare some tea. We have some pie that I baked yesterday if it's good to you." Winry suggested while Ed was tailing after her like a lost puppy. She was different, but he can't pinpoint what.

"Any food is good to me." She seemed to be having enough of Ed and pointed to the couch, he persisted for a second until she glared and he had to give up and seat with them. Feng raised an eyebrow, he noticed something. "Specially if it's made by you." He flirted and Ed kicked him, throwing him a scowl. Winry rolled her eyes playfully and went back to the kitchen.

"You're here for diplomatic reasons right? already talked to Mustang?" Ed looked only interested enough to be polite.

"Yes, and things went better than I expected." Ed looked in the direction of the kitchen with every sound that came from there and this made his suspicion rise.

"Why Al didn't come with you?" Winry asked as she placed the teapot on the coffee table.

"Or better yet, why you lot didn't attended our wedding?" Ed added, obviously hurt mainly by his brother's absence, while he did lie to Mustang, Ed and Winry are a different matter, they're his friends and he trust then with the truth regarding his country's current state.

"The letter didn't arrive, I'm having problems in the west of Xing thanks to some of my brothers not accepting my claim to the throne." Their faces fell from the news, Winry mouth was gaped in shock while Ed was indignant.

"But how? The former Emperor choose you right?! You had the philosopher's stone!" It's somewhat heartwarming to see how riled up Ed is for his sake.
"It's not as simple as this, Ling was the twelfth male prince, nineteenth prince in total, not to say that our clan is not the strongest in Xing, it has some cout, but that's that. Of course the more powerful clans in Xing would be against Ling's claim, they're the majority of the rebels." Feng explained and this managed to calm Ed down somewhat.

"And it was only after I defeated the second most powerful clan in Xing that the court really accepted me as their Emperor." His friend sagged down on the sofa, pouting and accepting the unfairness that is Xing's politics.

"Your country stinks."

"I've heard that before thanks.

"You told that to Roy?" Ling didn't respond, and instead shrunk in his cup of tea as Ed's brows started to frown. "You didn't? Why?!"

"I have a reason hear me out! I have all the right to hunt them down, I know, but what I really want is to defeat them without fighting. Not only they have my mother as hostage at the moment, if I bring external help it'll be implied that I'm planning to start a civil war. My people are tired of civil wars and my public image isn't the best in most places 'cause of my age, they're also not very fond of Amestris' war ethics." Ed hissed when he mentioned his mother, but it's good now that he understands where he's coming from. Grandpa must also be already in the west to negotiate with the Zhao, hopefully things will go well.

"Ling I must be honest, I think the General already figured this out, he was prying and you gave enough evidence to him." Ling froze as his mind tried to process the information given by Feng, shit he did gave a lot of information. In the midst of his concentration he felt a faint qi coming from Winry. Hold on.

"That sounds like Mustang, if he tries something funny I can beat some sense into him if you want."

"I'd be thankful if you did." Winry brought the leftover pie and once they had each a slice Feng faced her and smiled.

"Winry right? Congratulations." The couple smiled and Winry touched her stomach, making Ling look between her and his cousin. Oh.
Oh.

"So that's the additional qi I felt!" Ling could barely contain his smile, then he gave Ed a dirty look. "My Ed, you didn't waste time did you." Ed's entire face was red and he avoided eye contact, instead keeping to himself and his pie.

"I had to act quickly before he escaped again." She winked and he recoiled even more, he's acting stupid. "And you Ling? Do you have a significant other?" Feng snorted and he swears to God, why he brought this jerk with him to their house is beyond him. He and Winry glanced at Feng in the same time, only that he was angry and she happy.

"Who is she?" Now even Yongji snorted and Feng started to laugh, they're going to jail he swears. Lanfan was looking down to hide her own laugh and now he's feeling betrayed, worse, Winry saw that as some sort of hint and smiled knowingly. "Ah, it's you Lanfan isn't it?" Feng and Yongji were hysterical and Lanfan is probably mortified right now. He wants to die.

"So you're hooking up with your own guard you sly dog." Ed suddenly came to life just to tease him and Ling is a hair from beating his cousin. He started all of this.

"Well actually." Feng started and Ling felt his heart stop. He promised not to talk about Greed. "His Majesty prefer birds." Ling cupped his face in his palms, he's done with Feng, he's not talking to him anymore. Did, did he really reveal his sexuality using xingese symbolism?

Did they got the message?


"Then who is he?" Winry corrected herself and only now he had the courage to look at them in the eye.

"I have no one at the moment." The couple checked on Feng for confirmation and for once in their lives he opted to not be a jerk and just nod.

"What about Al? Where is he and what my little brother is doing?"
"I sent them off to Minh, a neighboring country." Feng explained and his friend hummed.

"To do what exactly?" At this time Winry got interested in Lanfan's automail and invited both girls to hang out with her somewhere else. He was going to ask Winry to check on her prosthesis anyway, Ling is ready to pay her if some adjustment or maintenance is made.

"Feng told him about a princess turned into a snake chimera and her alchemists trying to bring her back, so they traveled there to research said event." This interested Edward, a lot.

"Why he gets to do all the fun stuff?"

"You traveled to the west didn't you, I bet it was fun."

"Yeah, their alchemy is exactly like Amestris', that is if they know alchemy, but I found something more interesting in the country to the west of Creta – a plane. Ling you wouldn't believe it, it's amazing. It can fly in the sky!"

"Really?"

"Yes! If I had one of those I could visit Xing in a short amount of time. I plan to show one to Winry when the kid is old enough."

Then they changed the topic back to alchemy, more precisely waidanshu, or, how they refer to it in Amestris, alkahestry. Feng and Ed also used this opportunity to know each other and, if they didn't had to return today, he's sure they would be talking way after the sun set, what with Feng telling everything he knows about waidanshu, being a waidanshuist himself. Ed and Winry were also surprised to know that Feng is twenty eight and has a daughter, and when the sun started to disappear in the horizon, it was time to leave.

"We'll visit Xing in the future, so make sure to receive our letter."

"And tell Al that I forgive him for missing our wedding, but if he doesn't appear when our child is born I'll never talk to him again."
“I’ll do.” After another wave of goodbyes and one last jest Ling and his group left on a train to Youswell, another set of servants are waiting for them to cross the desert and return home. Home, the thought immediately brings his mother to the center of his mind, and while he stared off the landscape of eastern Amestris Ling could only pray that the Yao army succeed in their mission.

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea why people received half of their military titles, so I’m just gonna treat them all as "what it says on the tin."

I mean, 'General Who Drows Bandits' was pretty much that. Also ignore Ling's drunken rambling, I didn't know how to do that in a way I was satisfied. (I never really drank alcohol, just a sip here and there to have a taste, and they taste like death.)

So, guys, have you ever heard that there are different kinds of attraction? There's the romantic, sexual, and aesthetic attraction. Just a random bit of trivia.
Much Anticipated

Chapter Summary

The chapter everybody waited for. 😊

Chapter Notes

fyi a tang dog is a chow chow, so the puppy Greed is gushing over is a cream chow chow puppy, this cutie right here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Grand Herald announced the arrival of His Majesty Emperor Hongzi, and the first thing he sees as the Gate of Supreme Might is opened is General Kui with his mounted guards escorting the young emperor to the safety of his palace, Ling turned to look at his general and, as fate would have it, the General of the Chariots did the same and, as if choreographed, they avoided eye contact. He hate his grandpa.

Yue and her assistant moved closer to the imperial carriage and met her superior once Lanfan helped him out of the vehicle. "Your Majesty, Minister Baiji is requesting a meeting immediately, she said it is urgent."

"Alright, let her enter." They bowed and her assistant left to welcome the minister, Yue stayed and Ling only raised an eyebrow in question.

"And you have a visit."

"Who?"

"Prince Wei Miao." Ling frowned in confusion, what could the former fourth Prince want from him? Nothing comes to mind no matter how much he thinks.

"Did he said anything else?" He asked just to clarify.
"No, I'm afraid."

"I'll talk to Baiji first. Set up a room for Miao, when I finish with the Minister of Work I'll talk to him in my study." Yue bowed and left to talk to his half-brother while Ling headed to the Hall of Harmony, guards and servants bowed as he passed by and when he arrived at the throne room, there she was, his Minister of Work, sitting near a low table with tea already served, a member of the secretariat was standing nearby to make company and, oddly enough, she came alone.

"Your Majesty." She kowtowed and Ling dismissed the nervous secretariat seemingly minutes from fainting, she can't be this hard to deal with.

Or he is so used to his family in a bad mood her sharpness is ineffective.

"What is so urgent you couldn't schedule a meeting?" His tone was slightly sharper than usual, something he noticed he had to do when talking to some of his ministers. She sipped her tea and offered some to him, which Ling accepted.

"Before that I want to inform you that in these two weeks that Your Majesty was away we finished the railway stations from Zheng to Wen, the southeastern railways are almost complete." She announced with a tad of pride in her voice and Ling started to smirk, this kind of progress is something he'd like to hear from a day to day basis, the only reason he isn't full on happy is because she said something is urgent and these kind of things are hardly good news.

"You did a good job Minister Baiji. Now what is troubling you?" She gave a deep sight and rested her cup on her lap before facing His Majesty once more.

"There's an odd delay in the southern railways ever since that engineer's kidnapping. Winter hasn't started so I can't blame the snow, nor can't I blame the southerners' incompetence because we know how capable they are. I fear they're misappropriating funds so I ask that Your Majesty send the Censorate to investigate."

"You fear things aren't advancing because the Zhou are misappropriating funds?" She nodded and he looked down for a brief moment before facing her again. "I'll see into it, thank you for your report. You're dismissed." She ducked her head and excused herself, she was some steps into the door when she turned to see him one last time.

"We couldn't advance this much if it wasn't for Your Majesty's request for amestrian engineers, I
doubted Your Majesty's decision at first, but I take my words back." She kneeled down and clasped her hands in front of the other. "This subject wants to praise Your Majesty for his insight, for his lack of prejudice and for his humility to seek help when help was needed. Working for Hongzi feels like three autumns have passed in a day. Now if Your Majesty excuse me." She left and Lord Xing entered the room, confused by Baiji's presence and even more so for the smile in Ling's face. It felt weird, good, but weird, to hear such praise from her. As egotistical as it may sound, it felt good to hear that she finally saw that his idea wasn't illogical, that he was right for asking for help even with so many in his court being against it, and maybe that is the reason why he's feeling so well for hearing it from her, because she was one of them.

"What Baiji wanted?"

"She want me to dispatch the Censorate to Wen, she fears the Zhou are deliberately slowing the construction of the southern railways." He was focused, listening to everything Ling had to say and coming up with his own conclusions about it.

"Then I believe doing what she requested is a good idea." Then Ling remembered Greed is currently training in Wen and an idea brewed in his mind, something that the more he thought about it the more excited he became.

"Or." He started and his tutor and grandfather frowned. "I can go there myself and check." It's the perfect idea! he can go see Greed and, since he is very observant, he will see if the Zhou are innocent or not, and if they are, he can go see for himself what the problem is and come up with a solution. God he has the best ideas.

"Are you out of your mind? With rebels flocking everywhere, specially in the south and in the west, you expect me to let you risk yourself in such mission?" Ling flinched, he knew Lord Quan would be against it but he didn't expect such backlash, still he was convicted of his plan and he will see it through.

"But grandpa I can take care of myself, I have my bodyguards."

"I still think it's a bad idea." He said unflinching. "When the situation becomes more tamed and I can trust you to behave like an Emperor, then I'll let you go out and visit anywhere in Xing. But right now things are dangerous and I'm not risking my precious grandson."

"Precious?" Ling asked, needing to hear that once more, it's obvious that he is flattered. Quan sighed, he already blurted it out, there's no real reason to hide it.
"Yes Ling, you're precious to me. Why do you think I act so harsh with you? Why I'm so strict with my teachings? Because I care about you, I care for your future as Emperor. To me you're a beacon, the light that'll guide the people of Xing to a better, more unified future. I can't risk your safety, not when you just started." Ling’s eyes were opened as if in a trance, his words affected him in a way not even Quan predicted and it touched him to know how much he meant for his grandson. The young lad then calms down, having accepted his grandfather's response.

"I understand your reasons grandpa, but I still want to, need to visit Wenchang." But yet thi, this didn't make sense, why Ling, his grandson, who is walking in the path of a junzi, who he trusts will become a junzi, is acting like a xiaoren? Only.

"It's because of someone isn't it? You're seeing someone?" He chided, as sternly as he could, and when he saw a hint of a recoil his frown deepened. It is because of someone, why can't Ling see how shortsighted this is? He didn't taught him this.

"No I-" he tried to lie but must have noticed it was futile. "Yes." He admitted, hiding his face in shame. Quan is still fazed by what he saw, Ling never acted like this in the two years he educated and prepared him for his new role as emperor, he never acted like a spoiled kid before, what gives? He have no choice, now he's curious about this person, the one that is making his prestigious grandson act like a xiaoren.

"Then I'll let you go, to see this person." Yes, he permits, only because he wants to know who he must blame for this. Ling smiled, a smile he never saw the kid make and it was unsettling how much power that person had over him.

"Thank you grandpa." He needs to know and fast.

-------------

When he arrived in his study his half-brother was talking to Yue, Ling doesn't remember if he has ever interacted with the Wei Prince in their time in the harem, and he didn't know what to expect, Ling doesn't know how he looked or acted, but now he know his brother looks taller than him and is chunky. His black robes made of fine silk and rings – how many rings a man need? - is a clear sign of his clan's wealth, and to top it off a turquoise vest signifying which clan he's from.

"Sorry to make you wait. Now I'm all yours, although I'm quite curious, what business does Wei Miao have with me." With this Yue excused herself, but not before bidding him goodbye. Once she
left his half-brother clasped his fingers on his lap, composed and dignified, just like his aunt.

"Something I'm sure Your Majesty will find worth of his time." He was confident but the calmness in which he responded almost obscured it. Almost, as Ling noticed it.

"Oh, and that is?" He provoked, feeling challenged.

"You know how you brought justice to the late Prince Zhou? This clumsy brother asks that Your Majesty find the culprits behind Princess Han's murder." He'll give it to Miao, this really interested him, and now in the corners of his mind he can hear him cursing himself, how he never thought about doing it? "She was one of the few princes I considered a sibling. Her death affected me greatly and if You, the Holy and Exalted One could give her the same treatment you gave Prince Zhou, I'd be more than thankful." He dropped the confident persona and changed his tone to that of a grieving person, yet his voice carried hope and this hit back home for Ling.

He smiled before answering. "She meant a lot to me too, but I guess you already knew that, so yes, I'll do it. I'll only ask you one thing, convince your aunt to bind our clans in marriage."

He bowed but remained a good time with his upper body lowered, an expression of thanks, then he straightened himself. "Consider it done."

They talked for a while longer, reminiscing the good parts of their past and the current situation with their brothers. It was only through their chat that he discovered the Wei are allied to the Han and it made sense as both clans shared a border, his lands being to the north of Liang province, and also only after he got up and excused himself that Ling confirmed that yes, he was taller, which was typical for a northerner. It's bizarre how xingese are tall on the north and south but start to get smaller as they go to the center.

After Miao left Ling felt a sense of fulfillment, as if he found his objective in this world, he will bring justice to Princess Han just like he did to Prince Zhou. No, scratch that, Ling actually has a better idea, he'll persecute the assassins of all fallen princes and make them pay for their crimes. Not only will his public image and his opinion of himself rise, but their respective clans will have no choice but to submit to the Yao clan just like the Zhou and the Chang.

Now he just need to inform the right people about this plan and get some detective work going. He knows the perfect person for this, so after calling his two bodyguards they traveled to the Garden of the Twelve Palaces, the area opposite of the harem quarters, where his main officers live, and now that Yufan was demoted, this includes Lanfan too.
Feng's apartment was the second to last building, and once there Ling knocked once, twice, he was about to knock a third time when a female servant opened the door to the Palace of Great Brilliance.

"Master Feng is sleeping, should I wake him up?" This early? Is not even eight. He realized he must have been silent for a while for the servant looked unsure when he looked down to meet her eyes.

"Do so." Feng's servant bowed and left to do as requested. Ling followed the handmaid to his cousin's bedroom. Feng's room is for the most part tidy save for a desk littered with books, he's binge reading again, this must be the reason he's in bed so soon. Ling can see his cousin's silhouette through the curtains, the handmaiden opened one of them to wake Feng, and after explaining everything she left the room but kept that one curtain tied before doing so.

"How was your convo with Prince Wei?" He sounded tired, not even bothering to open his eyes as he talked to him, as to shield his eyes from light. Feng made himself more comfortable on his bed as he turned in Ling's direction, as for Ling himself he snatched the nearest chair and moved it closer to his sleuth's bed. Kinda like that day he freed Greed from jail.

"I'm here to talk about it." He frowned before hiding his face with his sleeve.

"Tell him I'm not interested."

Ling rolled his eyes, not that people could see. "Not everyone I know wants to bang you."

"Taocai sure did." He back talked, his delivery deadpan, only adding more salt to the injury. Feng will never let him live it down, he's sensing it. Ling wanted to give him a piece of his mind but decided there was more pressing matters to discuss, they can always talk about it later.

"He asked me to avenge Princess Han, I plan on finding every prince assassin and charge them for murder. That's where you come in." Feng groaned and turned away from him, facing the ceiling of his bed.

"Yeah yeah, I'll do it."
"You alright? Want me to bring Master Tao?"

"My pressure dropped, and I have called Mei so don't worry." Feng said, then he faced his cousin once more. "Is that the only reason you woke me up?" He's done with the conversation and it shows, Ling felt bad for stressing his cousin, when this happens it's better to let Feng rest, he's doing the opposite.

"No, I have other news. I'm planning to go to Wenchang, preferably tomorrow morning."

"And how do you plan to go unnoticed?"

Ling was about to answer his question when a knock on the door disrupted his train of thought, on said door a maid bowed whilst Mei entered the room, Xiaomei was following closely.

"How's your jing?" Mei approached Feng to access his jing and hissed when she felt something out of order. She picked something from her bag and for a moment Ling thought she would use waidanshu to cure him but nope, just a vitriol with some concoction, whatever that is isn't good, as Feng grimaced with each gulp. Mei rested her hands on her hips after Feng finished, since it looked like she was done Ling decided to add her to the chat.

"I'm going to Wenchang." He shared the news.

"As Emperor?"

"No. Some may try to kidnap the train." She nodded absentmindedly.

"Then how?" Ling smiled, confident that his plan is perfect from every perspective, yet a more mischievous part of him didn't want to share the details, if anything appearing to them in his cover will be more productive than revealing what it is to them here.

"It's a surprise."
Greed laid out the things he was able to recuperate on the floor and winced as he sat, he's a mess right now, from cuts to scratches his body is full of bruises. He didn't expected a morning raid, and his stupid ass defended a sword slash with an open palm because reflex is a bitch and he used to have the perfect defense, and now his shirt is ruined as he had to make a makeshift bandage and fight if he wanted to ward off his attackers. At least he reciprocated the cut, stupid fucks.

Aside from the retrieved goods he also stole some medication from the dojo, having finally found a way in, not only medicine but some weapons too, more precisely a halberd, a sword and a dagger. He'll need to step up his game if he ever wants to not spend his days mostly healing, Greed still needs to meditate and improve his capabilities....oh.

Now everything makes sense.

That's the reason they're attacking him. The constant running, the climbing, the fights, the sneaking, they're putting his learning to use. Greed felt a sudden scratch on his back and almost sprung into action, just to discover it's just Xiong...and the puppy. It looks so cute now that it is healthy.

And scared as fuck.

"Look who's here." Xiong said as he played with the puppy's paws, the poor thing was trying it's hardest to hide from him and he felt quite bad about it. Then Xiong, because he must be oblivious to body language – which he wouldn't be surprised – put the dog on his lap. In the same minute the puppy flees and Greed doesn't think he has ever felt happy and disappointed at the same time. Both friends accompanied the animal with their eyes. "Look at him go." Xiong pointed out absentmindedly.

"Why did you do that?"

"He really is scared of you isn't he? Must be your teeth." Greed threatened to move closer and Xiong raised his hands, only to abruptly recoil his arm, hissing sharply. The former sin couldn't help but look fazed at his friend, this bruise, on the inside of his arm, looks familiar.

"Didn't had time to tend it?" Greed pointed his chin to Xiong's arm and he just laughed, carefree with only one hand behind his head.
"Nah, as soon as I arrived home mom told me you almost passed out during a raid, so I climbed quickly to check on you."

He's bullshitting him, Greed knows, so he went straight to the point. "I cut one of those guys in the same place." He gestured to the wound and Xiong looked between Greed and the cut before grinning.

"Now that's a hella coincidence." Yeah right.

"I cut your arm didn't I?"

"What are you talking ab-." He glared and it was enough to convince Xiong to stop, he looked down, bummed for being caught. "Yeah you did."

"We should search for the dog." Greed proposed instead, but Xiong shook his head. He wanted to protest, ask him why they shouldn’t if the reason he’s not here is because of Xiong being a jerk. Another part wanted to tell him to get lost and let him do his things, but he stopped feeding these emotions because in the end this won’t help anyone.

"You need to learn how to hunt, or better yet, skin an animal."

"Gross."

"Well you can't depend only on fruits." Xiong said and Greed got up, offering a hand to his friend to help him get up. He doesn't know how to hunt and to be honest, he also doesn't know what to hunt, winter is just in the corner and he doesn't think your usual games are available in that season.

There's a positive note to this, once he starts hunting the dog will return for food and what is even better is that he'll learn to prepare traps, now that's going to be useful.

He wonders if Xiong knows that he's digging his own grave.
All eyes were on him and while usually that would make him nervous that maybe the cover didn't work, this time he's feeling confident it worked, and boy did it work. Men and women of all ages looked in their direction with adoration, their eyes mesmerized by the layers and layers of soft colored hanfus with frills so abundant you could lose yourself in it, all of this topped by a pink, long doupeng. The fan he's using to cover his face belongs to his mom, a gift from the Zhong, and so is the jewelry, while the necklace and bracelets are bearable to use, the various headdresses and the earrings are heavy to his head, as is the makeup on his face. Ling has no idea how women can pull this off everyday, and for that he respects them.

His guards are also undercover, dressed as handmaiden, and also using frilly hanfus, this is the most cleaned up he has seen of them and if Ling had a camera he'd snap a photo. They look beautiful.

They stepped out of the train once it reached Wenchang Station, Lanfan holding an umbrella to protect him from the snow whilst Yongji was in charge of his baggage. Where he looked people were entranced by his presence, but he's not looking around to boost his ego, Xiong promised to fetch him in the station and he's not seeing him.

"Ling!" Oh for the love of! You've got to be kidding. "Ling....Ling... What was her name...?" Xiong mused to himself, pressing a finger to his forehead trying to come up with a fake name. Ling, in his turn, let out the air he was holding since the idiot called for him. "Ah yes! Lingqi! Been a long time." He beamed and for a moment he thinks he sees what Feng saw on him. Ling soon recovered from the shock and approached his friend, smiling behind his fan.

"Aw darling, can't believe you forgot about me." Ling said, trying to sound as convincing as he can, Xiong bowed and he giggled. Then he beckoned Xiong to come to earshot. "You almost blow my cover idiot!" He hushed in his normal voice.

"Sorry!" He pressed his palms in front of his face. "A carriage is awaiting." He guided Ling to the carriage, helping him enter the vehicle once there. The horses started to trot and the carriage moved. "Why do you decided to drop by? I hardly think it's because of my invite."

"The delayed railway." Xiong sighed and changed his attention to the window, the topic draining him of his usual cheerfulness.

"The Baishe Bandits, they're back." Ling's eyes opened wide, last time he heard of them he wasn't emperor, he thought they were killed.
'You fought then once, why you didn't make quick work of them now?'

"Because they have the possession of guns this time." This is hardly a reason to not defeat them, most trained soldiers can evade bullets, this is why this kind of weapon don't sell well in Xing and why they prefer their swords and lances, if people are going to evade your attacks anyway might as well spend your money in something that doesn't waste a lot of resources. There are firepower they like, namely rifles and cannons, one is a more efficient bow and arrow and a cannon, well, they're great for sieges.

"You're faster than bullets."

"Yes I am, but the citizens aren't. We're planning a strategy to take them down this time, so don't worry Ling." After Ling fully absorbed the information given to him they remained in silence for most of the travel, it was only once they passed through a rock tunnel that Xiong broke the silence. "Why he couldn't come?"

"Feng had to take part in negotiations with the Zhao. He really wanted to be here, believe me." 'My duty comes before my feelings, it's sad but...this is the burden I must bear as leader. You'll understand with time.' Feng told him before embarking on a different train, his cousin had handed him a satin bag, a gift to Xiong, and he promised to deliver it. Talking about the gift. "He wanted me to give you something." Ling gestured to his bag and Yongji took the bag from his suitcase, all the while Xiong looked to the gift quizzically.

"What is this?"

"Open and see." His friend shrugged and proceeded to open the sack, what was inside the bag took the air from him and made Ling and his guards equally surprised: Feng's jade bracelet, made with white and black jades found in a river in Wa, the black jades have animals engraved on it, 'the four gods of rain', they're commonly worshiped in their hometown. Xiong planted a light kiss on the jewelry, the fondness in his eyes, in his smile, tugged at Ling's heart.

"How long do you plan on staying here? Only you seem to have brought half your wardrobe with you." His friend's comment snapped him out of his jealousy, and when Ling noticed what Xiong was talking about he smiled.

"Some of these are for Greed."
"Talking about Greed, we're going to attack him this night. You three can join if you feel like it."
Xiong's proposal ignited a flame that he hadn't felt for months and before he knew it he had a
mischievous smile in his face. Ling checked on his guards for their input and they had the same
malicious glint in their eyes, the answer was obvious.

"Yes, we'd like to join your party." Xiong gave them a conniving smile and they smiled in return, if
this isn't the perfect greeting he doesn’t know what is. The carriage stopped and they started to
move to the exit, but Xiong held the door.

"Wait! Before we exit the carriage, keep your act, I want to see their faces when they see I brought
a woman home." Ling was about to question him but stopped when he saw a mischievous smile in
Xiong’s face.

"That's mean, I like it."

Once they arrived at the manor and made themselves comfortable in the main tatami room Xiong
did as planned and introduced Ling to his family as a 'very close friend', while the male inhabitants
of the house seemed proud of their future Lord, Xiong's sister was very close from snapping and
Lady Zhou, well, her expression tell him she already know it's His Majesty in disguise.

His assumption proved true when she offered to scout them to their guest rooms and Ling and his
bodyguards were taken to the largest guest house, the one in the west, and the one that – in her own
words – is reserved for His Majesty or Great Master Yao only. Ling stopped here and there to pay
attention to the decorations in the inner patio and the architectural similarities to Wa made him feel
homesick.

"That problematic boy is in the mountains, if that's who you're searching for." Yuan answered out
of nowhere, consequently opening the door to their house. "Can you believe he sent us an almost
dead puppy to heal? His heart is as big as his ego, I'll tell you that."

"I couldn't make a better comparison even if I wanted." She threw the keys in his direction before
leaving and Ling and his childhood friends settled in their temporary home, finally having a quality
rest after countless hours of traveling.

Xiong appeared in their room by dusk and after asking Ling's bodyguards of his whereabouts he
found the young emperor on the outside bath. Ling was relaxing on the wood bathtub, enjoying
every minute he can before dressing for the night raid, even if it's cold, the hot water makes the
chilling air bearable, oftentimes he would stare off to the mountain, wondering where Greed might be.
"We're going soon, so stop prettying yourself." Xiong said as he stepped into the balcony, he was dotted with an assassin's garb, the hood down and mask to the side of his head. Now that part of his hair is shorter, Ling can see a beauty mark below the eye.

"How he's faring? Be honest with me."

"Greed can read jing, but not qi, and I think his speed is still lacking. He packs quite the punch and is very agile so be careful." Ling hummed, taking the feedback to heart. Guess it's about time he dressed up.

"I've been long enough on this bathtub." He worked to leave, but soon returned when he heard footsteps coming from inside.

"Brother what are yo-" She cut herself short to gasp and turned her back to both males, okay this is awkward. Xiong's sister was frozen in place and Ling wanted to use this as an opportunity to go back to the bathroom but Xiong acted before him.

"Is this anyway to greet Your Majesty? Where are your manners Ran." Ling almost asked what was wrong with him, since it was clear that his sister was uncomfortable, then he saw how Xiong was grinning and things started to sink. This girl, Ran, his would-be future wife, has the hots for him, and Xiong is being a dick to his sister knowing that. Ling stood there silent wondering if siblings relationships were, for the most part, like this, then he recalled how Feng treats him on a daily basis and started to feel sorry for the girl.

No wonder these two clicked.

Ran mustered any courage she had left and turned to Ling, her entire face red. "It's, um, I, a, a pleasure to, to meet you! Your Majesty." Oh god is that how he acted near his crushes? He hopes not. Out of sympathy he elected to feign ignorance of her feelings, it's for the best that he doesn't plant any ideas on her head, so he responded in a manner that wasn't charming but also nothing cold.

"It’s a pleasure to meet you too."

"Ok Ran, clean things here, we need to go." She yapped 'yes!' And it was like she was trying really hard not to look at Ling as he exited the tub and got dressed to enter the bathroom. After he was
ready – because the girls were done half an hour before him – they left to meet with the rest of Xiong's party.

Greed was sitting outside letting the bonfire warm the night, this wasn't the only reason he was there, his lazyass finally bothered to fish. He could hunt for wild boars, he spotted some those last days, but he doesn't have a rifle nor a javelin. Maybe if he hurl his halberd.

The former sin was about to eat a grilled fish when he heard whimpering noises coming from the bushes, he stopped to watch, it's definitely the puppy, no doubt, he just needs to wait for it to reveal itself. It lifted itself on some rock to look better at the food, then he looked to Greed and he looked back, his beady eyes were imploring for food. Greed couldn't take it anymore and threw some to it, the puppy ran almost hopping to the food and he almost had a stroke. Forget the wild boars this puppy is going to be the end of him. The puppy finished eating and Greed threw some more whilst serving himself, this time closer to him, this continued until the canine felt in a trap laid there for him.

"You're mine now puppy." He jested in a scary tone, the animal trying to flee and Greed stopped, resting his hands on his hips, he doesn't understand why this tang dog finds him so scary. "Oy I'm not going to eat you, y'know?" And as if fate hated him the puppy started to bark, a high-pitched sound that was too cute to be intimidating. After a futile attempt to make the dog shut up Greed sighed and took it to his current shelter.

After he freed the animal it ran to the nearest corner, taking a defensive stance, Greed offered it more food, to see if it trusts him. The puppy gave tentative steps towards the food and recoiled with any kind of movement coming from Greed, he gave more food, this time boldly enough to offer it in his hand and the puppy walked towards it without hesitation, as much as Greed wanted to pat it he better not null his progress because he couldn't contain himself. His canine companion jumped and faced the door, Greed spent a lot of time with Dolcetto to know that something is nearby, his gut feelings told him to brace himself, since he wasn't attacked until now.

He left the dog in the shelter, taking with him a halberd when recalling Xiong's comments on it. The wind started to blow and the only sound was the rustle of leaves, then, immediately after the howling of wolves, six, no, seven people appeared from the trees. Greed was surprised by the increased numbers but he remembered to calm down, he fled, one of the things Ding Mi taught him was the basic tactic of using the terrain for your advantage and that's exactly what he'll do. After a week or so Greed noticed how some follow him on trees and others on the ground, so he prepared traps for that. He managed to rule out three of them with this and stopped at a glade to fight the rest.
The first person who advanced on him was hit on the solar plexus and laid there on the floor, the other three became more aware after this and Greed noticed something, two of them attack with different patterns, hopping here and there, waiting for an opening, he feels like he had seen it somewhere but he can't put his finger where.

He engaged in fight with another one and they locked his halberd on the floor with a kick, kicking his face in sequence but Greed defended himself and shoved the person away. When he got up a third one kicked him in the direction of the person he just shoved, the person grappled him by the arms, keeping him in place for the third goon to faint him so they can bind him somewhere. Greed waited for them to come closer to toss the person holding him but they evaded, this third mook attacked him and he defended mirroring their move, what came next shocked him: their arm was as hard as metal, an automail? The only person he knows that have one is...

Maybe-Lanfan noticed his hesitation and stroked his torso with her elbow, followed by a punch, Greed countered by holding her fist, he wanted to knee her torso but she rotated her arm so now she is holding his fist. The last person came in to assist Lanfan and if it's Ling he's screwed, these two have too much harmony fighting together, Greed freed his hand and defended her blow, he evaded the next one, hoping it would hit Maybe-Ling but even he evaded.

Greed fled from them while coming up with a strategy, what Bradley did to defeat Lanfan? He'll need to be faster than her, Greed recovered his halberd and moved to attack Ling as a bluff to get Lanfan, as much as he doesn't want to hit a girl he'll have to. Maybe-Ling evaded or defended every attack and the more the battle dragged on the more he felt lightheaded, from all the time his body could tell him he's under eating it decides to do now, his lucky is unbelievable. Maybe-Lanfan appeared behind him once he spotted an opening in Ling's movements and immediately he aimed a kick to her face, only she defended, with her automail, cutting his calf. She froze in place and he ignored the pain to use the leg to kick her in the hip, then the waist area to a nearby tree.

Then it occurred to him that his calf wasn't the only place she cut, and that he still had wounds from previous raids, and they might have opened. Greed's body wasn't only telling him that he is under eating, he's bleeding out. Maybe-Ling attacked him but instead of defending Greed's body gave in, his vision was darkening, Ling held him before he could fall, helping him lay on the floor. His soulmate took off his mask immediately, the look on his face that of distraught and it was the last thing he remembers that night before passing out.

"Ling."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry guys I said something in ch. 14 that would only happen on ch. 15 (^^'A
I know, I know, they don't really interact besides fighting but they do in ch. 16, but hey, at least they can talk face to face now

Also I forgot to mention, giving something that belonged to you to a loved one means a lot in ancient China, think like how in medieval settings when a maid gives her handkerchief to a knight. That's the reason they were so shocked.
"Lady Ruan is dead." Dai said as he placed a white stone on the weiqi board, putting two of his in danger, but.

"Yet we got something even better out of her execution." He analyzed the board and elected to ignore the endangered pieces, instead opting to press into Dai’s territory. His brother looked at the board with little emotion and blocked his path.

"What do you plan to do with her?"

"She won’t part with information..., I could use her to make Hongzi acknowledge Yan as an independent state...or..." He placed a piece on a forgotten place, putting them in a deadlock, the move affected Dai negatively, making Shuang smirk. "We could deal an emotional blow on him."

"He’ll start a war if you do that."

"Ling’s a coward." His personal assistant approached with a letter in hands, a golden chrysanthemum stamped on it. Shuang and Dai eyed each other apprehensively, Dai grabbed the letter in his place, softening his expression the longer he read the letter, after finishing he handed it to his older brother. Yes, the letter wasn’t anything alarming. "Xiyi, send some of my guardians to Wenchang, we need to see what Lanhua is doing in the area." Xiyi bowed, excusing himself while doing so. When he exited Shuang’s cousin entered his study, once he switched his attention to her she leaned on the nearest column while crossing her arms.

"The Zhao are inviting you to see Her Royal Highness."

"So prepare a ride, we’re going right away."
A servant appeared in her room to place the food on the table and left, as for Linyu, all she did was seat beneath the window, leaning on the wall as she lost track of time. For how long is she locked in this room? Two months? 'You're not using me as a hostage, if you try to use me to negotiate with my son I'll off myself so he won't have to.' She meant that, and if she'll have to follow this through she will, but does she want it? No, Linyu wished she could have spent more time with her son, her friends and family, Kui...Linyu sighed, just when she finally saw herself free from that monster this happens.

Are the Yao destined to have unsuccessful love lives? Her father is the best example of that, though three examples don't make a rule. She won't deny that every time the door opens her heart jumps, they are the people who tried to poison her in the past, who knows what they might try this time, and talking about father, what is he doing right now? Is he trying to rescue her?

She heard the sound of heavy keys and she composed herself, refusing to show her vulnerability to them. Her captors bowed in her presence but she barely spared a glance, not only is the Zhao brat here, the Yin rascal joined him.

"As beautiful as ever My Lady. How are the Zhao treating you? I'd hate to know they're hurting such a pretty face like yours."

"Flattery won't get you anywhere Yin child, what is it that you want?" The rebel leader chuckled and moved closer to her, when he got close enough he sat cross legged in front of her.

"I just want to talk." He said and she couldn't help but notice the similar features he shared with his father.

"Then I want to know how it feels to be the first Prince and yet not inherit the throne." She hoped this would've insulted him, poured salt in an old wound, and for a moment she thought she did it, but then he started to laugh, a loud, joyful sound that threw her off.

"I think the real question is: 'how do I feel about having a father that chooses his successor based on a stupid hunt instead of his heir's overall abilities.', to that I say I hate it, I absolutely hate it and it just shows how this empire has hit rock bottom."

"So you plan on fixing our country." It was an honest question, because if there's anything she
learned from history, is that people act either for personal gain or because they genuinely think what they're doing is for the best of the country, and Shuang might be the latter.

"Yes, but I'm not telling how. If I did I'd have to kill you, and I don't want that." The way he talks, trying to sound sympathetic when it’s clear he sees her as nothing but a thing, a doll, like his father did, is insulting.

“Of course you don’t. What do you plan to trade me for?”

“I could tell you, it’s not like you’ll understand the reason behind it.” He got on his knees, ready to stand, but instead lifted her chin, their closeness making her uncomfortable. “But I think you should wait and see. So don’t kill yourself, I’d hate it if you did.” He headed for the door leaving the Zhao rebel behind to close it.

Chan followed him out of the room and into the inner courtyard, the Zhao Manor is a humble residence compared to his own, but he likes their inner garden with it’s desert flowers, he can’t say the same of the dry air in the area.

“I thought we wanted her dead.” His little brother asked after catching up with him. He swears, this kid.

“That’s one of our plans, yes, is the first one fails, and Chan” He turned to his brother, placing his hands on his shoulders. “Have you never heard of reverse psychology? I’m disappointed.”

-------------

Ling is here.

No matter how hard he try, his mind keeps coming back to this one fact. He doesn't know how he feels about it, doesn't know if it's true or a mere fever dream, it's surreal and yet real. He fainted yesterday and Greed swears the face he saw was Ling’s, he wanted it to be, and also it made sense, why else is he laying comfortably on the floor with all his wounds tended, Xiong wouldn’t do that.

A lick on his fingers rescued him from his thoughts, and yet, in a trance-like motion, Greed glanced at the puppy that now isn't afraid of him anymore, hunting did wonders for their relationship. The animal seemed happy that it got his attention since it is hungry and Greed ended
getting up and preparing it's food, funny thing is, once it got over it's fears the puppy is actually quiet.

"I still haven't give you a name yet right?" He said and followed by examining the dog's features, it got bigger in the week Xiong took him to heal, he's probably the size of his forearm, what is the name of it's breed? Tang dog? He recalls Xiong once calling him 'fluffy-lion dog' which is a cool name. "You're a dog like Dolcetto..., you're all puffy and cute, and you have the same color as that pudding, what was it? Doufuhua? Doufu…. Dolfu. Dolfu! That's your name!" He said, feeling proud of himself

"Say, Dolfu, you really helped me out yesterday, and you helped me earlier tracking that wildboar. I should train you to be a guard dog and fetch people for me." Dolfu looked up as if he noticed Greed was talking to him then tilted his head to the side, god he's too cute. "What I'm doing, talking to an animal?"

"Now that's something you don't see everyday." He would recognize this smooth voice anywhere. "Greed, dog whisperer." Ling then crossed his arms and now he can confirm that yes, Ling is here in Wenchang.

"Don't you have jobs? What are you guys doing here?" Greed asked, not making any effort to hide his smile.

"My job is to be where His Majesty is." Lanfan responded without her usual stiffness which surprised him, then it struck him that she is timid and must be only now opening to him.

"And my job is to watch over the country."

"And what that have to do with anything?"

"Sometimes I have to watch over an asshole or two, so there it is."

"Taking care of yourself isn't a job."

"Now is that any way to talk to your husband?" Xiong interrupted as he approached them, then he looked at Dolfu. "This explains why you seemed ready for our raid yesterday." Greed reached for his dog to caress it's back, he's a good boy, he deserves it. Xiong rested his hands on his hips and
looked dissatisfied with his discovery. "He'll have to go."

"What? No!" Instinctively Greed held Dolfu on his arms defensively. Abandon him after finally gaining his trust? Hell no.

"You have to learn how to read qi, you'll not do it with your puppy telling you when we're near." Ling reasoned but he calls that bullshit, he doesn't care if he's being stubborn, he's not abandoning the puppy and that's final.

"But I already know how to track you lot with jing, isn't that enough?"

"If you want to learn waidanshu you must know how to read qi, there's no walking around it." Shit Ling has a point, yet he will not abandon Dolfu, he needs to think of something, quick.

"I'm training him to be a guard dog and to fetch people when I ask him. Do you know how to do that?" Xiong and Ling shook their heads, great. "See? I need him here with me."

"I know how to train dogs to do just that." Lanfan butted in and Greed's face fell as he felt his victory slip through his fingers like sand.

"And I can teach it how to hunt." Yongji proposed and you know what? Fuck them, they won, and he hates to admit it, but they did and he hates them. Ling got closer to take the puppy from him and carried Dolfu in his arms.

"You can't steal my son."

"He's my son now." Ling teased.

"You better turn him into the best guard dog in Xing."

"I promise." Then Ling handed Dolfu to Lanfan and Yongji was all but orbiting her to get a chance at carrying the puppy. They all left but Ling and Greed had to raise an eyebrow.
"Wanting me all to yourself? Greedy?" Ling chuckled and sat beside him, propping his jaw on one hand.

"Is there a problem in being greedy? Lay on the floor." He said playfully and Greed tsked.

"Am I your bitch now?" However this didn't stopped him from slanting himself on his arms, might as well do what he said. Admittedly this reminded him of his last night in the palace, and having Ling using his abs as pillows had this unusual casual vibe going that he liked, that is the reason he's doing what the brat ordered, nothing more.

"All of Xing is my bitch." This made Greed snicker and he smiled in response.

"Funny story, I called Truth a bitch before coming back."

"You insulting beings way out of your league? Color me surprised." Ling laid down on Greed's stomach, and once he was comfortable the former sin looked down to meet his eyes.

"So, how are you doing? I know there's no way you could be feeling better with your mom still a hostage, but how are things going with the negotiations? Do you have any news?" Ling breathed deeply to calm down and sort his feelings, running everything he did on his mind to draw a conclusion before answering him.

"As good as anyone in my situation would be, but to be honest, I try to have fun, and I even have sometimes, but in the end my thoughts come back to her. Grandpa requested Feng's presence. I hope things doesn't end in a war." It was so much easier to talk with Greed here with him, and it was way more satisfying to say these things in his presence, he had no idea how much he missed the ex-homunculus until now that they're talking face to face.

"I'll be honest, I have no idea of what to say to comfort you right now, I don't even think there's something you can say to comfort someone in your situation. But if there is anything I can do for you, say it." Ling lifted himself a little, just enough to have a better look at Greed's face, and he smiled, his heart is as big as his ego indeed.

"Then continue to be silly." Ling moved just a little, so now his arms are sustaining his weight on the floor while his chin is propped on his hand.
"I'll be your pathetic bitch then." Greed winked but this made Ling feel remorseful, ashamed of even thinking of Greed as 'pathetic', he said that without thinking and never that it occurred to him that Greed would listen to it, but now that he did he better apologize.

"Greed, look, I'm sorry, it was just a drunken rambling and I, I."

"Don't sweat it kid, I say worst things about you." He shrugged his shoulders and Ling stared at him as if he was another person. Really, he goes and apologizes and that's how he responds? Why he bothers anyway?

"So that's how it is? Hope you get eaten by bears." Greed snickered and laid on the floor completely, with his arms bent behind his head.

"For what? For you to go cry to Xiong? 'Wah, my very handsome friend was killed by bears, why I wasn't there for him?"' Ling doesn't know why but he chuckled, maybe is how Greed's voice sounds in a higher pitch, or his interpretation of Ling's psyche that couldn't be farther from the truth.

"Bold of you to think I find you handsome."

"I can't find any other reason for you to jump on me at every second." It not exactly this, and he isn't completely wrong, but trying to change his mind will only lead to headaches so Ling opted to drop the topic.

"Did the clothes I've sent you arrived?"

"Huh? Yes, they did, I liked the cape."

Ling raised an eyebrow. "It's called a 'doupeng'."

"It's still a cape. Say, are the girls really good at training animals? I've never seen them even mentioning those things so." 'I don't know if I should trust them with Dolfu.' Is Ling's bet on what he refrained from saying, he can't say he blames Greed from doubting their abilities, and Ling wanted to reassure him, both to calm Greed down and to defend his childhood friends' reputation.
"Lanfan's mother trains hawks and dogs to hunt and send messages, I've seen her training a dog once."

"Never heard of hunting hawks, how that works?"

"You send a hawk to hunt down birds, quite simple." Greed accepted the answer without further questioning and patted Ling's waist, he didn't get immediately what Greed wanted but he moved from him nonetheless. They get up and exit the shelter, the sun high in the light winter sky, the sun rays are weak against his skin and he wonders how the mountain must look in the morning if at noon it is so picturesque.

"I should go hunt before it gets dark, I'm thinking on hunting a bear, I could use some fur when it starts to snow." Greed started to stretch and Ling stopped to look at the clothes he's using, his father's hunting garb, it was a good thing to include it among the other clothes.

"Don't get eaten then."

"Yeah, promise." After that they bid goodbye and went on their own paths, Greed going up while he went down. Ling ran in his mind mental notes of what to do, first thing being give a call to Yue for any news in the court, the next big thing was confront Xiong and know why the hell he told that to Greed.

The walk was faster than he thought and while he had to wait for Xiong to return from work it was a time spent fast by watching the girls train Greed's dog and getting to know Ran, he doesn't think she is as skilled as Mei when it comes to healing, but her knowledge of neidanshu got him hooked. As for Yue, she mentioned that things are calm, of course, and that Feng might arrive at the Yao camp tomorrow. No negotiations have started as far as she knows.

Xiong appeared home when the sun was almost completely set, and when Ling told him he wanted to talk, the young general took him to the main room.

"I'm all yours."

"Why you told Greed about the after party?" Xiong avoided eye contact, seemingly uncertain, and Ling awaited, he wants an answer and he'll have it. He heard screams on the patio outside and turned to check on the girls, they were surrounding the puppy with smiles in their faces, so Ling assumed they fell for it's charms.
"He asked about the rebellion and I ended talking about you and Feng too." The mention of his cousin drew the attention of his guards, particularly Yongji. He also was curious, after all he too was confused about their relationship, one day Feng is angry when mentioning him, the other he's gushing over a gift he sent.

"Can you tell me? About you and Feng? When I talked about you before the Autumn Festival he was angry."

Xiong gave a nervous laugh. "You remember that we bought you to your room that night?" Ling nodded. "After that he invited me to his room and I'll spare you of the details. The day after he wanted us to be a thing, but I refused." Ling hummed, barely keeping a straight face, whilst absorbing the information given to him, after Xiong finished he noticed his guardians plus Ran were with them in the room.

"So Feng was dumped?" Lanfan asked in her typical deadpan tone and the information became ten times funnier, first it was him bursting into laugh then, likely because of his laughter, the others joined him. There's so much to take from this, for once he'll have something to use against Feng next time he mention one of his past crushes.

Little by little the laughter died off and Ling decided to take a look at Dolfu, he's chubby and fluffy and doesn't match Greed at all, still, to think that Greed fell head over heels for this puppy is cute.

"How's Greed? Did his wounds healed right?" Ran asked after a while.

"You'll need more than that to kill that guy, still, he should pay more attention to his opponents. What do you think, Your Majesty?"

"He's way better. If he tried to face me or Lanfan in his first day he wouldn't lay a finger on us, if he continue like this Greed will be able to take down any soldier." Greed is learning fast and Ling is satisfied with this, thanks to no small part to his teacher, and, even if he still hates to think about it, King Bradley. It can be also the influence of his other siblings, but honestly aside from Bradley Ling doesn't think any of the other homunculi knew how to fight, although he never met Lust.

They continued to chat, and at one time Ran mentioned the Spring Festival, Ling had to inform them that he'll return to Zhongjian when the Festival is closer, as it is the tradition for the Emperor to make an announcement to his people in the first day, Xiong also told them that he plans on visiting Zhongjian in time for the Lantern Festival, which made them jealous that he had someone
to celebrate the last day of the Spring Festival with. Their merry conversation stopped once one of Xiong's men appeared in the door, gasping and looking desperate.

"General we have urgent news! We found the bandits hideout! They're in Baishe mountain, in a different cavern from last time!" They all looked shocked from the news, Ling’s first instinct was to look at Xiong, to see his reaction, his other whim was to climb the mountain and warn Greed, or better, defeat every single one of those bandits. Xiong acted first, getting up and exiting the room, followed by Ling and rest. He didn't know what Xiong was up to until he left home to climb the mountain, all the while Ling's heart was thundering in his chest, his senses unaware of his surroundings, only preoccupied in following Xiong. They stopped in the dojo where Greed's master was sitting in the stairs, calm despite their distressed expressions.

"Master where's my Hushen Polearm?" The moment Xiong mentioned the weapon his master glared.

"Why do you need such a weapon?" He questioned, his voice was stern and Ling felt a sudden curiosity rise, wondering if said weapon is the famed Zhou heirloom grandpa told him once.

"We found the location of the bandits, Greed is in danger!" Xuan nodded and for a moment Ling felt relieved, that is until he spoke.

"Let him handle this alone."

"Why!?" Xiong took the words out of his mouth.

"Greed is capable of handling then alone, I trust his abilities."

"But Master what if he's killed?" Ran persisted, and maybe now that she mentioned the risk of letting Greed up in the mountain he'll relent.

"He won't, if he can defeat my students he can take on lowly bandits." Why he have to be so stubborn?

"That's beside the point! These guys have guns and Greed isn't fast enough, he will get hurt!" This time Ling tried to talk some sense in their master, hoping that his position would do the trick, he remained in his posture, steadfast, and Ling dreaded his answer.
"Let me give you a question, Your Majesty. How do you think Your Majesty became so good at fighting? Isn't it because of the real threats You, the Holy and Exalted One had to face? Trust Greed, he can face them, and if he dies, you can execute me." He has a point, he must begrudgingly accept, however just because he's sure Greed is capable of fending those people off it doesn't mean he should do so blind.

"I won't argue anymore, but I'll warn him, I don't want him to be caught off guard." Master Xuan gave him a curt nod, and Ling glanced at Lanfan, she bowed and left to search for Greed, now he just need to wait for news.

-------------

Greed doesn't know how much time he spent trying to find a bear, he did find a cub but what monster willingly kills a baby? That and even if he killed it it's fur won't serve for anything. The sun started to descend the horizon and so he decided to take one last look before giving up and relocate his shelter. After weighing his options Greed placed his bets on the river, bears eat fish so that makes sense, he arrived at a stream and saw movement on the other side. Fearing that it might be Xiong and his gang he stopped to sense their jing, but immediately halted it when he felt a big number of living beings behind him. His heartbeat became so strong it was hurting his chest, and the first cue that one: they're human; and two: they aren't Xiong's men was the sound of metal clicking.

"Nice clothes ya have there, boy." Ugh, devaju. A dozen or so people got out of hiding and got closer and Greed wanted to smack himself for not noticing them earlier. "Wait. Golden eyes? Ha! Ya seen’ that boys? Our luck just got even better! Imagine how much Lady Lanhua will pay us to get ‘im back?" They all cheered and the mention of Lanhua sent shivers down his spine. He have to think quick, he can't evade bullets in this distance, hell he doesn't think he can evade bullets at all.

Now would be a good time for Xiong to attack him.

Greed raised his arms, no point in fighting, they're going to kill him, eventually Xiong and the others will appear and see that he is nowhere and they'll rescue him. Their leader was satisfied with his reaction and Greed wanted to punch him when he started to talk as if he was a dog. Know what? Screw it, they want to sell him anyway. Greed stole the first melee weapon in sight and hit the bandit leader in the chin, consequences be damned, then he felt a strong hit on his nape and everything went black.

-------------
Trees, waymarks, streams, no matter where she looked she couldn't find him and just this once Lanfan wanted Greed to be a homunculus again, it would be so easy to track him down, she could chance to jing and take a hunch at the quantity of jing he has and follow a singular entity, but that's a gamble and a much safer option came to mind. Xiong told them how Greed has the habit of changing between hideouts to make them search for him everyday, and so Lanfan went to his previous camp, the one they found him earlier.

She felt her heart sink to her stomach when she found, to her horror, that the place was untouched.

Chapter End Notes

Weiqi is the original name of Go, that board game with black and white peebles and a grid. I think it is also known as chinese chess (?) I think Mei already said what the Lantern Festival is, it's the last day of the Chinese New Year and is quite romantic, although I think this is obvious by how they all reacted in this chapter.

In case you forgot about Shuang and Dai, I wrote them in this chapter. :V They'll appear more (well, at least Shuang will, next chapter) I should do a villain timeline to have an idea of what they're doing while Ling does his things.

Comments and feedbacks are appreciated. :3
Apple of the Eye

Chapter Summary

We see the end of Truth's and Greed's deal.

Chapter Notes

I you're wondering what the hell was passing through my mind when I had written the first part, see End Notes.

Also you're in for a ride.
(Not a rollercoaster, just a regular ride, I mean if you can constitute what will happen as a ride, oh well just read and tell me what you think)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He woke up by the smell of wet rock and the discomfort in his body, Greed tried to move and the first thing that greeted him was a sharp pain in his neck, a reminder of yesterday, or maybe earlier today, he has no idea of how much time passed, he isn’t exhausted by the lack of sleep, so maybe the former. What he has idea of, however, is that he's in a cell and that he was captured by bandits who want to sell him to that psycho Lanhua. Sell.... He's going to become a slave and he can't do anything to stop that.

There is a dim light coming from where he presume is the door, his vision adjusted to the place and realization hit him like a boulder, the place is dark and small, and it triggered something in his mind, a nasty, strong shiver ran down his whole body and he found himself almost unable to breath, the darkness like a heavy blanket against his frame. Damned be his father and his claustrophobia, from all the things he could get from his old man living in his conscience of course it had to be this. It's getting harder and harder to breath and his lungs are hurting, no, it isn't just claustrophobia is it? It's the fear of being locked forever, that is their biggest fear, that is the thing he is fearing right now.

Greed got up on his knees and moved to the nearest wall and leaned on it, sitting and trying his hardest to calm down and even his breathing. It can't end like this, there's so much he wants to do, needs to do.

He continued to pace his breathing until it slowly returned to normal, at this time his mind started to run images of those dear to him: his teachers, the Zhou, the pipsqueak, the Devil's Nest gang, Ling...
Truth's twisted smile.

An alchemical formula.

Greed's eyes widened in shock at the sudden image played in his head, it's not from his memory, he's sure of that, an alchemical formula he had never seen in his life, what was that? A circle, a hexagram, what else was in there? Greed moved again, staying on his knees as he supported himself with his arms against the wall. He concentrated again, it's a memory from Dad Dearest that's for sure, he fished for the image, trying his hardest to remember, a circle? No, two circles, and what more? A hexagram, and a smaller circle with a straight line cutting through it. What was the purpose of it? What did it do?

More importantly what they mean? If he remembers it he'll know the answers. *As a human you have infinite possibilities.* That was the last thing Truth told him. Endless possibilities right? He must remember the things he read from Father's books while he was sleeping, or the few things he learned in the Devil's Nest. The circle with a straight line is salt, or the human body, that he remembers clearly, and the hexagram are the four elements.

Body, fire, earth, water and air?


Carbon.

"...the element that is part of our body structure that can be turned into something extremely resistant and durable is something that constitutes one third of our body, carbon!"

Greed decided to give it a try, having no other viable option, but first he need a way to draw the circle so he searched for anything this rock cell had to offer and to his dismay, he found nothing. Out of frustration he punched the wall, no, it can't end like this! What if Xiong and Ling arrive too late? He can't rely on them every time. Greed punched more and stopped once he felt a stinging pain on his fingers....maybe, if he continues the stone will cut his skin and he'll bleed. That's it, now with a new resolution, Greed continued to punch the wall, ignoring the pain until it was unbearable. He withdrew his hand to check on it, and when he saw blood he began to draw the circle in his head, Greed stayed still, ready to perform his first transmutation as a human and hoping that this is what he think it is.
"Hey boss, that guy was making a fuss on his cell." Sun said as they entered the room, he was busy writing a report to their princess, a tedious work but it needed to be done.

"Explain." He said while his eyes were still glued to his work.

"I think he was punching the wall."

"He's just ventin', no need to worry. Let the boy be, the sooner we sell him to Lady Lanhua the sooner we're outta 'ere."

"What about Xiong?" Now it was Lei's time to ask, the boy was shaken by just mentioning his name. They did broke their deal with him, but he isn't scared of that kid, not with their new toys.

"No need to worry about that superhuman brat, even a tiger when outnumbered can be defeated, this town here is chock full of people fed up by the government, they'll join us if given the opportunity. We just need to shake them up a little, ya know?" He finally finished the damn thing and handed it to Lei so the boy can revise it, then another member offered him a cup of wine and he called his fellow men to toast. "Hongzi or Shuang, I don't give a fuck about who's in power, as long as things are in chaos I'm home!" He raises his cup and his companions do the same, then one of his henchmen that he left there to guard the stud comes running, gasping for air.

"Th-that guy broke free! He teared the door open and killed the gatekeeper with his bare hands!"

"Yes, yes! Now that's the shit! I'm back in my game bitches!" Greed proclaimed after killing the third bandit in the corridor and he laughed, a boisterous, malicious sound that reverberated through the stone corridor to tell of his freedom and total enjoyment of his situation. More people arrived at the end of the corridor and they sported guns, Greed touched the wall to transmute a thick wall to block their attack and he strolled to the opposite direction.

He heard the commotion on the other side of the wall and smirked, he has never felt so well and so
alive like he's doing right now, how much he missed his claws, this time he felt his skin burn and it hurt like hell, but he doesn't care, and to top it off the snake fangs martial arts match his ultimate shield like soulmates. Greed saw a couple of goons sitting and chatting with their rifles ready and he felt something sadistic take control of him so he ran in their direction, they could barely react before he pierced the first one in the waist and cut the latter's rifle, this one he spared when he noticed it was a girl and just broke the weapons before she had any chance to use it against him.

"Where's the exit?" She recoiled to the wall, shaking and whimpering, but still drawing out a dagger from somewhere in her clothes. He hummed in interest and approached her, the chic tried to attack him but he twisted her arm behind her back and pressed her against the wall. "I'll repeat, where's the exit?" Greed purred and she started to fight in his grasp, having found a new set of balls, they both heard a weak groan and looked down, the asshole was still alive. "Oh look, he's alive, not for long. I can change that if you want, but only if you tell me the exit." A couple, how lucky of him. They exchanged glances and she looked at him again.

"I'll not tell!" She was frowning and he shrugged, humans and their stupid habit of defiance. If that's how they want it, whatever, Greed released her only to transmute rock bars around them, this way she won't get help. "Curse you!" She clutched at the bars, close to breaking into tears, he felt a hint of hesitation and moved away last he does something stupid, when he turned his back to her she resolved to curse him with a lot of colorful things, he didn't care as much as simply flipping her off.

It didn't take much for him to get lost and use jing to guide him through the places, he's also not feeling dizzy from lack of sleep anymore and he wonders if these idiots noticed how much of a bad idea it was to let him sleep. His journey through the tunnels was uneventful which, to his rushing blood and sudden homicidal thoughts, was anticlimactic, that's what he gets for blocking most of them with a wall.

Then he felt a single jing coming in his direction and he felt his blood pump again, when Greed was ready to attack the person who appeared in front of him looked as if she saw a ghost.

"Lanfan?"

"You're free." She pointed the obvious, then she looked at his arms and torso and turned her back, having pieced everything out. "I've searched for you for three days, they're worried about you." She snatched a top from a nearby corpse and gave it to him, which he begrudgingly accepted, just when he was starting to like those new clothes.

"And you? Were you worried about me as well?" She lowered her head slightly and he took it, it's as best of an answer as he'll get. Greed was following her to the exit, and sometimes along the path he saw the corpses of bandits unlucky enough to engage in a fight with her. "You did all of this?
"Girl you rock! You have to teach me this."

"When you learn the Zhou stealth techniques you'll get closer to Yongji's level, trust me, you'll prefer her style." Greed hummed, he forgot about the stealth lessons, maybe he really should invade the manor. "He's worried sick you know? I don't want him to be stressed, so you better quick your pace."

"Huh, sure." Lanfan started to run and he had to pick up pace, on their last turn Greed saw light pick from the entrance and he felt his heart beat faster from excitement, free at last.

Outside they encountered Ling and Yongji, the Zhou brothers and, surprisingly, Master Xuan, they were over some feet away from the entrance and when he and Lanfan approached Ran ran in his direction and clutched herself on him, he was going to tease her but stopped when he heard her sobbing.

"Hey Ran, you sure you want to rub your face on this dirty rag?" She nodded furiously, still clutched to him.

"I don't mind. I, I was afraid! I thought I'd never see you again." She looked up and he chuckled, like he predicted her face got dirty.

Greed patted her head. "You're such a kid." The others came closer too, with Xiong giving a light punch on his shoulders – later shaking his hand to alleviate the pain – and Ling smiling once their eyes met. As for Master Xuan, he bowed, which confused Greed.

"I must apologize for neglecting you, Greed. If I did as they asked this wouldn't have happened."

"Well if I wasn't captured I wouldn't learn how to do this." He showed his arms to them and save for Ling and Lanfan, the rest was scared.

"How did you got it back?"

"He always had that?" Xiong asked, incredulous, then Ling nodded.
"Easy, I punched a wall until my hand bleed, then drew the transmutation circle in my hand." Ling brushed his lips, lost in his own thoughts, the Zhou siblings, in their turn, touched his arm, curious and wary at the same time.

"Do you know how to revert it?" Ran asked and he paused to think, surely the circle can revert it right?

Right?

Since Greed stayed in silence for long enough Master Xuan sighed and went to examine his skin. "There's still qi running through your skin, then this," he placed his hands around Greed's arm, the shockwaves making his skin turn to normal. "should do it." Greed took the top off and offered the other arm as well for his master to heal, after he did he hid his hands on his sleeves. "When you learn how to feel the Dragon's Flow Lady Yuan will teach you waidanshu, I suggest you only use this technique once you learn how to revert it."

"We better go down, everyone is worried and grandpa wants to blow up the place. So we better show him you're ok." Xiong patted his back and went ahead, then they all followed behind with Greed at the rear as he walked slower than the rest.

Now that the adrenaline rush is over and he is sufficiently calm to register what just happened, it all feels out of this world. Greed stared at his hand, the one that had the ouroboros tattoo, the mark is still there, vouching for the events that just occurred.

---------------------

The figure in front of him isn’t a white silhouette anymore, but the monster he transformed into when using the full shield. Greed didn’t had much time to process the implications of that as the door behind him began to open, and small, black hands danced in his body. He cant describe the feeling, only that it is agonizing, they started to drag him to the other side and he noticed, with utter desperation, that he had nothing: no possessions to call his own, no name and no acquaintances. He is dead, but worse, he’s barren.

“Wait!” He shouted, but his voice was barely audible next to the disturbing sounds from the other side. “What about my abilities!?” His other self smiled.

“You can recreate most of your abilities as a human, you have endless possibilities now.”
The door close before his eyes, and a headache inducing amalgamation of past events rushed through him, too fast to grasp their meaning and too fast to process what was happening in this black void. Be it Father’s or from his siblings, it was harrow and disturbing, and, in a brief moment of self-realization he came to the conclusion: He was everyone and yet he was only Greed.

--------------------

He never thought he'd return to a camp so soon after the rebellion, yet if it means he'll bring even a modicum of peace into Ling's life doing so, he's more than glad, that boy endured a lot of shit in his life that he didn't deserve, all of them really. Feng smiled to himself, he's more protective of Ling then he is of Mixi and she is his younger sibling.

He's here to act in Ling’s stead and instill order in camp between ally clans under the Imperial seal. Does he wants this? Not really, he was called while focusing on doing the task Ling gave him, and he absolutely hates doing something while focused on another and to be honest Qianshuan should be doing this, he is the General of the Court, the person right below Her Imperial Highness. Note to self: write a list of every title in the palace and their duties and hand it to grandpa.

Feng raised his palm to one of his armored maids and she handed his feather fan, now he can make an entrance to the main tent. "Like the Commander requested...why are you the only one here?" Inside the only soul in sight was his grandfather, sitting in a random wood stool in the big council table, raising an arm with his palm stretched.

"Hi Feng. Beautifully dressed as always."

"One of your grandkids must know how to." He said as he walked closer to Lord Yao, he grabbed the stool beside him to seat. "You didn't answer my question grandfather."

"Oh this old bones just wanted to talk to you alone." He was quirkier than usual and it drew suspicion, Feng acted like he didn't noticed that and leaned on the table.

"This is great and all, but when will the negotiations start?"

"They sent a messenger to us yesterday saying they wanted to talk today, it was about time to be honest, but we know what is going on, they bought reinforcements in case things exploded." Feng
nodded, it's probably the case, two months is enough to set their defenses and position troops.

"You think the Yin army is here as well."

"The Ming too. But that's not what I want to talk about my bee, I'm so happy that you found your peony." Memories from when he caught Xiong training came to mind, the way he looked so fierce and graceful with the halberd, he looks so different when serious, so handsome, so majestic, like the ancient kings of Zhou, and yet when he's smiling he's so youthful, and so cute when he is being a dork. He's a beautiful bundle of contradictions.

"I wouldn't exactly call Xiong a peony, more like a bamboo-" He stopped abruptly, having caught on the insinuation. "And I wasn't pining over him, it was the opposite."

"Don't mind the little details, what matters is that you two are seeing each other, I couldn't be happier! So, tell me, is he a good partner? A good lover?" He remembered the calls of apology, the flirtatious letters full of sweet nothings, the romantic poems, and then, the battle fan, it was so thoughtful of him Feng couldn't be angry anymore and finally answered.

"Yes." His voice was filled with longing and he knows that. "To both questions, although I was drunk that time so I'll have to do it once more to have a real opinion." He quickly added and his grandfather smiled, a sincere smile that showed how happy he was for him. As sweet and wholesome as this is it's weird that he knows about him and Xiong being a thing since he only confided to Xiuying and Ling, he doubts it was his wife for a couple of reasons, so. "Who told you about me and Xiong? Was it my sweetest cousin?"

"Yes." Feng accepted the answer without fuss. When this negotiation ends he is so telling grandpa of his diner date with Greed, he could lie and say they slept together but not only will grandpa be more worried than excited – after all Ling is inexperienced – and if he discovered the truth he doesn't think he could handle his wrath. He needs to teach Ling a few things.

"The Zhao are here!" Their messenger announced and opened the tent to the Zhao envoys, along with them generals of the Han and Yao clans entered the tent as well. The former Zhao Prince sat in front of grandpa and he went from affable to serious in a blink of an eye, it's chilling.

"I hope I didn't make the gentlemen wait. Like my messenger said, we'd like to negotiate." Lord Yao crossed his arms, not buying into his politeness.
“Negotiate? You're lucky your head is still over your shoulder instead of in a pike like the traitors you are.” This flustered the young rebel Prince but he maintained his manners, instead of paying attention to him Feng's eyes drifted to one of his men, this particular person was completely covered and it made him suspicious.

“You sure you want to act like that Lord Yao? I have your daughter as prisoner, don't you forget it.” He must be around Ling's age or younger and yet he's trying to act like he's big fish, of course Lord Cheng didn't take none of that.

“Hum, a threat? You want to kill her? Do it, I dare you. But I'll warn you, the moment you do it do not expect to come out of this camp in one piece Zhao brat, and I always keep my word.” This put him in his place and then, out of nowhere, the suspicious person started to laugh, this put all attention on him, while the Yao generals looked at the figure as if he was crazy Prince Zhao looked at him for comfort and then it clicked.

“They're out of your league little brother, forget it.” Then he took the mask off and most of the allied generals frowned, it's Yin Shuang. "Just as I expected from our fearsome Lord Yao, the one who killed his own friend for his people, admirable.” He's talking about Tsuruya and it hurts, probably more on him than in his grandpa, but still to be reminded by a lousy traitor like him that you killed a lover for the sake of duty must be too much. The fact that Lord Yao isn't showing any emotion is awe inspiring.

“Think you can bring a better deal to the table? Amuse me.”

“Then I'll try. Tell my naive brother that he either allow us to trade between allies or Lianyang will go up in flames.” If he had to describe the scene in the tent in one word, it would be disorder, subsequently discussions started and evolved into arguing, Feng didn't bother to discern any of them, instead he faced Shuang and felt his anger rise when he realized how satisfied the rebel Prince was, and how dangerous he's proving to be.

“We don't need to accept your demands, we can defend the city.” One of the Han generals said, Shuang crossed his arms and sighed, making sure to sound patronizing while doing so.

“You're not understanding are you? My men are well disguised, so unless you arrest every single citizen of Lianyang, you're not avoiding this.” Shuang shook his head in a condescending way. "So, you're calling His Majesty right?"

“There's no need to do so, I know my grandson and what he would do. I accept your deal but with one condition: all your trades will be under heavy supervision. You won't get anything better than
this." The rebel leader ducked his head before getting up, cueing his generals to do the same.

"I liked to negotiate with you Lord Yao, yes, I accept your terms. No-"

"We're here to negotiate my daughter's freedom, you're not leaving until we do so." And to cement his argument, members of the Guardians of Yao locked the tent. Shuang frowned, feeling the power balance tilt to their side, and Feng could see a hint of anger in his eyes, so that is how he acts when things don't go his way. He returned to his seat, once more wearing the amiable mask, and clasped his fingers on the table.

"But I thought you were okay with her dying. Jokes aside, first I need to know, how much does Hongzi value his public image and tradition?"

-------------

Greed is in his previous room right now, resting, and from his balcony he can see part of the building. When he exited the cave with Lanfan he thought he would faint from relief, Ling couldn't do things right when he went missing and so to see him again, he can't put words on what he felt at that time. When did he become so dependent on Greed? He is changing little by little and he doesn't know why.

Yet, when he saw Greed descent the path to meet them he felt a strong pain in his chest he wasn't expecting, and as a consequence a voice kept poisoning his mind, telling him that Greed must regret even starting this training, that everything was his fault, if he didn't send him off to Wen against his will this wouldn't have happened, those bandits wouldn't have captured him, and all of this because he forgot to talk to Yumei, to lose the restrain on police officers and their treatment of thieves, because he's soft this happened to Greed, and he was lucky to get his ultimate shield back, what about other citizens? Those who can't fend for themselves? Only god knows what happens to these people and it's all his fault.

"Won't you talk to him?" Lanfan asked, a hand on her hips, after Ling stayed outside for god knows how long.

"I, I don't know, I, Lanfan, I don't know what to tell him."

"Then tell the truth, tell what you think, what you feel. He won't blame you for what happened, because it isn't your fault." He wanted to believe that as much as she does, Ling didn't move,
instead he supported his elbows on his thighs, leaning his forehead on his fingers. Lanfan sighed and moved closer, once in front of him she squatted to have a better look of his face. "Your Majesty."

"We're in casual company Lanfan." Ling smiled and she avoided his gaze for a second before facing him again.

"Young Master, instead of wallowing in self pity you should do something to change this. If you ignore Greed you'll be only hurting him." She's right, he grabbed her arms, nudging her to get up so he can do as well, once up Yongji appeared from the door, seemingly picking on their conversation from behind the door. "What is Yonyon doing eavesdropping?"

"Thon't call me Yonyon!" She was blushing and they chuckled.

"You where caught in a trap on the latest raid, you deserve to be called Yonyon." Lanfan can be so evil with her sometimes, yet seeing Yongji being called 'Yonyon' bring back memories.

"I chust, I just wanted to say that Ling should act fast before Ran snatches Grid from him." He felt a strong pang in his chest followed by his heartbeat speeding in embarrassment, oh please not Yongji too.

"Greed. Look, I already have my family insinuating things, I don't need you too." His face was heating too now, thanks body, and Yongji began to giggle.

"He reminds me of big brother." She suddenly confessed and Ling made an effort to not show pity, Yongji had made it clear countless times in the past that doing so had only stopped her from moving on.

"Taocai was mostly nice and sometimes a jerk. Greed is the opposite of that." Lanfan said and Yongji shook her head.

"Then you didn't know Taocai."

"Although it makes sense that you think they're alike, after all-"
"Alright, I get it! I'm going to see him, no need to embarrass me to death." Ling threw his arms in exasperation and left the building. Correction, Lanfan is evil, period, there were better ways to convince him to talk to Greed dammit. It was getting dark and colder so he walked fast to Greed's house and knocked the door once there, wishing for Greed to answer fast, he didn't put on warmer clothes and now he's trembling.

"What are you- come inside." Greed invited him in, he was wearing thicker hanfus with one draped over his shoulders like a cape. When Greed closed the door behind him the ex-homunculus gave Ling his outer coat, and if he clinged too much to the piece of clothing, it's because of the cold, Greed opened the closest door to the entrance and invited him in, as it turns out, it's the bedroom. "It's warmer here."

Greed plopped down on his bed and now Ling can see he's wearing pants, his wrist is in place too, this is good. "I still can't believe you didn't feel your broken wrist." He said as he sat beside his friend. Greed hummed indifferently and it made Ling's chest hurt, he's mad at him, or disappointed, or...

"You're mean, did you know that?" Greed's tone was calm but it was far from meaning that he was calm.

"Hm?"

"When I arrived from that cave you did nothing." This time Ling hummed, the young emperor was fidgeting with his fingers and when he caught on what he was doing, he stopped.

"And what did you wanted me to do?" He didn't turn to meet Greed's gaze, didn't felt the courage to do so, since when he's such a coward?

"Maybe hug me, or cry, I don't know." So what Ran did? This time he turned, supporting himself on one arm.

"You wanted me to cry?"

"I could be dead." Ling felt a strong blow on his body and he face fell, the teenager turned his back once more to Greed, his guilty so overwhelming that he couldn't look at his friend in the face or he may really cry. Greed noticed the sudden change in mood and sat, but before he could put his hands on his shoulders for comfort he talked.
"Say, Greed, do you regret this? Do you regret having to live here against your will?" Greed sighed and he was a hair from blocking his ears, the dread was killing him.

"No, yes if you're counting the first day, but after that, no, I don't regret it, specially when I see the things I can pull off. When I returned to the manor I kept thinking, if I had maintained all the things I had learned under Father, then maybe, maybe I could've saved my friends in the Devil's Nest." All pain had left his body when he heard the first part, but that last one, he knows the feeling, knows it very well, the regret that maybe you could have done something to stop a tragedy in your life if you had done something different along the way. He faced Greed again, wanting to say anything to comfort him but he couldn't and he looked down, upset with himself.

Then Greed wrapped an arm around his shoulders and Ling felt a tug in his heart. "Don't worry Ling, I'm not alone anymore." He pulled him closer and their eyes met, Ling doesn't think the warmth he's feeling is from the cape anymore. "I have you." He didn't know how to respond, if he could respond. Three words, three simple words and it was all it took to stop him from breathing.

He was so bright it hurt to look, but yet Ling felt conflicted if he should face Greed again or not, and when he did it was like Greed was a different person to his eyes. Not only his eyes, his entire being was regarding him differently.

And suddenly it hit Ling, he knew it, the meaning of this change.

Chapter End Notes

We saw the beginning and we saw the end of the deal, but there's still more. If I can I'll upload three chapters per month, but do not expect much from me, I need to study and practice my drawing (and read, but that's beside the point) so updates can get slower (like chapters 6-9 levels of slow).

Now for Greed and his Ultimate Shield: I've read the manga, both volumes of completed works, they mention that Greed transmute the carbons in his skin to create said shield (Bido mentions it before dying, I think it's mentioned on the first volume of completed works that Greed is transmuting his skin [I mentioned that in chapter 4]) I also spent hours reading about alchemy and it's symbols, carbon and human skin just to see if a human!Greed could have the ultimate shield back and I elected to give him his ability back, I only am not sure about transmuting without a circle, what do you guys think?

Hope you understand.
Winter Hot Music

Chapter Summary

It takes skill to be this dense. Also Ling's sexuality decides to show.

In another news Shuang is weird.

Chapter Notes

Lots of songs on this chapter, in order: Horse Racing, Half Vase of Yarn and In Search of Tea

"Is something on my face? Or was my speech too awe inspiring?" Ling blinked a few times, seemingly waking from his stupor, and remained with his eyes shut. Greed frowned, even closed they look bigger then he remembers his eyes to be, then it occurred to him that Ling is wearing eyeliner and...it was different. "Open your eyes." Ling did as told and now that he isn't busy being an attention whore Greed couldn't tear his eyes from Ling's, as if he was bewitched by the blackness in his eyes, a blackness like a void he didn't want to escape. Sensing the awkwardness growing in the room he stared off to another direction. "You look beautiful like this, just like those ink paintings." He turned in time to see Ling looking away, he got closer to check on him but the Emperor faced Greed and he stopped mid-action.

"You're a sweet talker, did you know that?" Ling lamented half-heartedly.

"I really am ain't I?" It looked like Greed wanted to say something else but stopped once the phone started to ring, Ling turned to the direction of the sound, as attentive as him. Greed got out of bed to answer it and Ling used this opportunity to relax, sprawling on the bed while doing so. The sound set off a meek whimper and Ling turned and dragged himself on the bed to see the source of the sound, Dolfu had awakened and was trying to climb the bed, so Ling took the puppy and let it lay on top of him.

Dolfu is technically their child isn’t it? The young emperor reached for the puppy to kiss it’s fur and sighed, it isn’t like him to act like this, it was just a joke – from both of them – and here he is reading too much into it.

He's in love with Greed, the thought scary and exhilarating at the same time, since when he felt
like this? When did he crossed the line from platonic to romantic? 'I have you with me.' Ling shook his head, trying to push the thought away, 'You look beautiful, like a painting.' Out of frustration he hid his face on a pillow. He shouldn't read too deeply into it, Greed is a sweet talker, like he himself said. He loves Greed, and knowing that only worsened things.

"Ling!" Greed called from the other room, Ling mentally prepared himself before exiting the room, Dolfu in his arms, will he be able to face Greed the same way he did before now that he's aware of his feelings? He doubts. He doesn't want to act distant towards Greed just because he harbors a crush on him, and yet just having a crush feels selfish, as if Greed's friendship wasn't enough, as if serving his people and country doesn't bring the joy it should.

'An Emperor's duty is first to his people.'

"Ling!" Greed shouted and it snapped Ling out of his thoughts. Having made his mind Ling walked to the other room, one hesitant step at a time. "Your grandpa wants to talk to you." Greed handed him the phone and Ling looked at the electronic as if it was his first time doing so before trading the puppy for it.

"Grandpa?"

"You sound weird, did anything happen?" A lot happened.

"No, nothing. You have any news?" His grandfather groaned and it was like a flip switched in his head as he all but forgotten his angst from seconds ago.

"Your brother is a lunatic, I'll tell you that. As for negotiations, he threatened to burn down Lianyang if we didn't allow trade between rebel clans, so we accepted his offer on the condition that their trades will be heavily supervised. There was nothing we could do about that, his men are infiltrated in the city, and sending the police to investigate the citizens would only provoke them." Ling hummed, leading Lord Yao to continue. "As for Your Royal Mother, well, I'm calling because of that." He sounded tired and confused, very unlike him, and while it worried Ling, it wasn't because he feared something bad happened to his mom, his grandfather would be acting very different if that was the case.

"What they asked?"

"First he wanted to know how much you value tradition and public opinion, I'll tell you, his
demand is nonsensical." He can feel his grandpa shaking his head, still he didn't answered him.

"What does he want?"

"Yin Shuang will give your mother back if you promise to visit Yan to pay respects to Changwu every year. But we'll have to tell the public that my daughter was ransomed for their right to trade and that you are visiting Your Royal Father by your own volition." Ling didn't know how to react, this demand reeked of trap and yet, lying to the public that their Emperor is risking his life just to pay his respects to the greatly revered Emperor Changwu will boost his public image better than anything he did in two years.

It's definitely a trap, but nothing says that he can't use it against Shuang.

"I'll accept his terms."

"You sure lad? This is clearly a trap."

"Not a real trap if you know it's there."

"Alright, I'll inform him tomorrow. Hope you'll be able to spend the Spring Festival with your mother cricket, you both deserve it." Lord Cheng hung the phone and so Ling did the same, and as he put the phone on the hook, a thought came to mind.

"Can I use it one more time? I really need to make a call." Greed blinked, taken away from his distraction.

"Yeah sure." Ling muttered a 'thanks' before dialing the number of the Minister of War's office.

"The Minister is occupied right now."

"I'm sure she can spare a minute for the Son of Heaven." The person on the other side of the line gasped, there was a small pause before they talked again.
"I'm so sorry Your Majesty, please forgive the misconduct of this lowly official." Ah this never gets old, Ling hummed, not making any effort to hide his smile. "I'll talk to her."

He didn't have to wait for long, in the mean time his eyes caught sight of Greed as he read a book, Dolfu on his lap. The overall air of serenity surrounding him, the focus on his eyes, the way his golden eyes moved as he read the characters, it made him look like an intellectual, and it made his heart flutter. Greed was so handsome when he was elegant.

"Your Majesty." Ah yes, he almost forgot Yumei.

"I want you to heighten the defenses in every city, as for criminals." Ling pursed his lips. "You can treat them harsher, but in accordance to their crimes." He added later to clarity things, last Yumei start treating everybody like they're all the same.

His minister hummed. "About time Your Majesty issued this order, but I want to be certain, what Your Majesty mean by 'accordance to their crimes'?" For once she is not mocking him for his 'softness' and for that he is thankful.

"I don't want you to treat a desperate thief in the same way you would treat a slave trader, or a leader of an organized crime." He hopes he drove his point across, and when she hummed, a calm sound unbefitting of her, he allowed himself to relax.

"Alright, I'll send a message to the Chief of Police from every city once I finish a guideline Your Majesty can approve."

"I'm counting on you."

"Your Majesty honors me." That was the end of their conversation. Ling hung the phone and turned to Greed, who stopped reading to look at him.

"Slave traders? Xing has slaves?" Ling shook his head.

"It's illegal since Kuanzhi's reign, but you know how this means nothing to some people."
"Better than anyone."

"What are you reading?" Greed closed the book, marking the page he's in, and looked at the cover. He was frowning, to all appearances having difficulty to read certain hanzis. Ling sat by his side and examined the cover. "The Maiden of Lianyang. A study of the upperclass of Zhen? Never thought you'd want to read this kind of thing."

"So that's what it means, I thought it was 'The Lotus Shaped Maiden.' so I got curious, still interesting." Ling raised an eyebrow, not fully believing what he said, but still, Greed reading the hanzi literally instead of reading it as the city name? That’s cute. "When you learn how people act you learn how to work with them, don't you agree?" So that's why he finds it interesting, it makes sense, considering to who he's talking to. Ling nodded, then got up abruptly, surprising Greed and the puppy.

"I need to give you something, so don't go anywhere." Ling headed to his room, having remembered the clothes he bought for Greed. They were neatly arranged in a separate suitcase but just to make sure Ling checked the components of the bag one more time to see if everything is there, he got his hands on the fishnet shirt and felt a bolt of excitement run through his body, one part of him is eager to see Greed trying these clothes, to see how he'll react to having them again and for obvious reasons, the other part is ashamed of the latter. Is it even right to give him these clothes in winter of all seasons? Having said that he was still content in buying them and thinking about gifting the suitcase to Greed made his heart race in excitement.

He returned to Greed's apartment with bag in hands but before he could open the door to the living room he stopped briefly to still his heart. "Look what I bought you." He announced cheerily, surprised that now he can do that with Greed too, and the best part is that it doesn't feel like a mask. Greed looked puzzled.

"New clothes?" He asked after Ling laid the suitcase on the table, and after the emperor hummed Greed opened the bag. His eyes were shining, enchanted by the content inside, making Ling's smile all the bigger, Greed closed the lid with a satisfied smile. "You're too good to me."

"You're welcome. You should try them on, to see if they fit." Greed nodded and got up after laying Dolfu on the floor, eager to try his new clothes. Ling followed him to his bedroom feeling Greed's happiness seep into him, as for the clothes itself, he's looking toward to see how the leather pants look with Greed's new changshan, or how he looks with the warmer, more elegant pieces.

Once in his bedroom Ling climbed the bed along with Dolfu. Greed opened the suitcase on his bed and rubbed his palms, looking at every piece reverently. "Aw man, I still can't believe it. You're awesome!"
"Keep complimenting me."

"Nah, think I'll give you something better." Greed teased, Ling crossed his arms, provoking him. He gave him a confident smile, and as his hands traveled to the sash things clicked together in Ling’s head. The ties on Greed's hanfu were loose and the way the fabric slipped down his shoulder was captivating as it revealed his collarbone, his shoulders, his well-defined biceps, his toned chest and abs, as well as part of his v-line, Ling all but forgot how to breathe. "You're liking it don't you?" Ling blinked a few times and felt his face warm when he noticed what he was doing, the emperor glanced off the window, ashamed to admit he enjoyed seeing Greed undress.

Greed continued to try his new clothes while Ling avoided looking too much, only giving his input when Greed asked, and things moved faster because Greed couldn't stand the cold. The clothes looked as good as they could, he liked it when they were more casual, but he would be lying if he said he didn't like the tank tops and leather pants combo, or the aforementioned pants and his new changshan. It fits him and Greed is happy and comfortable, more so than he had ever been since they met again and this is what matters.

"Ling." He stopped dozing off and looked to his friend just to see him with the fishnet shirt looking full of himself, he must admit, he looks hot. Ling’s sure he would be ogling more if it wasn't for the former sin rubbing his arms to warm himself.

"You should try the winter clothes."

"I should." Greed changed again and damn, if he looked hot with his usual clothes, the slim fit jacket was another level, black – of course – simple yet chic and a lighter inner layer that made it look like he was wearing two pieces, combine it with the turtleneck he is wearing and it looks so warm and handsome. The trench coat Greed used later also looked good, a more formal look and he better stop trying these clothes before Ling starts making weird noises.

He found his weakness.

It should be illegal to be this handsome.

Suddenly Dolfu bit his fingers in retaliation and just now Ling realized he was squeezing the poor thing, their yappings took Greed’s attention immediately. "You okay pissant? Lookin' about to faint."
"No it's nothing, I, I need to go to the bathroom." Ling excused himself, dragging his body to said room to wash his face, to see if he can calm down. He's an emperor, he can't be gushing over a person like this, an emperor that let his earthly desires take control of him is doomed to destroy their country and he can't afford to do that, not when he have people to protect, things to restore. It was a terrible idea to ask that of Greed right after discovering what he feels for him.

"Feeling better?" Greed asked from the other side of the door, Ling opened it to meet his gaze, so beautiful, his friend. He changed his clothes, having dismissed his hanfus but one and keeping it open, instead opting for one of the turtleneck blouses he gave him. His internal conflict is taking a toll on him and it must show, because he can see a subtle hint of worry in Greed's eyes. "What happened? Did something went wrong with the negotiations?"

This caught him off guard. "No, everything is okay, mom will be released sometime in spring, hopefully." He gave a weak smile and Greed grinned in return.

"This is great isn't it?" He held Ling by his arms and the impact lightly shook him, his touch sent a tingling sensation to the area. Then, all of a sudden, Greed's eyes faltered as he avoided eye contact. "I hate to tell you this, specially after you gave me all these clothes."

"What?" Greed released him and sighed, coming to terms with whatever he's about to confide, just making Ling more curious.

"I'm thinking in returning to the mountain, to continue the training. Don't get me wrong that's very annoying, which is why I want to be done with it as soon as possible."

"What will you do about the bandits? Can't you wait till Xiong deals with them?"

"They'll just be more annoying people to deal with, they only kidnapped me because I was reckless. I promise to be more careful, trust me." The confidence in his voice, it's so charming.

"I do. What if they kidnap you again?"

"Then you come to rescue me." The trust he has on him, it's making him fall once more. "Say, since I'm planning to climb the mountain tomorrow, don't you want to sleep here with me? We shared your body, sharing a bed can't be a problem." Greed reasoned in the end, and when Ling kept silent he looked away embarrassed. "Unless it is of course."
From his confidence to his willingness to learn, Greed's more charming trait is certainly his caring nature, and the way he asked and how he got flustered. He looked so kissable, how can Ling say no to that?

"You better not kick me out of the bed then."

"Hmm, so Master have this much trust in my abilities? I knew you had a soft spot for me." Greed teased his teacher, Ling just watched from the other side of the room as Greed poked and acted as annoying as possible while his master as unyielding, like he was made of stone.

"So, Greed, you saying you want to return to the mountain? Ballsy of you." Yuan interrupted, ceasing Greed's tomfoolery.

"Those guys are small fry, they don't frighten me." Greed pointed to himself with his thumb while his Master nodded, Yuan looked surprised, amused, but surprised nonetheless.

"Well said, which brings me to another topic. Greed, you proved you're more than capable of facing my students, but you're not honing your stealth abilities. Xiong told me you stole supplies from the dojo, guess I'll have to live there for six months too." His shoulders sagged as the news hit him hard and Ling had to cover his mouth to avoid any historical laugh from bursting through.

"Why?" Greed whined and it made it harder for Ling to stifle his laugh, the way he acted with Master Xuan was unusual, and how he praise Greed just to throw a bomb on him in the next second reminds him of his grandfather. "I thought you liked me."

"And that is precisely why I'm doing this."

Greed huffed, propping his jaw on his palm. "Killjoy. Hey, Yuan, why I must learn how to read qi to do waidanshu? Isn't knowing jing enough?" She stopped writing whatever that was and rinsed her paintbrush, she glanced in Ling's direction before directing her attention to Greed.

"Ehh, no, jing is inconsistent, it's always changing. Qi, in it's turn, is constant and unchanging. I
recommend taking times of the day to meditate with your eyes closed, already knowing jing is a great step stone to learn qi. Now go, you've overwelcomed your stay." She pointed with her pipe to a spare cushion for Ling to sit on, while he walked towards her desk he could see Greed raising a hand to his chest in mock-hurt.

"You throwing me to the bandits?"

"I thought they were small fry." Yuan responded without looking at him, having returned to her papers. Greed shrugged his shoulders and followed his teacher out of the study, Master Xuan bowed before leaving and forced Greed to do the same, as he was going to simply walk past him.

"Now that we're finally alone." Yuan started and Ling straightened himself. "What Your Majesty thinks of my daughter? She's a good girl isn't she? Your Majesty should use this opportunity to get to know her better, hm?" Lady Zhou propped her chin on her clasped fingers, smiling amiably. Ling was dumbfounded, not because of her audacity – you got to save your clan in any way you can – but because he told Xiong about the harem, and her daughter seemed to know he won't build one too.

"Xiong didn't tell you? I'm not building a harem, to avoid tragedies like the ones from ten years ago." Yuan dropped her gaze, her eyes were in an almost lifeless state just like Lord Cheng’s sometimes do. Then, in a blink of an eye, she glared to whoever was stepping in her study, and, judging by the swiftly retreating qi, the person was very likely Xiong.

"What about Greed? His future is promising and they get along pretty well, I'm sure they'd make a good couple." Ling had to hold himself to not dismiss her proposal rudely, and took longer to answer as he was scolding himself for almost acting out of jealousy.

"I must say, why would you risk the future of your daughter on someone without titles or land? That good-for-nothing isn't worth it." It sounded forced, even with his mask on, Yuan, in her turn, didn't dropped her act and they started to laugh.

"Quite the contrary Your Majesty. Do you know who his parents are?" She said in a conspiratorial way and it peeked his curiosity.

"I know they're doctors, but Lord Xia said nothing about them."

"Maybe because it doesn't matter, but I saw his seal, you wouldn't believe from which clan he's
from." She was excited for sharing this gossip, Ling was anxious and it didn't help that Lady Yuan paused to build it on purpose. "He's from the Wang clan, and not the one you're probably thinking."

"The fallen clan then? The one who was prominent in the days of Heng?"

Yuan nodded. "This means that if Greed does get titles and land, Xing will have fifty one clans. Well, actually forty nine since my clan and the Chang are annexed to the Yao."

"Good observation, but that's still an 'if'. I think it'll be better if you marry Ran to the Yao, or the Wu." Her hands fell on the table and her shoulders sagged as she sighed, Ling felt slightly upset, as if she was leading with a stubborn child, which he isn't.

"Ling, Greed's handsome, smart, eloquent and polite, at least most of the time. Now we know that he knows alchemy and I'll teach him waidanshu, I don't know what his amestrian father taught him, but he knows his stuff. His parents are doctors, and once he finishes here, Greed'll know martial arts, weiqi and music." And he also knows fencing, Ling was caught off guard by her information, and he still is unsure of what to do with it. But if what she said is right, Greed is only a few steps away from becoming a junzi, and this is good.

"This is nice to know, but why are you bringing this up?"

"What I'm trying to say is: when he returns to the palace and you do give him a title, those old fogs in your council will flock him with marriage proposals, so you better act fast." So that is why she was sighing, she noticed her defeat. Still, she discovered his feelings, his intentions, so fast. Is this an ability that comes once you become a mom?

"It's scary how fast you notice things." The Lady chuckled and returned to her paperwork, their talk was finished.

"Go to my son, I think he wanted to talk to you." Ling nodded and excused himself out of the room. Now in the inner patio, Ling was guided by the energetic melody of a pipa, the lively strumming like kids playing tag, rapid and immerging, as if a story was being told by it's harmonious strings. His feet walked on their own, his body instinctively wanting to find out who is playing such beautiful song. He can hear Lanfan's voice in the background, training Dolfu, and sometimes the dog would bark.

Ling found himself on the east wing of the manor without noticing beforehand, ignoring how rude
it was to trespass on private quarters Ling arrived at what looked like a living room with the shoji
door opened. The song came further from the door and the young emperor stepped into the balcony
to find none other than Xiong playing the instrument.

"Song so good you had to invade my house?" His eyes were still closed as he was feeling the
music, the emotions it was passing. His friend looked so calm, so serene, and yet content, Ling had
never seen him play, didn't know he was capable of it, and then it hit him, the things Xiong was
pressured to do to make up for Liang's death, of course his family would coerce him to do lots of
stuff, if one wants to be recognized by the Imperial Court, they must first excel at a lot of things.

"What's the name of song?" Ling asked as he sat by Xiong's side.

"'Horse Racing', grandpa taught me this one, had an urge to play after a sudden bad memory
flashed into my mind. Do you know any instruments? We could play together."

"I know the dizi, I was practicing 'Half Vase of Yarn', do you know this one?"

Xiong nodded. "Go get your flute and meet me in the balcony of Greed's room, it's more calm
there."

"'Kay." Ling walked to his room, perhaps faster than normal, and fetched his dizi, enthusiastic
about playing a duet with someone after so long, last time he did so with Leibo, Ling playing the
flute as he sang, at the time they were addicted to a love song they heard in a play and wanted to
recreate it. This time it's kind of similar, but Xiong has a pipa and such not only it can have singing
– that is if Xiong knows how to – but also an accompanying melody to boot.

Xiong was already on the balcony when Ling arrived and they started to play, the first part was
bumpy and they had to start from the beginning more than once, but when they started to sync the
music sounded richer than any of his rehearsals could ever be, like he was walking on a wheat field
near a mountain in the morning. The song reverberated through the balcony and into the landscape
beyond, a calm tune befitting of winter.

"If your eyes could perceive the landscape of my heart," Xiong begin to sing in a tenorish silvery
voice, it sent chills down his spine and Ling almost went off-tune, "With every lotus step I'll pray
for your sake;" then he relaxed, letting Xiong's singing drift him back to the mood, feeling almost
like the person in the song.
"It’s regrettable, the plights of mortals, lives akin to a field of grass, aging made haste by the passing years;"

*Let it be then, superfluities like the wind, the moon, the flowers, the birds; with a careless smile, we draw closure to our mortal ties."* The song came to its final part, and when it ended Ling returned to this world. Immediately after retreating the dizi from his lips he turned to his friend.

"Since when do you know how to sing? That was nice!" Ling said as he sat on the armchair, Xiong cupped his name as he looked down and smiled, flustered.

"Five years ago in Lusha, I visited for a summer fair and learned the basics, then I upgraded my technique in Laocheng." Ling nodded slowly as he absorbed the information, upon closer inspection, Xiong looks like a younger and prettier version of his father. After listening to Xiong he had to ponder, what business he had in Lusha? That place is unbearably hot in the summer.

"A summer fair? Of what kind?"

"A tea festival, they taught children how to do the tea ceremony, and I got to buy some tea exclusive to the area. A song was playing, sweet and relaxing, I can play it for you if you want, been trying to replicate it since I've listened to it."

"Be my guest." Xiong positioned his pipa and began to play, a cheerful song that, just for a few minutes, made him reminisces the past, when he was a child playing in the mountains on a hot summer day, catching insects and watching the fish swim by. Days when Lanfan and Leibo still referred to him as Ling, days when nobody thought that Yongji had what it takes to be a guardian, days which he lived peacefully, with his innocence still intact.

-------------------

First thing he did after climbing the mountain was to find a new shelter, preferably away from that gang, even better if it is an old temple. Greed walked for a while longer, glad that it isn't snowing, and passed through the canopied pass on the mountainside, Yuan suggested that he take some time to meditate and Greed has the perfect spot in his mind, without waiting any longer he sprinted to the rock from the Autumn Festival, the one he had a deep conversation with Yuan. When he found the coveted stone he cleaned any snow on the top and sat in a lotus position, closing his eyes and breathing deeply.
Greed had an easier time to focus this time and now that he can see jing he can feel the seeds beneath the snow, little dots scattered on the ground, surreal. He can't feel jing in the trees, nor in the rocks and it made sense, after all jing is the life force in living beings, and when he thinks like this, it makes sense that qi is used in waidanshu instead, as apparently qi is felt anywhere.

He was busy trying to track animals with jing when he felt a weak source of it walking in his direction, Greed wanted to open his eyes to see what kind of animal it was, and he did open, but only after sensing a weak stream of energy coming from the ailing jing approaching him.

In front of him was a child about Bido's size, dressed in rags and hair messy and uncut. His eyes were glassy and while his face was turned in his direction, his eye weren't precisely on him and Greed noticed what was going on.

"Mister, what...are you?"

Chapter End Notes

Okay, down here is a rant, just felt like warning.

You know, it's quite disheartening to have all of these subscribers but not as much comments. Don't take me wrong, I'm grateful for each one of my comments, kudos and subscribers, it's the most I've ever had with any of my fics, on this site and otherwise, and the number of comments grew and I'm happy for that, I really am, but when compared to the number of people who follows this fic it becomes clear it's just a select few that feels like commenting.

So how do I feel? Well, I feel like my fic is uninteresting, or maybe my writting sucks, or maybe my subscribers are shy, but I don't know, how should I? You don't tell me. I don't know if there's a problem in my fic, is it the pacing? The characters? The plot? Tell me what you like, what you dislike, if there are anything I can improve on. Is there a character you like? A scene perhaps? Or is it the opposite and there's a character you wish was dead already? My romance sucks? Or my action scenes? I have no idea, if I have no idea I can't change it.

The worst part is that I kept quiet for a while, afraid of voicing my complaint, thinking that 'maybe next chapter I'll have more comments' and I kept thinking like this and then next chapter it continued the same, and next chapter, and next chapter, until I realized that yes, I need to summon my courage and take this out of my system. I know I may sound like a bitch for complaining, but it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease.

To the people that comment on this fic: Sorry for having to read all of that and thank you, from the bottom of my heart thank you, you have no idea how much your words mean to me, even if it's just a 'I liked this chapter', I doubt I would have written 19 chapters if it weren't for you guys.
Still hope you liked the chapter.
"What am I?" Greed pursed his lips, what a stupid question, of course he can’t say this to the child, so he opted for another thing. "Human?" The kid huffed, not having the patience to deal with him, he muttered something but Greed couldn't make it.

"Have you seen God? How come you possess shen?"

"Shen?" The kid nodded.

"An essence lighter than qi, it's very rare. You're the second person I've met that have it." If he have seen god? Is he talking about Truth?

Why is this kid here?

Greed stopped thinking too much on this and closed his eyes again, he needs to read qi as soon as possible and this brat is delaying him.

"Yeah, yeah, I saw it. Now get lost kid, I need to start reading qi for like, yesterday." He made a choked sound which cued Greed to open an eye, what does he want? Why can't human kids be like puppies? On second thought it's better this way, the day he finally got Dolfu to accept him the puppy couldn't shut up even for a minute.

"I'm here because of this." Greed raised his eyebrows in mild interest, he hummed so the kid could
continue. "These idiots are teaching you wrong, you don't "read" qi, you feel it, that's the reason why you're failing." The attitude on this brat, Greed stopped his meditation to focus on the boy, he reminds him of his first days with his chimeras, mainly Dolcetto and Martel, and how sharp-tongued they could get sometimes, and maybe it's because of this that he got a sudden interest in the kid.

"And you think you can do better than them? So tell me, kid, what I'm doing wrong?" The boy calmed down to ponder and when he figured how to answer he faced him again.

"The wording is wrong, this is why foreigners have no idea of what we're talking, they should use 'feel' exclusively, but because most neidanshu masters say 'read', and because most people can see, it tends to fall apart." He stopped to collect his thoughts. "When they say 'read' you're trying to picture an image, you're trying to 'see' qi with your mind's eyes. Because you can see, the first thing you're trying to do is find a visual clue. This is wrong, this is like asking a blind person to imagine something and expect them to see an image, when in actuality we remember it's shape or how it feels to our touch. Do you understand?"

"So what are you trying to say is, I should focus on feeling it?"

"Yes!"

"I'll give it a try." Greed concentrated, making sure to keep his mind unoccupied, and like the boy said, the moment he stopped thinking about how qi looks Greed felt streams of energy coming from the ground and going to the trees. Just to make sure he kept track of the boy's jing, and trying to sense both is a fucking mess. It didn't take long for Greed to stop sensing the Dragon's Flow, and when he did, he opened his eyes, satisfied. "It worked. But let's be honest, you're not here out of kindness, and the fact that you know I'm training neidanshu tells me you've been spying on me. What was your intent? To rob me? If so I'm telling you now, I have no possessions with me as of the moment. So unless you plan on invading the Zhou Manor, this was all for nothing. Thank you by the way." The boy dropped his head, obviously upset. He crossed his arms and tapped his fingers rapidly against his arm, biting his lips. Is he still trying even after Greed unmasked him? Bold.

Dumb, but bold.

"Okay I admit, I tried to steal your food once, but when I saw you had a lion dog with you I gave up. But I'm not here to steal from you! I'm here to make a deal."

This interested him. "Huh? What kind of deal?"
"I help you learn neidanshu, and in exchange I live in the palace as your subordinate," Greed started to laugh, loud and boisterous, he never thought he'd find a child with this much spunk, what with every kid in town being so meek and polite. He's a breath of much needed fresh air.

"In other words I'm your meal ticket? I like you kid, wished more kids had as much attitude as you do. Consider your deal accepted. You work for me now, hope you don't regret this decision."

"I won't." He said with utter conviction and Greed smiled, he's doing what he can to survive and that he respects.

"By the way, name's Greed."

"Yang. H-how do you pronounce your name?" Oh boy not this again, Greed sighed, so much for wanting people to address you with your true name, but he guess he can't really blame Yang, there's a big chance the kid don't know amestrian.

"Forget it, just call me Henry."

"Hengli?" Greed huffed, he's just like grandpa. He hopped off the stone, first a dog and now a kid, what's next? A woman? Greed chuckled and walked ahead, waiting for Yang to follow.

"Where are you going?!" He asked behind him, for a minute Greed would think the brat felt lost or abandoned. He paused and turned his head, smiling when he saw the mix of relief and dread in the boy's face, in the end he's just seeking company, he knows the feeling.

"To the hot springs, you need a bath, and food." Yang seemed to want to tell him something, but decided against it and followed him instead.

-------------------

The streets of Wenchang were lively for such a time. Trees, rooftops, roads, you name it, all blanketed in a fine layer of snow, Ling decided to take a stroll without a guard, much to Lanfan's dismay, and was forced to take with him a small dagger hid in his sleeve, or else he'd risk being followed by both her and Yongji. He's disguised, and the additional weapons on his head make him
feel safer, knowing they belong to his mother only doubles the effect, Ling smiled to himself, his mom is returning, he doesn't know when, but he knows it will happen and the thought lifted his spirit.

Ling stopped in front of a building and fetched a paper on his purse, after checking if it's name was the same as the one on the paper Hongzi entered the building. It was a humble inn, likely run by a family, the moment he entered a woman offered to take his doupeng and he accepted. The Emperor walked to the cashier and slid a paper to the man behind the counter.

"This way, my lady." He led the way, walking slightly bowed as show of respect, they walked to the back of the inn, and when they arrived at a door, both workers each grabbed a handle of the door and slid it open for Hongzi, revealing the group of engineers responsible for the south railways. "If you need anything my lady, just ring Chun over here. Now if you excuse me." He bowed one more time and left.

"Warn me if there's anyone eavesdropping." The lady bowed and the teen smiled while closing the door in front of him. Ling gave a deep breath and turned to the engineers who looked very lost. "First time we see each other right? I'm pleased to see the men behind the advancements of the country."

"I'm sorry but, who are you?"

"Whew, I'm glad you didn't notice, shows how good this disguise is. Now you're recognizing me?" Ling returned to his original pitch, which surprised the engineers.

"Who are you again?" He almost tripped off his seat.

"C'mon guys, it's me Ling Yao, the Emperor." Ling whispered, and just to make sure he glanced to the door. They made a conjunctive 'ah' sound, but watched their volume when Ling raised a finger to his lips. "I want to ask about the delay, you can be honest with me, and if you feel threatened here in Wenchang, I can send you off to the capital and back to Amestris." The four men looked between themselves apprehensively, which didn't stick well with Ling, are the Zhou hiding something from him? Will he need to seduce Ran for answers? Suddenly they nodded and one of them leaned closer.

"That boy, the police head, I think his name was Xiong, he told us to stop our activities until he dealt with those bandits."
"Did he explain why?"

"He fears these 'White Snake Bandits' were responsible for Gary's kidnapping." They all nodded and Ling relaxed, it doesn't look like the Zhou are culprits for now. Still, these men are his guests and they were in a traumatizing event, the least he could do is send them back.

"If you want to return to Amestris just say, I'll hold nothing against you." Hongzi smiled to assure them of his claim, they remained in silence and deep down Ling wanted them to continue working in Xing until Yulin station is built, but he knows it's very unlikely for them to stay. He knows how it is to feel homesick, and how upsetting it is to experience a hostage situation.

"Then we'd like to return." The oldest men in the group answered after another round of glances.

"It's nothing against your country, Xing is a beautiful."

"Yes! We, we just miss our families." Hongzi did his hardest to not drop his smile, he knew this would happen – it was him that gave them the option – and yet part of him wanted them to subvert his expectations.

"Then I'll talk to Lady Yuan about this. I'll inform General Mustang, so rest assured." They looked relieved so Hongzi got up, he stopped at the door, there's still something he wants to know. "I'll ask the Zhou to prepare your ride to Zhongjian." He waited for a reaction, anything to prove definitely that the Zhou are innocent. He looked behind his shoulder one last time and the engineers still looked happy, with no signs of fear or anything negative Ling left the room and soon after the inn.

'Now to talk with Xiong again.' Ling accelerated the pace, going into a shortcut instead of the usual road, he felt an accumulation of qi ahead and didn't bother to find another way, he's prepared in case he stumbles across some petty thugs.

It didn't take long for him to come across the source of those qi, five men chatting, most of them sitting, when Ling's appearance became clear enough for them two got up. He could see them leering and the overall air of excitement in the area, Ling smirked behind the fan, he was getting stale and they might provide a good warm up.

"Hey there young miss, come have some fun with us." The closest guy was about to put his hand on his shoulder to which Ling swatted away with his fan, in response to this another one closed the exit.
"We're being nice and this is how you react?" He teased and Ling felt the threat underneath it, he could punch this idiot and use him as a shield, but instead Ling decided to play along.

"I'm sorry my Lord, so where are you planning to take me to?" He heard the other punks stand from their seats, the man in front of him snickered before putting both hands on his shoulders. Ling had to contain himself, just a bit more and he can attack them.

"To a very nice place." In a blink of an eye one of his hairpins dug into the man's hand, the bastard shrieked as he held the injured hand. The closest person tried to assault Ling but he threw his doupeng on them, blinding the person for the needed time for Ling to kick them in the crotch. The guy from before tried to punch him but Ling grabbed his punching arm and elbow strike him in the torso, following by hitting him the chin with an open palm.

The teen planned to attack the other three but kunais were hurled at their heads, killing them instantly. Lanfan appeared behind him on one knee and her head ducked, it's nice to have her.

"Oh, hey Lanfan, what would I do without you?"

"It's official Young Master, you're not going out without escort ever again." He heard hoof-beats in the snow and not only those guys froze in place but Lanfan too turned in the direction of the sound. "How many do we need?"

"Only one." The remaining thugs screamed Xiong's name and started to run, as for Xiong he mounted off the horse and pursued them, cutting one in their legs and hurling his halberd at the other, killing him. The young lord walked some more to retrieve his weapon while Lanfan went to the fallen man to hand Ling his cape back.

"Don't you think you two went overboard?" More police officers appeared to take the corpses with them. With weapon on hand Xiong went to the only person spared and took them by the collar.

"I hate bandits who prolong the chaos for their own selfish needs. This one will give us information about the Baishe Bandits and their schedules, right?" Xiong beamed but it only made him scarier. So they were members of the white snake bandits? He wonders how Xiong discovered that, Ling faced Xiong and he did the same, serious again. "We have the map of their location, and now we know they're working for Xia Lanhua."
"You sure?"

"Greed told me she was the one they tried to sell him to. We're now going to plan a strategy to invade their headquarters, if you want to participate." The Chief of Police offered and Ling nodded. When everything was said and done they walked back to the manor with the bandit as a hostage, Ling was optimistic about this, if Xiong and his men succeed it's one criminal organization down.

And then Greed will be safe to live in the mountain.

-------------

The wood bucket hit the wooden floor for the ninth time, Greed sat on the other side of the door waiting for Yang to rinse himself, he asked before if he needed help and the brat told him off, wait till he needs to wash that mop he calls hair.

"Say Yang, where are you from?"

"Luhuan, a small, poor town on the west of Wen."

"What are you doing in Wenchang all alone?" There was a big pause and for a moment Greed wondered if he asked an insensitive question.

"My parents abandoned me." This came like a blow, no wonder kid is so harsh. "They didn't had food for everybody, and I heard them talking about abandoning me, I couldn't bear to hear that, so I..., so I fled." He bristled, and yet Greed could hear the hurt behind the scorn. There's a chance everything he said was false, he also lived in street for quite a time and deceived a lot of people in his days, he knows that but the feeling of being discarded by the family you loved, of being treated as replaceable by someone you held in the highest regard, by someone you sought the love and approval of. No words can describe how much it hurts.

"So we have something in common, I also fled home when I was young."

"Why?"
"My own father liked me about as much as someone likes a piece in a weiqi board, I was a victim of his manipulation for so many years. Didn't even know what it was like to be loved."

"Mister, you said 'didn't', do you know now how it feels? To be loved?" He's opening up, and Greed suspicions are realizing, the kid does have abandonment issues. It doesn't hurt to share more with him, if only because it also helps ease his heart too.

"Yes... Thanks to friends back in Amestris. But I must confess that it was because of Ling that I discovered just how broken up I really was. My father brainwashed me actually, just so I could work for him again," He heard Yang mutter 'wow' from the other side and chuckled, yes, wow. "if it wasn't for Ling who knows for how long I'd be his victim again."

"You and Hongzi seems to be really close. What's your relationship?"

"Nosy aren't you? If you spread word of anything I'm saying here I'll have to hunt you down." He kept silent and Greed smiled to himself, it does sound genuine, his curiosity for Greed's life, and he is working for him now as a subordinate, he won't destroy his chances at a better living just to spread scandalous rumors. Maybe he should charm the boy to his side, use his charisma to gain his loyalty.

"I'd say we're more than friends." He stopped, noticing how inappropriate what he just said sounded. "Like partners, or soulmates even." Greed stopped once more, feeling weighted down when he uttered the word 'soulmate', the former sin sighed, it seemed so easy to open up to Yang. "It took two years for us to see each other again and when we finally do, the first thing he does is send me away for a year. I know the feeling behind it but still it stinks."

"Did you two break up?" He sounded confused when he asked and it made Greed laugh, it does sound like they had an affair doesn't it?

"Yes! That's exactly what happened."

"You don't need to be sarcastic." He can hear the pout in his voice and it only amused him. Greed looked to the window above and decided that Yang is taking too long in the bath.

"It's getting late let me help you." Greed opened the shoji door regardless of his protests and helped the boy wash his hair, but not before cutting a good chunk of it so now his hair is short. While Greed washed the boy's hair he noticed how he relaxed in his fingers and he had to wonder, for
how long is he homeless? Also he needs new clothes, it's too cold to be dressed in rags. "Yang, I want you to teach me xingese slangs, alright? Now turn to me." He did as ordered and Greed worked on his bangs.

"Ok." He finished after he got satisfied with his look and helped the boy get dressed, taking the opportunity to give him his short cape, anything to keep this boy warm. "What are we going to do now?"

"Find a place to stay, if some dude try to attack us, can you warn me beforehand?"

"It depends if they're concealing their qi or not, same for jing, if they do that I might not sense them." Wait, what he just said? Greed looked at Yang as if he had grown another head, what he said sounded illogical, how the hell do you erase your own life force. Besides the usual way that is.

"You can conceal your qi?"

"How do you think royals get ambushed and killed? Yes, you can conceal your qi, or else training assassins would be useless." Greed blinked a few times, then it struck him, he spent nights awake thinking how he is supposed to infiltrate the mansion but Yang proposed a solution to his problem.

"And how do you conceal it?" Yang faced the other side and bit his lip, unsure of what to answer him.

"You'll have to ask your Master about it, I think you need to be used to your qi to be able to manipulate it." Was the answer he came up with. "However I do know that shen is impossible to hide, most people don't have it and the ones who does rarely know of it's existence, also it's very hard to sense it naturally, most neidanshuists need to press their fingers between someone's eyes to sense it." He added, to make up for his lack of an answer before.

"So how can you do that if not even specialists can?"

"Because I can't see, so my other senses are heightened."

"You're awesome did you know that?" He looked touched for a split second before dropping it for the sake of brooding.
"You're joking aren't you?" It will take a while for him to trust Greed, not that he blames the boy for it.

"No, I mean that, you can do what very few people can, you're amazing Yang." His eyes seemed to glisten and, as if to maintain his pride, he lowered his head so Greed couldn't see that he was indeed touched by his compliment. "Now let's find a place to stay, and we also need to come up with a plan to invade the manor, you need clothes."

"....yeah, sure." They left the hot spring and walked towards a nearby temple that, according to Yang, has an underground passage. They can stay underground while leaving traps on the ground floor, but this isn't what Greed have in mind at the moment, he can make Yang open up to him, it's possible, he just need to peel off his defensive layers one by one.

------------------

"C'mon, pick up the phone...." Ling grumbled, what is taking Yue so long? His secretary answered after what felt like ages. "How is the court doing?"

"Right, I feel like the tension is rising between them, now that Your Majesty is away. Lord Xing is keeping them in line however, he does so with such ease, must be experience." She trailed off but Ling was more worried about the first part, he was fearing the prospect of a factionalized court for a while and it is becoming real, he'll have to ask his grandfather for advice.

"Do you have any news? Besides that?"

"Greed is officially a consultant, and we received news from Master Feng, your Royal Mother will be finally back, I'm overjoyed, how is Your Majesty feeling?" He could feel her smile from across the line and he smiled in response.

"Good. About my mother, Yue," Ling paused briefly, remembering Shuang's odd request and feeling a bitter taste in his mouth, it felt so wrong, to lie to his people just to boost his image. "I want you to pass this information to the press, but first I want to know how Feng phrased the news."

"Master Feng said the rebels wanted to trade Her Royal Highness for their right to trade between allies." Ling listened carefully and nodded, it made sense for Feng to lie, this way less people
know of the truth and there's less chances for it to spill. The Emperor breathed deeply, if he'll have to keep the truth a secret so be it.

"Yes, that's right. I want you to do another thing to me, it turns out the problem in the south is due to a group of bandits. They're working for Xia Lanhua, I want the censorate investigating the Xia immediately, if there's any hint of traitorous intentions inside the clan I want them punished just like the Qin and the Ruan."

"Yes Your Majesty." Lanfan came to a halt at the door when she saw him on the phone and he hung it, she was accompanied by Dolfu and he had to smile because of his cute face.

"What's the matter Lanfan?"

"Dolfu needs time with his owner, tang dogs are violent if not properly socialized. I wanted to know if you, Young Master, want to take it to Greed?" She asked sheepishly, the mere mention of Greed flared memories from yesterday and he lowered his head before Lanfan could see his blush.

"I'd very much like to." He approach and tried to take Dolfu in his arms but the dog recoiled, he stopped in his tracks and refrained from looking up at Lanfan or else the awkwardness of this situation would kill him. Good, he traumatized the puppy.

"This is strange, yesterday he was all over you, what you did to Dolfu Young Master?" He's almost sweating in nervousness, the truth is too embarrassing to share but he doesn't like to lie to his guardian for trivial things, what should he do?

"Isqueezedit...." He slowly looked up to meet her gaze, her eyebrows were raised, she was confused. "I squeezed him..." He admitted at last.

"Why?" Lanfan is cruel, that's a fact.

"I..., how can I say it, I watched Greed, um, I mean, I saw him, you know, trying new clothes?" Ugh that was painful, it doesn't help that she isn't reacting. Lanfan focused on other things on the room, like the ikebana sitting on the tokogamachi, and Ling’s eyes followed her gaze, he was so intent to it he didn't noticed Dolfu laying on his lap.

"You liked it?" He avoided her gaze and hoped it answered her question, she didn't try to pry, and
thank goodness for that. "It looks like he trusts you again, Young Master. Want to go?"

"Without Yongji?"

"Master Ding Mi offered teaching her some basic amestrian so she's unavailable."

"Then let's go. If he gets a day without seeing his baby I think he'll faint." She ducked her head and followed her master outside the manor and into the mountain. He was acting awkward in the beginning of the climb but stopped after they remained in silence. As for she, Lanfan was wary of her surroundings, apparently Greed had sealed the majority of the bandits inside of that cave, but that doesn't mean they can't get out of it, so Lanfan focused to sense any source of qi in the mountain, better safe than sorry.

After concluding that the only qi she's feeling is from trees and the like her eyes wandered to Ling and something felt off, she then looked to the ground near him and saw where the problem is. "Young Master, Dolfu isn't a lapdog, he needs to walk." He looked over his shoulder and pouted.

"But, he's so cute, and the ground is so cold, I can't do that to him." She lowered her gaze, she doesn't want to argue with him, doesn't feel she really can, however if he keep doing that the puppy will become spoiled in no time and Greed specifically said he wanted him to be able to hunt and fetch people, a service dog more or less, he won't be that if Ling treats him like this.

"He may become unaccustomed to walk, this is detrimental to a hunting dog." She said meekly, hoping he'll put the dog on the ground.

"He's not even a month old Lanfan, I saw that you're just training Dolfu to roll, sit and lay." His voice was calm but still made she lower her head in humiliation, it's true that a dog this young can't be properly trained, it's just that being admonished by her Young Master means that she failed him, and she hates that. "I was not criticizing you Lanfan, right? Right? Who's being a good boy? You're being a good boy!" He started to play with the lion dog, lightly brushing their noses together and blowing a kisses close to it's muzzle.

As much as she hates to admit it, Ling is a menace to Dolfu.

They continued in silence until Dolfu tried to wiggle his way out of Ling's arms, cueing the young Emperor to finally let it walk, the puppy ran – more like hop – and they followed close after it, she saw many dogs in her life to know what's happening, he sniffed Greed's scent somewhere and is
Greed was walking in the surroundings of a rundown temple, the snow giving it a more somber look, the ex-monster, in his turn, is sporting a brand new fur cape, and judging by the spear on his hands, he's been hunting. Dolfu yapped and it called his attention, Greed crouched with open arms and the puppy jumped right into his embrace. There's probably nothing that he loves more than this dog, besides himself of course.

And maybe Ling, he did gave his life for him.

"Oh, so you have a heart." Her Master teased and Greed turned to him.

"You can't live without me can you?" They raised their fists together and after lowering them Lanfan subtly frowned, Ling's general stance is different, the very air around him is, to be honest. She would be pondering about it longer if it wasn't for a faint qi coming from inside the temple.

The guardian concealed her qi and walked around the building, all the while those two talked and jested, Lanfan entered through a hole on the roof and was surprised by seeing a boy peeking from the door, he looked unaware of her presence so she lightly stepped in his direction until she was right behind him. That's when the boy noticed her, which threw her off for a second before she composed herself – he wasn't supposed to notice her, even this close, how? Before more thoughts could muddy her conscience she locked the boy on the floor and was shocked to know how thin he was.

"Oy Lanfan! That boy isn't an assassin, he works for me!" Both men walked towards the temple and she let go of the kid, which death glared her.

"First a dog and now a kid? Are you trying to rebuild the Devil's Nest gang?"

"Don't give me ideas." He mock-threatened. "Hey Yang, don't get mad at her, this lady is just doing her job." This boy, Yang, nodded.

"Yeah, yeah I get it." Greed's kid servant turned to Ling, he looked dazed and, after watching him for so long, Lanfan realized how he sensed her even with a hidden qi. "You're the Emperor right? Hongzi?"
"The one and only."

"The rumors are right." He said, eyes full of wonder. "You really do have shen." Upon hearing what he just said both Ling and Lanfan distanced themselves in confusion.

"W-what you just said?" Ling asked wary, and for good reason, Lanfan couldn't tear her eyes from the boy, he can't be serious. To read Shen naturally like he's doing one must train their mind's eyes diligently for years.

"You possess shen, weaker than Master Greed's, but it's still there, like the rumors said." They exchanged glances before Ling addressed Yang one more time, asking what was on her mind this whole time.

"Boy, what...are you?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for taking so long, chapter 20 is monster that I can't finish (I'm close tho), I think it's worth two chapters so I posted this one before finishing it. When I finish writing chapter 21 I'll post chapter 20 in all it's 6-7k+ words. Luckily chapter 21 won't be this long. (I hope)

Tokogamachi
is the small platform on the back.

remember back in (I think) chapter 14 when I said a very important character would appear, yup, that's Yang, he can feel shen naturally. Shen is the last of the three treasures mentioned in ch. 4, Yang already explains what that is.

Commets and feedbacks are appreciated. :)}
The Feelings of a Small Sparrow

Chapter Summary

The calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

Scaly, once you asked me something about crossdressed! Ling, today you'll have your question answered. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"What am I?" The boy, Yang, tilted his head. "I think I'm a human. What do you think Master?" He turned to Greed, playfully asking his superior to play along. The former sin leaned on one arm.

"I think you're a pip-squeak." His face fell whilst Greed gave him a smug smile just to piss him off more. Ling crossed his arms and leaned on the nearest wall, it's heartwarming to see Greed bonding with Yang.

"You're such a bad influence for this kid." This sparked something in Yang, as the kid turned sharply in his direction, eyes flaring in rage.

"I'm not a kid! I'm twelve!" Is this any way to talk to the Emperor? Also, wow, twelve, such a grownup.

"You look nine." Lanfan pointed out.

"He has the Yonyon syndrome." Ling joked and his guard hid her face, and knowing her, to hide her laugh. "How old is Yonyon?" Greed asked them, ah yeah, Greed doesn't know much about Yongji, now that he thinks about it.
"My age, eighteen."

"She looks fifteen."

"Exactly." Yang decided to ignore them in favor of Dolfu, pouting while doing so. Greed gave the duo one last glance before turning to Ling once again, his friend got up and, with his arms, asked Ling to exit the temple with him. They stopped below an oak tree and Ling faced Greed, waiting for whatever he has to say.

"What do you think of him?"

"Unmannerly, but talented."

"The kid is my servant now. So, if I return to the palace, he'll go too, right? Just wanting to make sure." So that is what is happening, Ling chuckled, he wished he could achieve this balance between benevolent and savvy as Greed does. Ling looked past Greed to see the boy again, even if he wasn't serving his friend Ling would like to have him in his service. He wonders how long is the radius of his sensing field, just like any Zhou master or perhaps longer? He wants to know.

"How did you find him? And he needs clothes."

"He was spying on me for some time, and we've just gotten along. About the clothes, can I ask you a favor? Can you take him down and buy some clothes? Preferably keep him in the city while you're at it?"

"Yes, but. Do you trust him?"

"Not entirely, but if I can win his loyalty." Ling nodded, Greed's intentions are clear to him. To be honest, Ling doesn't think Greed need to do much, the boy already seems attached to him, but if he wants Ling to see for himself to make an accurate judgment, he's more than glad and touched by the amount of trust he has on him.

Ling clasped his shoulder. "Since you're asking so nicely." He was about to walk past him but Greed grabbed him by the arm.
"Go for what he feels more comfortable, but choose something I’d approve of." Ling smiled, to show he got the message, and patted his hand so Greed would let him go.

"I'll go for the tackiest clothes I can find." He looked over his shoulder to see Greed's reaction, the way he felt insulted by that, so worth it, even when lightly upset he looks kissable.

"Fuck you."

"Fuck me." Ling got close to the stairs of the temple and waited for Yang to turn to him. "Come to the city with me Yang, we're going to buy you some clothes." The boy looked hesitant and turned away from him, finding more comfortable to turn to Lanfan instead. When Greed got closer to the temple, he turned to him, finding solace on his boss.

Or dare he say big brother?

"Go with him Yang, I'd trust my life to this kid." Greed locked him on his arm jokingly but Ling freed himself almost at the same time, muttering a joyful 'stop' right after. Yang got up, ignoring Lanfan's help – but thanking nonetheless – and got closer to Greed. He tilted his head up, not willing to let go of Greed apparently. "Go Yang, Ling knows of my promise and he has more integrity than I do."

When it looked like he was going to let go of Greed Ling distanced himself, he was already running in his mind the kind of clothes he could buy to Yang. Is he comfortable tying sashes? If not changshan is the best way; for warm days he can buy a jinbei, they're in Wenchang so there's a chance they sell it here. Yang nudged his sleeve and they were ready to go, Lanfan followed close behind, Ling offered his hand but the boy dismissed it at first, and accepted it midway through their walk back at the manor.

"Why are we in the Zhou residence?" Yang asked behind him, Ling had the dress and hair ready, now he only needed to do the makeup. He started with his eyes and through the mirror he could see Yang cocooned in his blanket.

"Because I need to put on a disguise." He finished the eyes and moved to his lips. "Is there any clothe in particular that you like?" He saw the kid retracting into the blanket as if to hide himself from Ling and the emperor stopped immediately, placing the lipstick and brush on the table and turning to the kid, afraid he said something insensitive. "Yang?"
"I never really had much of a choice..."

Ling pursed his lips, he should have been cautious. "Then how do you feel about hanfus? Have you ever tied a sash? If so, do you think it's inconvenient for you?" He showed his face again and Ling sighed in relief, returning to the mirror. The conditions Yang is in, his trust issues and now this, it speaks a lot about what is his social status and background. This gave a sour taste to his mouth, Yang is a xingese citizen, someone he should protect, and his condition served as a harsh remark of the things he still need to do.

"I find them annoying." He muttered and Ling hummed, almost done with his disguise.

"Then a changshan it is." Ling placed everything on the table, having finished the makeup, then a though occurred to him. "Although you might want to try more western styles, such as daopaos and yuanlingpaos, or any two pieces, they're easy to tie, just a simple knot, unlike our eastern counterpart. As for jackets, you could try a pifeng, it's a button jacket, or you could go for a beizi or a doupeng, like Greed."

"I think I want to try them on first."

"Fair enough. We're good to go."

They found Ran on the way down and asked for suggestions, to Ling's surprise she was acquainted to Yang and after giving a snack to him she headed home. Ling didn't know why but he couldn't shake the feeling that she liked seeing him cross-dressed, being in love makes you weird.

"You must think lowly of me." Yang blurted out after they passed through a crossing, he stopped walking and they came to a halt some steps away to check on him. "That I'm just a shabby brat leaching off your dear friend don't you?"

"I don't know what gave you this impression." Yang jerked his head up at the sound of his voice, confused by it's sudden change in pitch. Ling walked towards him and when he got closer he lowered down to get to his eye level. "There's a saying I live by, taught to me by a very wise man: 'No matter how small a sparrow is, it still has all it's vital organs.' Do you know what it means?" Yang shook his head, the same was lowered. Ling smiled, this kid is bratty, foul mouthed, has trust
issues and think everyone hates him, reminds Ling of someone from long ago. "It means that no matter how small a person may be, they're still a person and should be treated with due respect. If there's anything I hate, is the circumstances that made you take those decisions." He nodded and Ling straightened himself, satisfied with the result of their talk, he turned to Yongji after Yang came to his side and they resumed their walk.

"Thank you." He uttered, almost inaudible, and Ling smiled in return. Yang really does remind him of himself when younger.

-----------------

"Yang isn't here with you?" Master Xuan wondered after he was close enough from him. Greed was treating some minor injuries he got from the current raid, they got him unprepared and if it was a week ago he would had his ass handed to them. The cold water stung in his cut and didn't help his skin, the cold soon caught up and he quickly dried it and put on his blouse and cape.

"You know Yang?"

"Yes, I let him spy on you. But I'm not here for this, since the kidnapping incident I've concluded that more disasters could happen, so I want you to learn how to use a messenger falcon." His master whistled, a sharp, high-pitched sound that seemed to echo through the trees, giving this sensation that something was about to come. As expected another high-pitched cry resounded through the sky in response to his teacher's whistle, the cry became more clear as Greed heard the strong fluttering of wings and from up the trees a gray falcon emerged. The majestic animal flew in the sky, showing off it's prowess before landing loftily on his Master's armguard to receive a treat.

"Cool."

"This one was raised by Lord Guizhang. Here, use this before training with Leng. Trust me you don't want a falcon landing on your bare arm." He handed him a spare armguard, upon grabbing the piece Greed felt how sturdy it actually is. Made of a thick layer of leather and another hardy fabric underneath that still felt good to touch, Greed strapped the thing on his arm and lifted it near the bird. Nothing happened.

"Huh?"

"Leng will only fly off once you attached a letter to it. Give it a try." He won't lie that he isn't
disappointed, he wanted the falcon to land on his arm and take off from there. Greed went inside
the temple to write said letter, it's a good thing he still have his classes or this whole experience
would prove to be an ordeal. He wrote something basic, asking whoever get the letter 'how is
grandpa doing?' And after learning how to attach said letter on the falcon, he saw the bird fly
down the mountain and he must say, it's pretty nice.

Greed whistled in admiration. "How long does it take for it to come back?"

"10 minutes, give or take. While Leng does it's job you should try to replicate my command."
Greed stared off to the place Leng flew to, astonished thanks to the info he just received, it takes an
hour or more to go down and come back.

Great, now he wants a falcon too.

They spent the last ten minutes practicing his whistles, and once Leng arrived with another
message 'My father is doing fine, thanks for asking.', Greed went to learn how to call and keep it
still on his arm. He also learned that it needs to stay hooded for the most part, to not stress it, and it
was exquisite in a good way how calm Leng would stay when hooded, or how it keeps still while
on his armguard. At one time Greed got beaked in the finger for trying to touch it, and once his
Master decided that it was enough and he was upsetting the bird it returned to a box he recognized
from the dojo.

Down Baishe mountain and into the city Ling, Yongji and Yang were returning to the manor,
having renewed the boy's entire winter wardrobe. In the end he settled for a yuanlingpao and
doupeng set as his outfit for today, in other words, what Greed is wearing; it's not his father's
hunting garb – a shame it was lost in the bandits' hideout, it was an ethnic piece from his clan, the
Yin, and absolutely gorgeous, Ling regrets giving it to Greed – but a more casual one for when he
felt like riding his horse on the landscapes of his hometown on cold days.

"Yang, when you start to live in the palace with Greed, I want you to teach me how to sense shen.
Understood?" Ling looked down to see Yang's expression and when the boy nodded he felt a smile
tug at his lips. The group ascended the hill leading to the manor and Yang halted once again.
"Yang?"

"Why are we going to the mansion?" He froze in place, and for once he acted as suspicious as he
wanted, glancing off to Yongji, lips pursed, and back to Yang. He needs to think on an excuse
quickly, last he blunders his promise to Greed.

"To store some of your clothes, and to eat. Aren't you hungry? We'll have dinner in a few hours."
Yang relaxed, which is good, but if his face is of any indication he isn't convinced either.

"I can eat in the mountain."

"Yes you can, but it's a full fledged meal here. Can't say the same up there," Yang nodded right before bolting off in the direction of the mountain. "Yang wait! Stay here Yonyon, I want to build trust with him." It felt like she wanted to say something, but whatever that was he'll never know because he turned his back to his guard before she could utter any sound.

Ling climbed the mountain in a hurry, the boy couldn't have gone too far and yet he was nowhere to be found. The cold mountain wind stung in his face and it was horrible to run in this dress, soon the only thing accompanying him was the sound of his breathing. That kid can't be this fast, how come he lost hi-

Ling stumbled on his dress and fell on the ground, he got on his knees trying for one more time to sense Yang's qi, the Emperor got on his feet and dusted the snow off his clothes and face, and ran in the direction of Greed's campsite. This is where Yang is heading too, so he might as well.

He found the boy not long after his fall and, sensing his qi or shen – he doesn't know which – he became more desperate to widen the gap between them, the boy is running faster, but if his heavy breathing serves as any indication he can't keep this up, which boosted Ling's morale significantly. It was now or never, so Ling quickened his pace, coming closer and closer to Yang, close enough to hear him muttering a curse before grappling the kid in his arms and locking him there.

"Caught ya!" Yang tried to break free and Ling squeezed him tighter, at this point the kid was complaining and all he did was laugh.

"What are you two doing?" Came Greed's baritone, and Ling would be lying if he said his heart didn't flutter at the mere sound of his voice. He looked up to meet his gaze and saw that his handsome friend is lifting a boar, he'd find that weird if two years ago he hadn't lifted Gluttony of all people, and Greed is stronger than him, so it's not.

It's impressive nonetheless.

"Playing tag." Ling was acting in his usual silly self – that now that he thinks of it, he hardly uses around him, why? - Greed decided to keep quiet, studying the scene in front of him: Ling was pretty much hugging Yang, or better yet keeping him in place, while the pipsqueak was glaring
daggers to the emperor. In other words Ling couldn't keep him in the manor, fan-fucking-tastic.

"Yang, return to the temple." He followed the boy with his gaze before turning sharply to Ling once again, when he did the pissant exhaled. "Couldn't keep him down the mountain?" He glanced off to another direction, ashamed, Ling bit his lip and for a moment he felt his aggravation diminishing.

That is hot, all of the homo.

"He bolted off the moment we reached the manor. He likes you, you know? Look at what he's wearing." It looked like he wanted to say more, but Ling decided to look at his sleeves and as he did that, so did Greed. Ling is crossdressed, and only now he's noticing that, the boy started to fret his arm, biting his lip so hard Greed is sure he will break the skin there. He closed his eyes, as if maintaining them open was too much. When he winced in pain while cupping his forehead Greed noticed the snow on his hair and headdress.

"Let me help." He laid the boar on the floor and approached Ling to dust the snow off his head, the cold was hurting him, no doubt. From his head Greed's hand ran through the free strands of hair, his hair is longer, now he can see that. His hand traveled to Ling's cheek, then to his chin, propping it up. If only Ling could look at him for a minute, but maybe it's for the best, last time he only had an eyeliner on and Greed was already trapped by his eyes, imagine with the full package?

"You want to make fun of me don't you?"

Greed shrugged. "Well, I was going to call you 'the hottest girl in Xing' but since you don't want me to." This drew a smile from Ling, and, without any warning whatsoever, he landed his eyes on him. Greed bit his lip, he knows this feeling; it happened in his dream, it happened yesterday. How can someone look so good passing as both sexes? Suddenly Dolfu scratched Ling's dress, trying to get their attention, and they both broke eye contact. "If I didn't knew who you are I'd try to hook up with you."

Ling blinked once, twice, trying to register what just happened, what Greed just said. Greed got the boar from the floor and went inside his camp, all the while Ling stared. Then, as if a gear shifted in his mind, he frowned, did he just said that he's unfuckable? That hurt, perhaps more to his pride than his heart but still, he pretty much dumped him. This sucks.

"Do you want to stay the night?" Ling looked over his shoulder, not making any effort to hide his hurt, he's upset and hungry, he could care less. Greed, on the other hand, was calm. Stupid, charming, inconsiderate, handsome bastard, Ling wished Greed could look ugly to him even if just
for a second.

He took Dolfu in his arms. "No!" Ling turned and left without uttering another word, stupid and childish? Yes, and he's going to regret it in give or take an hour but right now he's feeling better.

"Why is he angry?" Yang asked behind him, well, good question.

"I think it's because I pretty much cat-called him. Ling's usually uptight so." He cut himself off, hoping Yang understood the rest. Greed proceed to skin the boar and prepare their meal, since the day he learned alchemy cooking things have become smoother. Greed was washing his hands when Yang asked.

"Do you like him?"

"Define 'liking'."

"Like lovers." Greed sat opposite of Yang to start a fire, rushing to do so to warm his hands again while the meal cooked. He'll invade the manor tomorrow to steal some vegetables and grains, he can't only feast on the shit he hunts, maybe Dolfu but not him. As for Yang's question, Greed crossed his arms, eye fixated on the fire while he thought on it thoroughly; he finds Ling stunning, today proved that, and he'd fuck him in a heartbeat if Ling asked, but he can't see themselves as romantic partners, that kid probably thinks the same.

"No. But as friends? Totally." Greed poked the cackling wood. "What do you think of him?" Yang hummed, the boy was embracing his own knees as he faced the fire, face unreadable.

"He's nice, he told me that I'm valid, regardless of my conditions, I..., I liked that." For the first time Yang showed him a genuine smile and it felt good to see, it is also good to know him and Ling are getting along. Greed stirred the stew in the pot and felt his happiness slowly slip away, there's something he needs to tell Yang and he knows the kid will be angry.

Greed tapped his knee nervously. "Yang, after we eat I want you to return to the manor." Like he predicted the brat got angry, even changing to a more aggressive posture, this prompted Greed to do the same, he knows how jing and qi look on someone's body, in this case Yang knows how he is sitting.
Yang scoffed. "So what? You turn back on your word while I'm not looking? I'm young but not idiot."

"I don't lie kid."

"And I'm supposed to believe this?"

Greed huffed. "In case you don't know, which I doubt because you've been spying on me, there are bandits on this mountain. I don't want to risk your safety, and Ling knows of my promise. He has more credibility than I do, so just hang around him and he'll take you with to the palace, isn't that what you want?" This hit a nerve on Yang, the boy was pouting and fuming and worse, he felt betrayed. Good, he destroyed the trust he built.

"Then why are you here if it's so dangerous?!" Yang snapped.

"I can protect myself."

"Then you can protect me." He sounded hurt and then it hit him, Yang isn't hanging with him because of their treat anymore, or at least it stopped being his priority. Sending him off like this will make him feel abandoned all over again and Greed looked down at his lap, he should have known better, Ling even told him.

Greed sighed in defeat. "Alright, you won, you can stay here with me, forever if you want. Just don't blame me if you end up killed." He joked at the last part, which thankfully eased the mood, coincidentally the food was ready and they had their meal.

"I've bought your dinner- Young Master?" She was confused, and not only at this moment, since His Majesty arrived from shopping he did nothing but play with Dolfu and brood in his bed. She needs an explanation and now. Lanfan turned to Yongji and the girl all but jumped. "What happened outside?"

"I-I don't know. He cli-climbed the mountain after Yang an-and came back like this." She glared immediately after hearing Yongji's report, she doesn't even care about what happened, she let Ling unprotected and that's alarming.
"You left His Majesty walk off alone?" Lanfan bellowed and Yonyon kowtowed in fear.

"Don't fire me!" She implored and Lanfan flinched at a moment's notice, a month and it still feels weird to be the commandant. Out of nowhere both teens heard their Lord grumble something in the pillow and shifted their attention to him.

"'If it wasn't you Ling, I'd hook up with you', what? Ain't I good enough for you?" They heard Ling mutter.

"Your Majesty?" Yongji called and this seemed to do the trick, Ling turned to them, then his eyes went to the food and his mood improved greatly.

"Ah, Lanfan! You bought food, thanks." He reached for the nearest bowl and Lanfan decided to give it him, against all odds. The commandant placed the rest of his meal neatly on the kotatsu table and sat on the seat facing Ling.

"May I ask how things went between you and Greed?" She has an idea, but her Young Master needs to vent, so let him vent. Ling placed the bowl on his lap and sighed.

"I met him crossdressed. Surprisingly enough he didn't joke about it, but he did say he'd fuck me if he didn't knew I was Ling." This sounds like Greed. If grandfather was still alive he'd probably tell Ling he shouldn't stress over a xiaoren like him, that Greed should feel grateful someone like their Young Master loves him in the first place. Not to say that she isn't affected by what Ling said, Lanfan is actually mad he had the nerve to make such crude remark in her Master's face.

"In your face like this?" Yongji inquired, astonished, and Ling hummed.

"How dare him! Do you want me to punish him for upsetting you Your Majesty?"

"No, there's no need to." He stopped to drink the broth left on he bowl, when her Young Master placed the bowl again on his lap his eyes stayed on the empty bowl, unmoving and unreadable. Part of her wanted to call him, to grab his attention, but it felt rude. "Part of me thinks I overreacted."
After their dinner Greed and Yang went to the underground floor of the temple, most likely an escape route or a secret passageway, where it ends is unknown to him nor does he care, but just to be sure he wouldn't be attacked Greed transmuted a wall to block the passage. Greed started another fire down there to protect them from the cold and, after making sure it would stay lit, he sneaked under the makeshift cover made of fur, Yang was already on the "bed".

"Can you tell me more about your friends Master?" He sounded sleepy, but why not? It's therapeutic to talk about the good parts of his life and Greed felt like entertaining Yang to sleep.

"Which?"

"The ones who worked with you in a bar." The Devil's Nest gang then? He knows what to tell him.

"Well then, let's start at the beginning shall we? I met them after I invaded one of my father's lab,"

"What's a lab?"

"A place to make research."

"What were they researching?"

"Chimeras, a fusion of two or more living beings."

"Like General Lei from 'The Epic of Heaven and Earth'?" How he is supposed to respond to that?

"Who's this General Lei? What is this Epic of Heaven and Earth?" Yang looked revitalized all of a sudden just by the book's mentioning and this got Greed curious, the boy looked unusually excited, unlike anything he saw until now, and he felt good, it was a good change of pace.

"General Lei is a tiger-human hybrid and a character from the book, he starts as Ru Jin's enemy but becomes her ally later in the story. This book is my favorite story! To some it's even the opening
gate to waidanshu, it teaches the basics and tells of a lot of other things, like the 'Elixir of the Immortals'. It even has the Sage of the West in it!" He was virtually bouncing on his feet and Greed chuckled, for once he's acting like a kid and he liked it. It feels like Yang is opening up more and more.

"When we wake up tomorrow can you tell me more about this story? It got me interested."

The child nodded before yawning. "Continue."

"I gave them an ultimatum: I free them if they work for me. At first they didn't trust me, how could they? I looked like the rest of my brothers. Bido was the first one I bonded with, and when they saw how well I treated him they slowly started to accept me as their boss."

"What kind of animal was Bido?"

"A gecko."

"What happened to him?" Greed froze in shock, that was a gut punch he didn't expected to take, which was shortsighted of him. Of course Yang would ask what happened to them, he's a child, he's curious. The lack of an answer seemed to be enough to him, since Yang reached for his hand. "You don't need to answer if you don't want to." The boy got closer, clinging to him like Greed was the blanket instead and made himself comfortable in a semi fetal position. "Good night Master."

Greed put an arm over Yang and exhaled, this night couldn't get any worse. "Good night pipsqueak."

--------------

He opened his eyes thanks to a strange noise and was greeted by the cackling of wood and the gentle swaying of the fire. The bonfire is getting weaker, Greed needs to rekindle it if he want them to stay warm through the night, he's not feeling Yang against him anymore so he didn’t waste time to get up.

When he flipped the covers, however, Yang wasn’t on the bed. Greed looked at his surroundings before opting to sense the kid’s qi, to no avail, so he tried his jing. His heart threatened to jump out of his rib-cage when he felt the big quantity of jing coming from the ground floor. Greed didn’t
spare any minute to climb up to see what is happening, all the while wishing nothing bad has occurred to Yang, not to him, not again. Greed rushed to the entrance of his campsite, the neighing of horses only serving to distress him even more, he arrived at the door just to be greeted by a gang of riders, Yang lying unconscious on one of their saddles.

Chapter End Notes

Cliffhanger! *inserts Fushigi Yuugi's ending theme*

This was actually the first half of chapter 20, but since it became a monster of 11k and most chapter are only 5k I decided to split it.
xiaoren translates 'mean person', but it closer related to 'vagabond' and similar terms, 'junzi' is the opposite, I think chapter 22 will have a better explanation.

Shoutout to Vash5 and SilverScaly you two are awesome.

Also guys, should I name my chapters?
Inside the Wolf's Den

Chapter Summary

Part two of what was chapter 20 :V

Chapter Notes

Oh god I took so long. D: At least I hope this chapter delivers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They kicked their horses into a run and Greed recognized their clothes, the bandits had freed themselves. The former sin chased them, desperate to save Yang, if the brat had listened to him, if he had stayed back in the manor with Ling… Greed shook his head, now is not the time to think about this. They were leaving him behind and Greed tried his hardest to reach them, the cold of the night was brutal to his body and the wind even harsher, if only he was a homunculus again he would have been on their neck by now, stupid underwhelming human body.

Their gap was widening and Greed stopped, gasping, this won’t do, he’ll have to change his tactic. He returned to the temple, tired and defeated, to say he was at wits’ end was an understatement, he was absolutely livid. Greed vented his anger in the nearest tree, how can he be this impotent? This disappointing? Greed withdrew from the tree, he damaged the bark and yet his anger hadn’t subsided. He returned to the temple, the full moon helped him see the damage the bandits did on the ground floor, the place was ransacked, they tried to find something here, Yang must have climbed to check on the ruckus on the upper floor and got kidnapped.

He knows why Yang was taken instead of him, they want revenge, it isn’t hard to know how these outlaws think. Greed howled and fell on his knees from exhaustion, this is hitting too close to home. He looked up, drained, and suddenly it wasn’t the temple before his eyes, but the sewers below Devil’s Nest, he irritated Father and his friends had to pay the price, his stupidity cost them their lives, this same scene is playing again. He failed them, failed Yang.

No.

No, at the time he was too weak to defend Martel and the others, this isn’t the case right now, he’s strong enough to take on the entire organization. He has alchemy, he have people to help, he has training.
He has the Ultimate Shield.

With a new resolution Greed got up, he’ll head to the temple and send a message to Xiong and the others via Leng. Yes, that is what he’ll do, and when he send the message and return to his camp to make the necessary preparations he’ll descend upon them with a rage rivaling Wrath.

He heard soft footsteps in the snow coming to his direction and braced himself, only to feel like a man who just saw an oasis in the desert. In front of him was Ling, and when he saw Greed the emperor ran towards him.

“What are you doing out here this late at night?” Ling was checking on him, and he would find the gesture sweet if he wasn't seething with anger.

“You couldn’t have come in a better hour! Ling you need to help me, Yang was kidnapped by those pricks!” Ling lowered his gaze, but Greed can still see how serious he got. The Emperor turned his back to Greed then looked at him over his shoulder with a squared jaw, it was impossible to not see his will to save Yang.

“Let’s go to the dojo and get some weapons then.” Ling began to move, treating the situation with all the seriousness it deserves. Greed, however, felt something nasty tugging in his heart and he immediately grabbed Ling by his arm, forcing him to an abrupt pause.

“No! I want you to either use the falcon to warn them or go yourself.” Ling turned so Greed released his arm, his partner crossed his arms and he can see clear as day how annoyed he is.

“And let you recklessly charge into enemy territory? Hell no! I’m going with you.” Stubborn little pissant, why can't he understand he just want his safety?

Greed groaned. “You’re not understanding Ling! I can’t risk you too! I have alchemy, I can protect myself.”

“Ah, so I have to stay here and fret over whether you’re safe or not? Greed, I lost you once, almost lost you twice! I’m not letting you go alone and that’s final. We’re partners did you forget that!” Stupid, stubborn, beautiful brat, he can feel his resolve crumble in face of Ling's conviction. He said once to Ling that they would fight together, now is the time to fulfill his promise. Greed allowed himself to calm down and placed his hands on Ling's arms.
“We need help, you know that right?” Ling gave him a sly grin, and as peculiar as that sound, he found reassurance in that.

“Don’t worry, they’ll come. Lanfan and Yongji must be on their way as we speak.” He know his guards, it won't take long for them to sense he's not on the bed and warn their hosts. Greed looked down at him momentarily before walking past him, patting his head on the way, he felt a little tug in his heart along a sense of fulfillment. Greed trusts him to fight by his side, to help him in his time of need, he couldn't be feeling more gratified.

----------------

They rushed to the dojo and Greed knocked on the back door, the humidity of Wen province made the cold harsher than it needed to be, made worse by his poor choice of clothes. Ling can feel his extremities ache, Greed knocked once again, this time with more strength, only ceasing when they heard his Master's footsteps.

"What's the matter? Coming here this late at night."

"Yang was kidnapped. We need weapons." Master Xuan let them in without further explanation and guided them to the weaponry: sabers, swords, lances, halberds, if it's used in martial arts, it was there. Ling traced his fingers on a group of sabers and settled for the one who felt more comfortable in his grasp, he played with it, swinging the blade to see how it feels. He checked on Greed and he was eyeing the halberds with dilemma.

"So, which will you choose Greed? Halberd or sword?"

"Give me a jian, and ink." His teacher raised an eyebrow to the last request and went to fetch ink. As for Greed he analyzed each jian, measuring it's height and weight before choosing a Qin-type jian, longer than your average ones. Master Xuan appeared with the requested ink and Greed gave the sword to Ling, it didn't take a genius to figure out that he was going to draw the transmutation circle for his Ultimate Shield. He didn't expect, however, for Greed to transmute the jian into a rapier, telling him and his teacher that he is not playing around this time.

"Want me to go?"

"No. Xiong and the others might be arriving soon." His master nodded and they left for the bandits'
hideout after they acquired other weapons fit for stealth missions, he didn't utter a single word during their walk, neither did Ling, too busy gazing at the rapier, the damned weapon creating a lump on his throat, it's very familiar shape making his skin crawl.

Ling decided to look at his own feet and realized that if they want to infiltrate the place they'll need renshu clothing or anything that doesn't get in the way that is also black and comfortable, Greed is doing alright but he...

"Greed." His partner looked over his shoulder. "I need to change, my clothes will get in the way and..., yeah, that's about it. We should go to your camp." Greed gave an uninterested hum and they changed course. It was Ling's first time inside the temple's underground and he made sure to dress quickly, Greed isn't here with him and Ling can't help but feel uneasy, Greed acting unusually distant and he doesn't want to make him suffer for longer. The former Yao prince discarded his hanfu in place for a makeshift assassin's garb, as long as he can hide the throwing knives and gas bombs Ling is satisfied.

Ling found Greed by the entrance morbidly eyeing the rapier under the moonlight, the weapon is like a reminder of the worst parts of his life, and yet is the best choice of weapon given his circumstances. It felt wrong to see him like this though.

"You can always just use your claws you know?" Greed turned as if he didn't expected Ling to be on this temple, he gave him a bitter smile before sheathing the cursed weapon.

"Yes I can, but thanks to you all, I'm back to my game, my real game. Ready to see how Henry fights?" Henry? Is that the name he used to have when working undercover for Father? He doesn't think Greed is in the emotional condition to be saving Yang, and Ling would be glad to breakthrough the White Snake Bandits' lair single-handedly for him if he needs to. But for now.

"What are you talking about Greed? It's just me and my bitch going to rescue a rude orphan. As far as I know, there's no Henry." He hoped it would cheer him up, Greed pulled him by the back of his head to touch their foreheads together and Ling thanked every god possible for how close they were, so Greed can't see him blushing like mad and he can see his eyes up close.

"Thank you Ling, now to rescue my rude orphan."
"Yongji! Yongji wake up!" Lanfan said in hushed tone as she shook the other guard awake. Her childhood friend was about to complain when her hand reached an empty bed, she almost jumped to her feet, all her sense in alert and it amazed Lanfan. As lazy as she can be, Yonyon takes her job seriously.

"Where is he?"

"Not in the mansion, His majesty must have fled when he went to the bathroom." Lanfan punched her own palm in frustration. "I can't believe I didn't considered this possibility!"

"Calm down, we wake Xiong and climb the mountain. If any ruffian try to lay a finger on His Majesty, I won't let them." The prospect of hunting bandits down sparked something in her, and for a moment Lanfan could see the glimpse of the frontier guard she was before.

To their surprise Xiong was on the main building half-awake, he was in the kitchen fetching some water after sensing a weak source of jing exiting the house and figured out it must be Ling, since he only knows him and Yang to have poor quantities of jing. They asked him to join them and the young lord complied after listening to their worries, they planned to invade the cave tomorrow in the dead of night but plans change, according to Xiong. Lanfan saw in his eyes the same cold and calculating vibe she saw on Yongji minutes before, he means business, and just the thought of seeing a master of the Four Wills fighting gave her chills.

"You two don't mind if we stop in the dojo first right?" Xiong asked after they changed to renshu uniforms.

"Depends on the reason."

"I need weapons." Lanfan and Yongji exchanged glances. They need to restock, that is a fact.

"Then we shall do it." Xiong nodded and they made a detour to the dojo. To her surprise Master Xuan was awaiting for them and it became apparent Ling is in the mountain when he disclosed everything that occurred in the last hour.

Xiong approached his teacher and made the hold fist salute. "Master, I need the Hushen Polearm." The tone in his voice had no room for negotiation, his teacher noticed that too and gave him a confident smile.
"Don't lose it, or our Great Lord Bang will be very sad." He went somewhere on the building and while they awaited Xiong turned to them.

"Actually I could've killed them all the first time I fought them." He confessed. "But at the time, I though, 'maybe if they're given a second chance, they'll turn a new leaf' and I made them promise one thing: if they never bring chaos once again to Wen province, I'll let them live." This explains the uncharacteristic coldness she felt from him this entire time, Master Xuan brought the requested weapon, a long ranged weapon wrapped in a red fabric. When he loosened the ties on it the fabric smoothly slipped away and revealed the Zhou heirloom, it looked exactly like the famed weapon of the first Zhou King and the metal seemed to shine like the moon itself when it cast it's light on it.

Xiong took the weapon reverently and sighed in contentment when it rested in his hands, he swung the weapon to warm up and then planted it on the floor in a loud thud before looking back at her and Yongji and she must confess, the murderous intent was something she never thought she would witnesses in his eyes. "But they didn't keep their word so neither should I."

---------------

"Shit it's cold."

"The boss told us to watch for that guy, we don't want to enrage him."

He and Ling heard the gatekeepers talk on top of a nearby tree, Greed ignored the rest of conversation on basis that it will be only small talk from here on. He turned to Ling and the teen was eyeing the guards, then a place close to them.

"You think they will kill Yang if they know you're here?"

"It's a possibility, yes." Ling hummed whilst his fingers were touching his lips, he's considering his options. It's a good thing he agreed to brought Ling into this, because knowing him Greed would simply act as things happens, which isn't very wise considering what is in stake here.

"I suggest we create a diversion close to them so one of the guards walk away from the entrance, then we knock down however stays and proceed to do the same to the other."
"I don't think they're dumb enough to fall for that, they'll check the source of the noise together." Ling didn't get affected by this new hypothesis and instead faced him.

"Then the entrance will be unguarded, giving you an easy access to their hideout." That is a good point, and a possibility they should consider. Talking about possible outcomes.

"What if neither of them move?" Ling frowned and turned to the cave, he stroked his chin, muttering something to himself, then looked back to him.

"We keep the sound, or you act as a decoy."

"Thinking of everything."

"One of us had to." True.

"And one of us must get things done." He climbed down the tree, not even waiting for Ling's response, acting as a decoy seems like the better option, this way they can get both guards at once. He wished he could tap at his siblings' abilities at will, Lust was great at sneaking into places, or maybe he shouldn't have been a lazy bastard and invade the manor, that would be a great warm up for today. Well sucks to be him.

There is one thing he can access at will though, and that is their memories. Greed remembers being tricked by Alphonse and the chimeras hanging with him, there's also that girl, he knows it's Envy, and just thinking of the utter humiliation they received makes his day a bit better. He's not remembering it just to feel good about himself however, he wants their tactic and he'll use it, first thing Greed did was dig in the snow at selected spots, draw a circle and pentagram on the ground, then bury it with said snow, making sure to be as noisy as he can. Greed never did waidanshu before and it depends on qi, making it a gamble, but one he's willing to take nevertheless. It's a good thing there are pines in Baishe mountain, it makes hiding from sight easier for him.

Greed heard steps coming to his direction and hid on the designated tree. Making sure he's hidden from sight, he started to sense the thug's jing, making an effort to feel qi instead. He wasn't on the desired spot, having stopped mid-track to look around, so Greed got a stone and hurled it in the tree closer to one of the traps. It did the trick and he walked into another trap.

Now was his chance, Greed activated the circle, creating a steel cage and trapping the guard. Both men heard a grunt followed by a muffled thud, he ignored the captured bandit to join Ling, the
other guard tied down. Just to be sure Greed also trapped this one inside an iron cage, they exchanged glances and looked into the cave in unison.

"Do you have a plan?"

"We ensure Yang is safe first. We go to where he's being locked and you create an iron wall to block the door to his cell. There are eighteen thieves down there, we can't be seen until we save him no matter what."

"Anything else?"

"This is a former part of King Wen of Zhou's mausoleum, according to Lady Yuan. We can sneak from the roof." Ling delivered the information calmly, as if he didn't just inform him that he was locked in a catacomb of all things, and why does it have cells? Was it used as a prison a long time ago? The bandits built it? He can't think of how Yang must feel locked in a miserable place like this.

Before he noticed Ling was already inside, Greed followed him and they climbed the support beam. "Do you remember the path to the cells?"

"Yes, follow me." Greed turned his back to the entrance and began to guide his partner to where Yang might be, they walked slowly to not draw attention. The former sin used visual and sensory cues to track his bratty servant, which isn't hard considering the boy's rather poor health, which, as sad as it is, is proving to be very helpful. The worst parts are when they have to go down a level, this is when Greed is put to test the most. He can't believe he almost forgot how big this place is.

---------------------

"Shouldn't we be heading to the Bandits' lair?" Yongji asked after they turned to the opposite direction.

"There's another entrance." They walked until he spotted the familiar pavilion on the lookout to the city, Liang's and Meiying's tombstone were somberly lit by the moonlight. He'll hate to do what he's about to, but attacking from where your enemy last expect is a big advantage he needs to take. Xiong approached the lustrous rock and ran his fingers on it before staying in a comfortable position to move it to the side.
"What are you going to do?" Lanfan asked. Xiong only spared a side glance before pushing the stone enough to reveal a hatch. "So this is the secret passage. Where does it lead to?"

"The old weapon gallery." He said as he opened the hatch. "The ones down there are all original members of the gang, you have permission to kill." They headed to the old gallery, walking stealthily as to avoid being caught, Xiong caught the girls looking at the walls with wonder, the Mausoleum of King Wen must have been the sight when it was made, to think it was looted long time ago pains him. It was a miracle they found his polearm.

They came across a sealed door with light peeking through it, they rushed to the door to inspect the other side and voila, they reached the hideout. Xiong beckoned to Lanfan and pointed to a smoke grenade on her outfit, then to the gate, she nodded and prepared herself for when he opened the door. The Yao Guardian threw the explosive when the creak was wide enough for it, smoke rose from the grenade, clouding the entire area, then, in a single kick, Xiong bursted the door open and the trio made quick job of the bandits in the vicinity.

Two patrolling thugs had the misfortune of coming across the scene and all but tripped on their feet, he saw a dagger flying pass him and hitting the head of the slower one, whilst the other retreated, paying to mind to his fallen ally.

--------------------

"Xi-Xiong is here!" Came the panicked shriek of a nearby thief, sending the thieves in this hallway in disarray, seeing how disorganized they are to decide who stay and who will face Xiong is pathetic and exploitable.

And he will exploit the hell out of it.

Greed used the opportunity to touch the wall above Yang's cell, and an iron wall covered the door, Ling threw a gas bomb on the floor shaking the already flustered ruffians. They jumped down in sync, landing on two guards and alerting the bandits who were on their way to assist their partners, Ling attacked another unsuspecting thug before Greed blocked the returning enemies. When the smoke dissipated Greed locked the three unconscious members of the Baishe Bandits in the wall, Ling approached him and they high-fived.

"I can feel two more souls ahead." This leaves Xiong with thirteen people, which, when taking into accounting the people he's likely with, amounts to nothing.
"Want to take their leader down with me?" He can feel himself calming down, sensing Yang's jing, sensing the boy sitting in a corner, hugging himself in comfort.

Ling was checking on the unconscious guards when he asked, and after he was done with that he smiled in response. "Yes."

Two people left, the rest will be on Lanfan and the others. Greed gave a satisfied sigh, they can do that. He walked to the iron wall and knocked on the metal plate. "Yang? We're here to save you, just wait till we make sure everything's safe." He didn't wait for him to respond, impatient to free his subordinate and return to their daily routine.

The hallways were like blurs as they ran towards the leader of the Baishe Bandits, Greed's expression changed for the better and Ling is relieved that things went well for him. When Greed remembered all the friends he lost to his father, the sudden pure, sheer sadness and rage that followed shook his very core and changed their relationship. He felt how scared he was of failing, how rigid he was with every move, even if he didn't notice that. A fast approaching qi cut his line of thoughts and before Ling could register what he was doing he pushed Greed away from the crossing.

The man that appeared before them towered even Greed, his footsteps were heavy and something about the air around him was unsettling. This ruffian wasn't afraid of him, even going as far as grinning maliciously to him, Xiong brought his weapon closer to his body. He doesn't remember this one, and this isn't good.

"So you're Xiong, you don't look as impressive as I though." He doesn't know why but he's on edge, he can feel the same applies to both girls, specially Lanfan. Yet being mocked by this prick allowed him to smile cockily.

"Don't want to hear you crying for mercy then." The man sucker punched him but Xiong was able to defend, his eyes widened in shock as the man's inhuman strength was forcing him to yield.

Another punch came in aiming his head and Xiong distanced himself, the attack hit the floor and they gasped when they saw the damage it did on the rock surface.

"This strength is not human." Yongji cried out.

"Can it be? Chimera?"
"Chimera?!" He attacked him once again and this time Xiong barely evaded, the man attacked Lanfan next so Xiong used this opportunity to check his arm, he could hear his heartbeats on his ear when he saw the cuts on his sleeve, he is a mountain animal, that is for sure.

“I was planning to keep this a secret, but you had to spoil it young lady?” The man tutted, he proceeded to flex his muscles, his form changing before their eyes into a bearish monster. Lanfan shielded Yongji from the monster, now that he stopped blocking the exit, she turned to her subordinate.

"Young Master is in danger, go after him!"

"Bu-"

"If there's another chimera he's in danger, go to his aid. That's an order!"

"You sure you want me to leave? What about you?" Greed asked after he protected Ling and himself from this chimera's attack, his shield is up to his neck and he is on top of him, if this were any other situation Ling would be blushing. The monster tried to attack again but Greed got her arm in time and Ling kicked her away, from what he can see, she's fast, so Ling has a better chance against this thug.

"I can take this chic on my own. Go after their leader." Greed nodded even though he was obviously against this then got out of him, he continued on to their boss and when the chimera went after Greed Ling blocked her. "I'm your target." She growled and almost slashed his dao away. Ling tsked, she's stronger than he tought; she attacked once again and Ling jumped away from her claws. Fast and strong, a feline perhaps?

Xiong advanced, piercing the chimera's chest with his polearm, he had a smile on for as long as he realized his blade got stuck on the half-beast's skin or muscle, his eyes widened in pain because of the impact in his head. Lanfan came in to help but the monster deflected her arm with his stolen halberd, Xiong rolled off to dodge and stopped close to Lanfan. He's doing pretty well for someone fighting two foes at once, and how he senses them even without looking, this is either his animal side or he can...

This has to be a joke, he was skeptical about the Xia’s involvement, but only members of the royal family and their bodyguards know how to sense the Dragon's Flow, and his would explain why he fights better than the bandits he faced. They need a strategy, specially now that he came to this
She's trained, unlike the other outlaws, something is off about this. Is she a warrior of the Xia? He wouldn't doubt that. Ling struggled to avoid her next attack and if it wasn't for the saber he'd probably lost an arm, this area is too narrow, it isn't an ideal place to fight the way he is used and he fears she noticed that.

“You’re doing pretty good against me, Suixi. Hongzi, I wouldn’t expect less from my Lady’s rival. Now if you allow me, I’ll take your head as a gift to her.”

Suixi resumed her brutal assault, Ling could do as little much as defend her onslaught of attacks, studying her moves and waiting for an opening to present itself, the saber broke and he had a short time to grasp that before she kicked him to a wall.

The impact sent a shockwave of pain through the young Emperor's whole body. His head was pulsating, his body shuddering, and he is sure he's bleeding somewhere, yet Ling refused to yield, he'll have to retort to his hidden weapons. Instead of finishing him the chimera turned in time to deflect a smoke bomb. A shadow landed in front of him, as it happened it was Yongji.

"Do you have any plan?" Her voice was coated in worry, as is her eyes, which wants to be on him but her fighting experience keeps it on their enemy.

"Keep her busy. She can smell us, the moment she turns to me, grab her."

The chimera lunged forward amidst the fog, aiming her claw on Ling's throat. Ling remained still as Yongji caught her arm, her nails a hair apart from his neck, and in a moment's notice he shoved his tantō in her gut. Suixi squirmed on the floor, the poison is taking effect, and as the life sipped away from her eyes Ling didn't react, his adrenaline rush clouded any moral thinking, and so the only thing he was able to do was to search for any piece of evidence that proved she worked for the Xia. Ling took a shoulder piece containing their mon and faced the tunnel ahead.

They need to rendezvous with Greed and fast, she has a cut above her eyebrow and this is getting in the way, surprisingly Xiong is standing his ground just fine. He got his polearm back after she engaged in combat against the bear chimera and she is certain they can’t pull that stunt again, she almost lost her automail.

They exchanged glances and nodded, they found a way to not be tracked by their qi, and the fact it
took this long for them to come to this tactic is stupid. Xiong moved first, using his higher speed to
 evade his attacks and being more careful with his blocks. When the chimera grabbed his polearm
 once again to counter Xiong’s strike Lanfan hurled a kunai in the beast’s wrist, giving Xiong the
 opening to thrust his weapon on the man-bear’s throat and ending his life.

They stood there in a haze, gasping heavily for air as they watched the corpse laid on the floor.
Xiong went to the body to retrieve his family heirloom and turned to check on Lanfan, the
bodyguard took a piece of cloth to wrap around her forehead and moved past him, she needs to
check on those two, and Xiong has his own business to attend to, they paths diverge from here.

----------------------

Greed reached the last room of this underground maze, and like he expected, the asshole
responsible for his kidnapping was there, weapon in one hand, a piece of cloth on the other. He
looked at the fabric in his hands with deep sorrow and then he clenched the cloth in his hands, as
Greed witnessed the change in mood to anger things clicked in his mind and Yang’s kidnapping
made more sense.

The former sin decided to study the room, to take notice of anything that might get in the way of
their duel. The room itself was round and empty of anything that would inform of it’s past use,
instead all he saw was firearms, mugs, bowls. This is the main room they used to hangout and from
the looks of it, he'll have to block his access to the weapons.

"He was very bright, my son, it's a shame he went down so easily by your hands, and do you know
what the worst part is? You probably don't even know who he was." He lamented. "Why? Why did
you spare the girl? I’d be pretty upset still, but at least I wouldn't suffer this heartache." So that was
his son? Whatever, he would feel something if today's event haven't happened, but as it stands, he
doesn't give a fuck.

"Sucks to be you."

"Ha, sucks to be me, yes. I wanted to take that brat from you, but I guess I'll just kill you, than
throw your corpse near him before ending his life too." He chuckled to himself, the he stood up,
smiling confidently. "Prepare to fac-"

"I don't care who you are, you're going to die anyway."
The bandit leader laughed. "Great! Then when I'm about to finish your life I'll tell you my name, just so it can haunt you in the afterlife!" He howled before shooting and Greed defended with his arms, he'd stop to be amazed by his reflexes if he wasn't fighting, he kept shooting and Greed continued to defend his face. A bullet grazed his face and he tsked, before the bandit leader could reload Greed touched the ground, transmuting a slab out of the floor to hit the man on the stomach, then he locked his hands on the floor.

"You were saying?" Greed unsheathed his rapier, walking in a tranquil fury that was easy to read. The asshole tried to break free, getting more desperate as Greed closed the distance between them. The ex-homunculus stopped near his face, pointing his sword into the other man's throat, the bandit nothing more than a struggling bug asking to be put out of it's misery.

"Greed!" Xiong's call break into his conscience in time for him to remember himself, Greed shake his head in response. This way of thinking isn't his. He heard a small chuckle coming from the asshole on the floor and he turned to him.

"They already know about you boytoy, my job here is done." Xiong came to his side and turned to the bandit leader, the coldness in his eyes sent shivers down their spines for different reasons, then the young lord crouched.

"You remember our deal right?" He fished for a pistol on the man's clothes and pointed it to it's owner's head.

"I-" The loud sound of gunpowder exploded into the room and ringed in his ears. It was over. Greed checked on his friend and it was unsettling to see the haggard look on his face, his empty, unreadable eyes. It spoke volumes of the reality of this country. Xiong faced him and smiled, a weary but sincere smile.

"He's waiting for you." Greed patted his shoulder and left to meet Yang.

Yang is safe, this fact kept repeating itself in his mind like a much needed remedy to his suffering. He did it, he saved the kid, and no words can describe what he's feeling right now. Ling is sitting near the metal wall with his bodyguards and the former sin halted when he noticed the bruises on his partner. Greed crouched down to check on him, putting all his enthusiasm on hold for the moment.

"You're bruised." Greed touched his bandaged arm and Ling jerked a bit, yet he was smiling.
"So is everyone." He caressed his head before standing up and putting his hand on the makeshift wall, Master Xuan can deal with them later, now he needs to save Yang. Blue shockwaves appeared around his palm and ran through the door, returning the condensed minerals to its original form, later he transmuted the door, changing its appearance and undoing the lock simultaneously.

When the door opened there he was, sitting in a corner but no longer scared, Yang tilted his head up to meet him. His eyes were red from crying and he was sobbing, Greed tutted, what is he going to do with this brat?

"See what happens when you don't listen to the adults?" Yang ran towards him and locked themselves in a hug, new tears forming as he buried his face in his stomach. Greed froze in the beginning but saw himself relax the more this went on.

"I was scared! I...I thought you wouldn't come for me!" Greed smiled and caressed his head before clasping his hands on the boy's shoulder to create a space between them, enough so he can knee down to get to his eye level.

"You work for me remember? You're worth the risk." Yang embraced him and he reciprocated the gesture, it feels good.

Xiong caught up to them and the group exited the abandoned tunnels, in the morning the police will clean up the mess. The bandits Lanfan and the others didn't kill will be sentenced to death in a later time, for now they should all rest for tomorrow.

Yang walked ahead of them and turned to stop the group, when he was successful he clasped his hands in front of Greed and bowed. "This no name vows to serve you, Master Hengli, till the end of times!" Ling flinched, strong words for him to announce, and yet it made total sense. Out of curiosity he turned to Greed, to see how he would react. He was touched, that Ling can tell, but for the sake of appearances he put on a smug facade.

Greed approached the boy and patted his head. "I'm counting on you." His eyes were shining and for the first time he allowed Greed to see his admiration for him. Then, suddenly, Yang turned his head sharply to the nearby woods for mere seconds before ignoring it altogether. None of them paid any mind to it, so Greed also shrugged it off.

In the end they arrived in the dojo to heal, eat and rest for the night. Tonight was quite the ride and now that he can stop and think of everything that happened Hongzi is cautious of the Xia, he never thought Lanhua would had the guts to expand the chaos in his reign, not to say that he is surprised
by that, no, he's just unsure if Lord Xia has any involvement in this whole affair too.

Another thought came to mind, the caring way of which Greed treats Yang isn't new, it is the thing that made him realize Greed isn't like his family. And yet seeing how loving he is to the kid and the puppy makes his heart beat faster, he turned his back to them, last he compromise his sleep hours. Greed would make a good consort, but reality doesn’t always corresponds to your ideals. He shouldn't entertain these ideas and he knows, he's pining over his friend and he wished he wasn't.

The silver lining is that he won't be in Wenchang for long

Chapter End Notes

With this I mark the end of the 'White Snake' arc, I'll write a short prelude (about 5 chapters) before starting the next arc 'Imperial Court' which is one hell of a ride. (to me at least, I can't wait to write it)

Shoutout to Keith, sorry for not mentioning you in the previous chapter, love your comments. :D

as always I'd love to read your thoughts on this chapter.
Chapter Summary

Ling celebrates the Lantern Festival alone whilst helping others to celebrate it with their so, the irony.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Now with Wenchang Station linked to the rest of the northern railways, more people are flocking in the platform waiting for the train to part. It could be, however, that a lot of people are gathered in the station because the whole Zhou family is there to bid Ling and his bodyguards goodbye, and knowing people – trust him, he knows – both are true. Just for this occasion Greed was allowed out of the mountain, Yang is here too, looking happier and healthier than before.

"I wish I could stay more, but there are things I need to sort out in Zhongjian. Thank you for having me, I'll inform Minister Baiji of the recent events, so no need to worry." Ling informed, then faced Greed. "And Greed, remember to write." The whistle blew and the engine started to run, soon the train moved and they watched it set off, away from view.

Yuan patted his shoulder, pipe in the other hand. "If you want to have lunch with us, you're welcome." She smile and looked down to meet Yang's eyes, and ruffled the boy's hair with perhaps more strength than needed. "You too, pissant." One by one they left the station and Greed guided Yang by his shoulders. The former sin gave the station one last, lingering glance, eight months, eight more months and his training is over.

-------------------

With Hongzi in his rightful place, the problems mentioned by Yue seemed like a passing rain, no minister showed signs of hostility nor he felt said tense air in the court once he opened one. Of course. He talked to his grandfather about it and, as proposed by him, Ling dispatched the censorate to investigate the members of his court.

After tea with the Commandant of the Capital and revising all rules Minister Yumei had changed, Hongzi wrote his notes on the letter and handed it again to the general. Yue came in after the Commandant excused himself to bring news of Alphonse's return to the capital.
"Tell him to meet me in the ground pavilion; tell Counsellor Changmi to prepare us lunch. I feel like taking a bath, if any messenger appears, take their letter and dismiss them." The Imperial Secretary bowed and left the Emperor to his bodyguards. As for Ling, his mind was still lost in his days in Wenchang, oftentimes when he's alone he'd stare off into the antiques adorning the Throne Room, or the sky when he was out, thinking, longing for Greed to return. It doesn't take a genius to notice that, and now the court thinks he is enamored by Princess Zhou, and that history is repeating itself. Silly things he doesn't want to indulge into.

Ling took a longer time in the bath, partly to relax and partly to sort his feelings. He thought that once he was away from Greed all that heartache would be gone, and indeed it was, but it also was replaced by another kind of pain that hurt just as bad. He's pining over Greed and he can't believe the reality he found himself in. Ling sighed and left the tub, glad the servant he had dismissed earlier left the towel within arm’s reach.

When Ling arrived at the pavilion Al and Jerso were laughing about Zampano's face after he, from what Ling can see, tried matcha for the first time. They bowed once in his presence and Ling sat in the opposite chair.

"Why didn't you write me? This way I'd have prepared for your arrival."

"We wanted to surprise everyone... but you're the only one here." Zampano said and they nodded.

"Where's Mei?" Al asked, making an effort to ignore the teasing looks of his bodyguards and Ling alike.

"In the Azure Palace, from there she was going to leave to Nan."

"Why?"

"The Spring Festival, we celebrate with family." And yet he probably won't, Ling looked to his cup, the intricate design of the pavilion's roof is being reflected by the tea. The young Emperor chugged the whole cup down, he will deal with this when Feng returns, for now he is in Alphonse's company. "You could go with her, I've heard Yulin, her hometown, is exotic even for Xing."

Al stroked his chin. "You think I could surprise her?" He said it innocently but he can't fool Ling, he can see the underlying mischief in his eyes and he's all for it.
"She's coming here first to get her things." It was settled then, that much was clear, and so silence took over. "We're forgetting something." They frowned in unison for what felt like minutes before Jerso exclaimed.

"Our expedition to Minh!" He remembered and Ling felt his curiosity peak. The concept of chimeras always felt like something out of fantasy – Epic of Heaven and Earth comes to mind – and now the prospect of undoing it? Even more so.

"So? How was it? You found a way to return your bodies to normal?" They lowered their heads, and as their gaze went down, so did Ling's mood.

"They found a solution, but when they tried they killed their princess."

"It's missing something, but the theory is right. So we decided to talk to my brother, he can't use alchemy anymore, but he still has the knowledge." Al added, the mentioning of Edward reminded the young emperor of Winry's request.

"Al, I want to talk to you, alone." They exchange glances and both get up, Ling suggests to the woods, were he's sure no one will eavesdrop, and they start they little leisure stroll. Ling guided his friends to a nearby glade, the place looks totally different with all it's deciduous trees dormant, the snow blanket also helps.

"I went to Amestris two months after you parted." Ling confided to Alphonse after leaning on a random tree.

"How's everyone? How's brother and Winry?"

"They're fine. As for your brother, Al, did you receive any letter from him since you came here?" He frowned to his question, looking to the ground as he tried to remember anything.

"No, did something happened to him?"

"Ah no! Actually yes! He's married, to Winry, for quite some time I believe." Ling added quickly and laughed nervously after meeting Al's deadpan gaze.
"Gee, the way you worded things I thought something bad happened to Ed." He paused quickly as his words started to sink in. "Wait, he married Winry? How come I don't know this?!"

"Their letter was likely intercepted by rebels, sorry for that." Al leaned on the tree facing his and looked to the ground once more, this time with a more saddened look on his face.

"Don't blame yourself, he must had been so sad that I didn't attend." Al lamented and Ling looked down on the floor as well, it is such a downer that they couldn't be part of such an important event of Ed's life. It is worse for him, Ling knows for sure, and knowing that it is thanks to his siblings only added insult to injury. It's not his fault, he had just taken the throne and it was his brothers and sisters that had decided to rebel. It's ironic how someone like Al, who shares a beautiful bond with his brother, couldn't attend said brother's wedding because of the tragedy of a brotherhood that is the xingese royal family.

Nonetheless it felt wrong to just sit and watch Alphonse like this, so Ling reached for him, and clasped his shoulder. "Don't worry Al, I told him the truth. If it'll make you feel any better, Winry asked me to tell you this: they're expecting a child and they want you there. I think they'll arrive in the end of spring." The information hit like a slap, with Al's bamboozled face not knowing where to look.

"Wow, Ed didn't wasted any time."

Ling chuckled. "I told him that, but it was actually Winry."

"Makes more sense. Did you receive any news from Greed?" He felt a fleeting pain in his chest, like his heart wanted to be noticed while it sung for the idiot he fell for. He can't believe he did this in front of Al, and hoped the boy didn't noticed his subtle stutter.

"Adopted a dog and a kid." Al nodded in acknowledgment and Ling smiled to himself, eager to see his friend's reaction to this next news. "And he has all of Father's memories, he recreated his Ultimate Shield, can you believe that?"

"You're serious? When is he coming back?"

"By the eighth month, so September. Don't tell Ed about Greed, please."
"I doubt he'd believe me."

"Either way, don't tell him."

"Alright, what if Ed decided to pay a visit?"

"Then there's nothing we can do, Greed will surely want to see him." Alphonse hummed in agreement, and Ling is glad he didn’t put up much resistance either.

"What about Jerso and Zampano? Greed could know the missing part, this would make them so happy." This is a good point, again, Al’s foresight is amazing for his age, he’s like the yin to Ed’s yang.

"And Greed would love to meet new chimeras. Alright, just make them promise they won't tell the military about Greed's resurrection." His friend nodded, and, in a more open tone, asked.

"What do you fear?"

"He have all of Father's knowledge, sometimes all you need to do to let evil in your house is to open the door. People act on opportunity."

"I don't think I trust the military wholeheartedly to be honest, and you brought a good point. We can tell them together?" Ling accepted his request and moved away from the tree, Alphonse took the clue and did the same, they walked in a comfortable pace to the pavilion and in the way both teens talked about chimeras and the possible extent of Greed's memories.

--------------------

The Ultimate Shield's transmutation circle was laid in the wood table in front of him, after their raid on the Bandits's hideout it became obvious that the circle is as barebones as it can get. It needs refining, it needs to be faster, only the circle isn't enough, to recreate his lost ability Greed will have to incorporate waidanshu into equation, but is it possible? Al is also learning waidanshu, and the kid is a prodigy, maybe he can use his help, that will make them even when he part with Father's knowledge.
Maybe all he need is a tattoo. Tattoos are nice.

"Master help!" Came Yang's cry from outside. He's playing tag with Xiong and Dolfu, the oversized puppy – if he can still call Xiong that after witnessing him killing a man in cold blood – was clearly controlling his speed to give Yang a chance. Greed also knows Xiong is testing Yang's abilities, wants to see how deep is his manipulation of neidanshu.

"Xiong!" Greed shouted from the top of his lungs, halting their game, from where he can see Xiong has Yang on his shoulder. "If you're going to throw him in the water do so in the hot spring." Xiong laughed triumphantly as Yang protested with all his might.

Dolfu returned to his side and Greed dropped his studies for the dog, the consultant ruffled the puppy's thick fur, scratching it's back then it's belly when he rolled. Since Ling left Dolfu is acting strange, it's missing him, it took Ling a week to achieve what Greed did in almost a month, to say he's jealous is an understatement.

"So you're alone." Master Ren commented once he was near his camp, Dolfu laid on his stomach once more, wary of the new face, just in case Greed lent more strength to the hand holding his dog down, not wanting him to attack his teacher.

"What brings you here Master?"

"Wanted to see how you're doing, and I want to show you something." He revealed a wooden box and gestured to the table, Greed cleared the surface and once the box was placed down he examined it, it had a grid, kind like an uncolored chess table. Ren sat in front of him. "Before I do so, though, I want to see if you remember your manners. How do you greet your family and peers?"

"Fist and palm salute." Greed commented nonchalantly, then his teacher waved his hand and the former sin blinked, getting what he wanted and doing the gesture, the pose itself reminds him of the praying gesture, only his left hand is held in a fist while his right one cups the other. Ren nodded whilst giving a satisfied nod.

"To your martial arts master." He did the hold fist salute automatically before his mind could even register what his teacher requested. "To your superiors in the court?" Greed clasped both hands in front of him and gave a curt nod. "Good, you're almost ready to work in the palace. But to be truly accepted by your fellow coworkers, only your knowledge won't do, the more you resemble a junzi, the better." He followed by opening the box and taking small, black and white pebbles from it.
"What is a junzi?"

"Something every men should strive to be, a perfect gentleman if you will. A junzi is someone who excels in the artistic, intellectual and martial fields, someone who puts the needs of the country above theirs." Ren finished speaking as he moved all the white pebbles closer to Greed. All of this is giving him a massive deja vu, all the piano, fencing and fighting lessons, the seven liberal arts, everything to make him blend with the aristocracy of the time, and isn't this exactly what he's doing right now?

"What is this?"

"Weiqi, it's a very popular game between scholars and nobility. A great tool to know who you're dealing with too, if I say so myself." His teacher had a sly gleam in his eyes and it made him grin, if he wanted to convince him to play he succeeded. Also it look like checkers, it can't be that hard.

He takes that back, it's harder than he thought. The basics are easy to grasp, the one with more 'territory' wins, and he can take the opponent's pieces by surrounding them. The rest however...

"What's the matter Greed? This is a strategy game, I believe Ding Mi taught you well." He muttered a quick 'yes' and returned his eyes to the table. Ding Mi did taught him xingese strategy, doesn't mean he knows how to apply that in the game. Greed tsked, your typical xingese politeness is sipping into him, he gave a deep breath and focused on the table, he can't possibly win but he can at least throw his teacher off a few times.

Ren seemed to read each and every move of his, yet he didn't feel like he was giving his all, like a feline playing with it's prey for the hell of it. At one point the ex-homunculus blocked his teacher's path but soon had his piece seized, to his bemusement. In the end he lost, to no one's surprise, and Ren promised to play with him every now and then so Greed could improve.

"Say Master, why do I need to become a zhunzi?"

"Junzi. So you become more eligible, and is more likely to raise up in ranks. With your knowledge of alchemy you could become a scholar, and your eyes tell me you're related to the Sage of the West, but only this isn't enough." Greed hummed, his eyes were still glued to the weiqi board, thinking of the decadent days of nobility and how half of the things he learned there didn't help him in the streets. "Before I finish here. Between painting, poetry and music, which one do you prefer?" Poetry sounds nice, and it wouldn't hurt to relearn music. He liked the days he played the piano, and maybe he could learn a new instrument.
Ren nodded. "Then we'll sort instruments later this week. I'll arrange everything with a craftsman I trust. I'll be seeing you later." Xiong's great uncle left, leaving Greed and Dolfu by themselves so the former sin returned to his transmutation circle.

Maybe he should add the symbols of mercury, copper and iron, or at least just mercury, since it represents transformation. An alchemy array would speed the process in a manner that would make it identical to his ability – helped by the fact amestrian alchemy is boosted in Xing – but that would need an understanding of waidansh-

Greed huffed and laid on the floor, he went back to square one. Lovely. Greed closed his eyes to rest and stayed like this for god knows how long, he heard the wood creak by the pressure put on it but he didn't cared to open his eyes. The entity had someone with them and they crouched near his head.

"You awake?" Xiong asked.

"No."

"Aw, that's a shame, Master wanted to talk to you." This convinced him to get up, first he had to lay Dolfu on the floor, the puppy must had laid on him when he didn't notice, he must had take a nap. Xiong stood at the same time as him and Greed looked at him puzzled. "He didn't told me what it was."

He discovered with time that Master Xuan was by the waterfall, sitting on a stone near the water bank, his sword in hand. He opened his eyes when they approached the vicinity and stood up.

"After the raid on the bandits hideout a thought kept creeping in my mind." He threw another sword in Greed's direction and unsheathed his. Xiong took Yang to a safer place and at that exact moment Greed's pulse accelerated, he barely parred his teacher blow then deflected his attack to get some distance.

"Hey! What's the meaning of this?" Greed snarled and was answered by another attack, his master is fast so Greed focused on defending, but it wasn't only because he was fast that he was solely defending is it?
"I'm attacking you. Treat me like an enemy." Master Xuan cut the back of his arm, the wound is probably stinging but he has no way to know, his eyes are too focused on his blade. The noise of metal clanking ringed in his ears, they attacked at the same time, the strength of their blows bounced their arms and Greed distanced himself again. It was clear by their stances that he's panicked and his Master is dead set in fighting him.

"I don't want to hurt you!"

His teacher got closer before he could notice. "Bold of you to assume you can hit me." Greed didn't react fast enough and got a cut on his back, the former sin evaded the next attack and turned to face his master, who swung his sword fast to rinse it of his blood. "My body isn't at it's prime anymore." 'It doesn't respond like it used to.' His mind added unconsciously and he blinked, bad move, in this split second Xuan advanced and he had a small window to react. Before Greed knew it he parred his Master's attack and shoved him away, when he checked his hand he was shocked to see it was trembling.

"If you don't act I'll kill you Greed." Yang wanted to intervene but Xiong kept him still, having pieced together what is it that their Master noticed.

He is getting angry, he can tell, a voice inside his head is telling him to unleashed all this frustration on his mentor, since he is asking for it. The anger is calming him down and letting him concentrate, how ironic, his teacher continued his assault and he defended or avoided most of them.

Looking at Master Xuan once more, a sense of guilt flooded his mind, Greed shook it off and changed tactics, attacking or counter-attacking when necessary. With that said he hoped his instincts wouldn't kick in and try to kill his mentor, he trusted his sword and for a moment he thought he'd hit but Master Xuan evaded and thrust his palm on his forehead. It was a weird move he hadn't taught him, it was weird in the sense that it immediately made his body go numb and Greed fell on his ass.

"Why are you afraid of your sword?"

"What?! I- I'm not afra-"

"What is it that you fear? What is it that makes you hesitate when you wield a sword against a human?" He elaborated, then deflated to a more calm tone. "That is getting in the way of your
growth, your fear is taking your control off the sword. That is the reason why you involuntarily try to kill when you spar." His mind is conflicted, it does makes sense that the ghosts of his past get in the way of him trying to function like a normal human being, it really does, but he can't admit it, can't admit that he's powerless against the influence of his family.

He must be looking distraught, because his Master crouched down, and with a face that irradiated sympathy, he spoke. "What your father did to you?"

---------------

Outside the highest floor of the Purple Palace he stood alone as fireworks blasted in the sky, it’s shining, colorful bits undoubtedly the source of many people’s wonder. It marked the beginning of a new year, the second year of the Hongzi era.

The banquet is over and while he didn't feel wholly miserable, he felt a gap in his chest that only his Royal Mother can fill, and now that Ling is all by himself it is only making itself more noticeable, he isn’t only feeling blue however, during the feast his mind would entertain the idea of spending not only the Spring Festival with Greed, but the Lantern and even the Double Seven Festival too.

Talking about the Lantern Festival, Feng is back, and Al and Mei must be in Yulin by now. Ling felt like leaning on the rail and his eyes watched the spectacle continue while his mind wandered. Mei was down in the dumps the day she was arranging her things for travel and as much as he wanted to smile he had to play along and comfort his half-sister, Ling helped her take her things to the entrance of her apartment, all the while bemoaning the missed chance of spending the biggest holiday with her loved Alphonse, only to see him there, sitting as if he was waiting for someone, acting oblivious to that fact he had been hiding from her for three days.

The girl was had tears of happiness flowing down her face as she all but jumped on top of her one and only, Ling didn’t want to disturb the couple and soon left, catching Alphonse’s joyful look in the way, thankful for his compliance. That was how Mei reacted for having him away for five months, how would he react when Greed finally returns?

“Do I have to teach you subtlety? You’re being too obvious.” Feng told him sometime after their holiday dinner, the teen sighed and left the rails, the loud bang of the fireworks continued but he didn’t want to revel in it anymore, he’d lost interest in them a long time ago anyway. Instead Ling leaned on a column and looked to the floor, is his crush on Greed detrimental? Whatever the answer is he doesn’t want to know right now and would rather sleep and prepare for tomorrow.
The lanterns flew in the sky in great numbers, not as flashy as the first day’s fireworks but still a sight to behold. He didn’t knew why Ling insisted he’d stay till today, but now here, on a secluded hill near the Azure Palace facing Zhongjian, accompanied of warm wine, delicious food and his lovable dork, he understands and is grateful for it. He never thought Xiong would celebrate this date with him, and now, while he is leaning on the Zhou Prince and enveloped in his warm embrace, Feng wouldn’t have it another way. The Yao Prince made sure to take them to a private place, where they could be only two people in love instead of the future leaders of their respective clans.

“I’ve heard you eliminated a criminal gang in Wenchang, so proud of my lionheart.”

“Yes, and I believe Ling told you the details. I fear a civil war will break soon.” Xiong lamented before laying on his shoulder, Feng ran his fingers on his lover’s scalp before going for a kiss.

“The Yin, Ming, Zhao and now the Xia. It does seem more and more likely.” And then there is Yin Shuang’s strange request, what person deliberately boosts an enemy’s reputation? He’ll hold this against Ling in some way, no doubt. His clan protects the Zhao, who made a deal with Lady Ruan behind her clan’s back, but what if the deal was only made after it became clear her faction would lose? “Do you think it’s possible that Yin Shuang is behind the Qin-Ruan Rebellion?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him, both clans are small and they needed suppliers. The Yin is known as a resourceful clan, he could’ve riled them up.” That is true, and if this is even slightly correct, the former First Prince of Xing is the biggest threat to Ling. Feng turned to get a better angle and kissed Xiong on the lips, while he was in the Yao camp he felt the tension rising and feared a battle would break out between the two parties. It is ironic how when he was a child he wanted nothing more in this world than to prove himself on the battlefield, and now that he had his fair share of battles, he is fearing the prospect of one.

Xiong cupped his face and deepened the kiss, Feng swooned in contentment and pulled himself closer to feel his lover’s warmth. The prince played along and wrapped his arm around his waist, making the Yao Prince gasp in surprise and the young lord smile in their kiss, his smiled enticed Feng to run his hands provocatively up his chest and neck, wanting more of him. Their time together a much needed break from the chaotic political scene of Xing.

They parted for air and touched their foreheads, Feng wished this moment would never end, he missed his dork, wished their duties wouldn’t put them apart. The young Lord went for another kiss before laying on the nook of his lover's neck, this endless civil war took so many things from him and it is threatening to throw it’s shadow over the land once more. Xiaoji, Ling, grandpa, his incompetent father, Xiong; he doesn't want to lose them, he doesn't want his daughter to suffer the
same cursed fate as his.

"I wish we could end this suffering in one big campaign." Xiong remarked and the gears started to shift in the detective's mind. A single campaign to end everything seems unfathomable with fifth sides fighting for supremacy, but if the numbers are decreased, like by two for example, this idea becomes a feasible reality. If all opposition is grouped in one faction and defeated, peace will be closer than ever.

Feng perked up from his spot and faced the Zhou Prince, the young lord raised his eyebrows in interest. "It is possible. Want to hear my idea?"

-----------------

The young Emperor got out of the bathtub and fast, with no servants to tend him in the bath he had to set everything previously, not that he doesn't like it, much the contrary he very much appreciated the privacy. After spending some time tending to his wants he needed a shower to feel refreshed.

He doubt his guards know he is still awake and at the bathroom, Ling put on his purple robe and returned to his room by the corridor linking both rooms. It didn't take long for the teenager to slip back into his blanket and call it a day, feeling way lighter and relieved than before. He was in the border between conscious and unconsciousness when he heard a knock on his door, Ling covered his head with a pillow, hoping the intrusive sound would cease if he ignored it enough but it only got insistent.

Grumbling, he reluctantly got up to check who would dare to disturb him. The Emperor was puzzled to find Lanfan holding a tray with his phone, the handle disconnected from the base, he glared at the thing wondering who it could be but she didn't answer, only motioning him to grab it.

"Who is it?"

"Your Royal Mother." It hit him like a carriage, and it was so sudden that his brain didn't know how to react and had shut down just to restart in the next instant. Ling snatched the phone from the tray, clinging to the handle desperately like a lifeline.

"...mom?"
"Ling? Ling! My baby boy, It's so good to hear your voice once again my treasure." She sounded as relieved as he was by hearing his voice and he almost choked, he is talking to his mother, he really is talking to his mother.

"Mom! I miss you... How you're doing? Are they treating you fair? Mom I, I'm so sorry it's taking so long to rescue you, I-"

"Ling. It's okay, I understand. They haven't done anything to me, I'm at the Yin manor right now, no need to worry." His mother sounded so happy just by hearing his voice, it makes him feel bad, she must have felt so miserable these past months, Ling wished he was there for her the same way she did when he was a sickly child.

"I wanted to spent the Spring Festival with you, I can't wait to see you again."

"Me too Ling, me too." He can feel her smile and so he mirrored his mother. "Nothing happened to Yufan righ-"

"Mom?" He heard the sound of the handle being yanked off her hands and froze, sensing his anger rise once again.

"Hey there young brother."

"Shuang!" In the corner of his eyes he could see Lanfan's eyes widening in shock. On the other side of the line his half-brother tutted.

"Is that how you say thanks for my gift? The least you could do is say 'thank you big brother'." It's because of him that they're in this situation to begin with, he wanted to curse him, but he had his mother in his grasp, he can't be reckless.

Ling was fuming. "What do you want?"

"You'll visit father when the cherry trees bloom. Don't disappoint your mother."
I know you guys hate Shuang, I just needed to refuel this hatred. I'm mean I know :P
I fear Greed might feel a bit OOC ’cuz he likes to fight people, but right now he’s fearing it.

Thanks for you support and feedback is always appreciated.
The Other Side of the Coin

Chapter Summary

The villain chapter. >=:D

Chapter Notes

You guys are either going to love this chapter, hate it, get worried or all three, let's see which later. :V

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As the carriage approached Caoyuan's city gates Hongzi stared off to the highlands of Yan Province, the snow had almost completely melted and the scarce number of trees surrounding the capital were starting to bloom. Marching alongside his vehicle is the Royal cavalry and the special corps, a simple safety measure that is likely to fall apart once they pass through the gates.

The city itself is nothing short of incredible and Yan's environmental influences is clear in the buildings and clothing of it's people, dotted with animal fur and silver jewelry. His mind went to Greed’s winter clothes that he lost and the possibility of buying another one for him, it wasn’t his fault that he lost those clothes.

Once inside the Yin army escorted the carriage to Jiulong Manor – a massive construction built at the Jiulong river spring – and Ling’s heart raced in anticipation, two seasons, two whole seasons away from his dear mother and finally they'll be reunited.

The carriage stopped once they arrived inside the mansion's yard, before someone opened the door Ling calmed down and maintained his posture. The doors opened to a long flight of stairs and the young emperor can already feel his head dizzy with vertigo, halfway through the stairs he caught sight of his older half-brother expecting him in the end. The air is as scarce as the vegetation and it reminded him of why he didn't want to visit his father's grave for so long, to think his mother is enduring it for a month or so upsets him.

In the end of the long climb Ling watched with amaze the minimalist walls but intricate windows, the ones in this side of the building are rather small, but by what he had read about the manor the ones facing the spring take the whole wall. In an alternate universe where he and Shuang got along he’d love to take a tour in such place.
When he reached the outer court Ling had to make an effort not to stutter and keep his composure: his Royal Mother was there, in the middle of the court, an arm locked to another woman's for support. She walked towards him and Ling walked faster to close the distance, the woman let go of his mother and she didn't wait to hug her son, who sighed in contentment as all the misery weighting his soul were warded off by his mom's warm embrace. The teenager broke the hug to look at his mom one more time, letting go of any previous restrain and letting his tears fall, he doesn't care the Yin are looking right now, he doesn't care how idiotic this is in hindsight, his mother is safe and right in front of him.

He can see that she feels the same thing as she cupped his cheeks to take a look at her son before wiping her tears and embracing him again. She must have been so lonely, with no friendly face in miles, Ling still had his friends to keep his spirits up and she had to put up with Shuang. It must had been so hard for her, confined in enemy territory, to see him again must be the best thing that happened in months.

"Now that I have both of you in my grasp." Shuang interrupted, halting their reunion. He received glares from them but didn't flinch. "Will you join me for lunch?"

"I thought I was here to visit father." Hongzi questioned, making sure to sound extra sharp as he did.

Shuang shrugged his shoulders. "He can wait, don't want you fainting during the visit." Their host walked past them towards the front door and was followed by the mysterious woman. Ling glared as their backs were turned to him and was taken off guard when his mother tugged his arm, when he checked on her his mother just walked after the Yin, not uttering a single word.

It's no secret that the entire royal family suffers from this disease, with varying degrees between brothers, and as fate would have it, the two brothers present are one of the weakest and the most resistant to it. It makes sense that he wants Ling to resist the journey to the temple then out of Yan, everything that happens here will end on books, and no one wants to be seen as the bad guy.

Ling widened his eyes after he finished his train of thought, having discovered Shuang ulterior motives, this isn't only to up his public image, every event here will be recorded, this means that his treatment of Ling will be known by the public. The rebel leader accepting the Emperor in his manor and caring for him in his stay, this will undoubtedly make him look good to the public eye. He wanted to punch himself, how come he didn't consider where he would stay? Ling barely had time to gather his feelings before noticing he had stopped mid track and everyone was by the end of the hall, ignoring them for now, he walked fast towards the door.
It just so happened to be a dining room, and the place already had the table settled, which made him wonder if Shuang made some agreement with his mother before his arrival. He won't deny that the food looked delicious – his one true weakness – and as much as he wanted to swallow everything in the table, he was hesitant.

"If you want we can change plates. The food isn't poisoned Ling." He was a bit thrown off by his brother's snark, the younger sibling shot a sharp glare to his older brother, but he responded with a smug smile. He hates this mightier-than-thou attitude of Shuang, always so patronizing, specially on the younger princes.

"You can't call me Ling." He back-talked, Shuang clicked his tongue and propped his chin on his hand, unfazed.

"Yes I can, I'm your brother." He countered, Ling calmed down, no use being all riled up because of this asshole.

"I never considered you my brother, and even if I did, you lost the right when you rebelled." He chuckled and Ling wanted to smack him in the face, or better, eat all the food in the table and leave him with nothing, just to be petty.

"Whatever, we share the same blood and that's a fact. I'm not going to poison you, I don't want Xing to end like Heng."

"If you two keep talking you'll lose the food." His mother butted in and both men turned to her, her eyes told Ling to behave and he obeyed, the young emperor went to his food but before he did so he glanced one last time at Shuang and was disgusted to see the leer in his eyes. That's it, fuck him, he'll eat all the food then ask for more, specially the things Shuang likes the most, see if he likes it.

After almost fighting with the former first prince to see who eats the most sweet breads – ending with Shuang's cousin, now that he knows that woman's identity, eating the last one – they silently agreed to act like that didn’t happen and he was escorted to his father’s mausoleum, this time by his army. The place is located on the highest point possible to build a structure, “the place closest to heaven” as his father liked to put, and if it didn’t speak of his arrogance he doesn’t know what does. Ling was accompanied by his mother and if it wasn't for the light-headedness that he was feeling he would spend more time to look at the intricacies of the place, including a 6’3 jade statue of his father, along with all sorts of weapons he possessed and a collection of dolls for each children and spouse who died before him. It was pretty uneventful without Shuang there to pester him. Ling placed his offerings and prayed for his father, and since it looked like his mom didn't want to be there Ling was quick.
They left Caoyuan the following day, with the Yin army escorting then out of the city. It looked like they're free from their enemies, but he better keep an eye open, Shuang was hospitable to him, doesn't mean he will stretch it to his army.

His mother was sitting in front of him in the carriage, and while he maintained quiet in their quick stay, he needs to know if Shuang did anything to her.

"Mom-"

"What happened to Yufan?" She was hiding her worry, that he can tell. Ling sighed, he can wait, for now he should fill his mother in the happenings of the court.

"Was demoted, but he's safe." The relief in her face couldn't be described by words, she was all these months worried about her bodyguard and it shows at how relaxed her body is after the news. Ling looked down, thinking about a hypothetical scenario in which the court did execute him, thinking about the grief that would've have struck her and glad that it is just a hypothesis.

"Any news? Besides Yufan?"

"Guizhang is safe and Mistress Ruan was executed. The censorate is undergoing an investigation to see if the Xia are traitors or not." While the first part brought a satisfied smile to her face she frowned immediately after hearing the last one, he can't blame her, this does sound out of nowhere.

"Why?"

"Wenchang was attacked by a criminal organization working for Lanhua." Her face was like a stone as she listened. His mother was silent for a couple of seconds before addressing him with a profound expression in her face.

"Ling, I think there's another spy inside the court." She whispered, careful of who was close to the carriage. Ling frowned, pondering on his mother’s train of thought and what could have possibly suggested said thought.

"Another one besides Ruan?"
"I think Ruan was just there to distract us from the real rat. Shuang seems to act based on what occurs inside the court." He cursed under his breath, does he have any idea of what he's facing? He doesn't know as much as he wanted about Shuang, only of his clan. Maybe his Royal Mother know something, Ling looked down, his lips pursed, the image of his brother leering to his mother is fresh and offensive. He fears Shuang did something to her and she’s keeping it to herself to spare him, and the thought is gnawing on his mind.

"Mom, did, did Shaung do anything to you? Um, any, anything," Ling gulped, "inappropriate?"

"He did touch my face, and sometimes got too close, but no, he did nothing. You can't mistreat a hostage, he's too smart to make such mistake." She doesn't look uncomfortable, mildly upset, but not uncomfortable and it eased his worries, if only for a little bit. Part of him wants to beat him till he confesses, but for now he will accept his mother's answer.

"Kidnapping you wasn't in their plans."

"Makes sense, the Zhao seemed to have zero idea of what to do with me until he arrived."

"And the Zhao also didn't expected the Yin army to help them escape." This means Ruan was a spy for the Zhao, but not for Shuang, and for him to see this coming, he must have someone there with a bigger clout, he'll have to talk to Feng. "What do you think of Shuang, mother?"

"He thinks this country needs fixing, just like you, and he hated your father's decision to name an heir based on their knowledge of immortality. Sadly I don't know what is his plan for the country."

"We know he wants to improve my public image, in the process raising his image too."

"You think that too? And yet you behaved like that." She rubbed her temples, her annoyance shown in her groan, Ling shifted his gaze in shame and didn't saw Linyu withdrawing her hand from her face as she pieced together the clues, only looking when his mother called for his attention. "What if his plan is to make you look incapable of ruling and have the court and popular opinion force you to abdicate the throne to him? This will make him your legitimate successor in this scenario, and he'd be Emperor without major conflict." Good observation, and now that he thinks about it, having brought Ruan to the palace and having him take care of her could be just another tool to make him look like a benevolent ruler. Crafty little bastard.

"Then I just need to be a good ruler."
"Do you remember what your father told you before passing away?" How could he forget? It was the first time he talked to the man, Ling still remembers how he couldn't attend Fu's funeral and had to stay in the Imperial Palace.

“The twelfth Imperial Prince, Yao Ling, has arrived!” announced the Grand Herald as he was escorted by servants to the Heavenly Apartment. Soon he was rushed to the bathroom by his father’s handmaids and cleaned up, then he walked towards his father’s – now his – bedroom, not knowing what to expect, but knowing what he wanted.

His father was laying on his deathbed, his mother sitting by his side holding his hand to comfort the ailing man, his grandfather and predecessor watched the scene in front of him with solemn eyes.

“If only I knew you would be my Empress, my jade, I’d do everything in my power to live one more year. So we could live a life of husband and wife." His voice was hoarse and weak and the semblance to his condition tugged a string in his heart. He cursed himself for stuttering in such important event and kept his cool.

His mother gave him a sympathetic smiled and kissed Changwu’s hand. “If we knew the future life wouldn’t be as thrilling, don’t you agree, my husband?” He uttered a hushed ‘yes’ and during all this time Ling stared with indifferent eyes, he doesn't know this man, doesn’t know his relationship with his mother.

“My son,” Lord Xing interrupted. “Prince Yao Ling is here to pay you a visit.”

“Come here” He ordered and it was his cue to walk in the Emperor’s direction. The disease has taken a toll on his body and in the back of his mind he fears he’ll end just like him. “How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“So young…, and handsome. He looks just like you my jade.” His mother ducked her head and Ling followed suit. The Emperor looked at everyone inside the room. “I want to talk to my son in private, if you will.” Both his mother and grandfather nodded before excusing themselves out of the room, Changwu beckoned him to come closer and Ling sat on the chair his mother left vacant. “Do you have the Elixir of the Immortals?”
“Yes.”

“Good. Don’t let anyone take hold of it.” This… was unexpected, his shock must have been apparent since the Emperor looked impassive. “This country, there are shadows lurking on it, be careful.”

Ling nodded. “What you want me to do with your things?”

“Give them to whoever you want. What is clothes to a dead man?” He asked cynically.

“Anything else you wish from me?” Changwu offered his hand to him, at first Ling was puzzled, not knowing how to react, then, not knowing why, he took it.

“Do whatever you want with my officials, as long as you keep Yumei in the Imperial Army.” Then gave a deep breath before continuing. “You must find people who are loyal to you. Countries are built by competent rulers but are kept by loyal followers.”

"Be careful of who you trust. Virtue, benevolence, they're all nice traits but what a ruler really needs is discernment." Ling recited the last part of his father’s speech, after that Changwu would still rule for a short time before he passed away and named Ling his rightful successor. From what he heard from his courtiers, Yumei was the last person he talked to.

"I have a feeling he knew. When we return, talk to Yumei immediately, he requested you to keep her, there must be a reason behind it."

---------------------

On the margins of Jiulong Spring Shaung watched as Hongzi's carriage faded from view, he lowered his binoculars and smiled, his job for today is done, now to continue reading his guardians' reports. Shuang turned to his house and from there he could see not only Dai but Lanhua chatting in his study, it took a while for him to meet them but when he did they were still talking, he paid them no mind and took the letter he couldn't finish.

'The Zhou are training a foreigner by order of His Imperial Majesty. From our research, he's here
since autumn and is learning their 'Four Wills' style, he’s also learning how to take on multiple foes and knows how to wield a jian, specially the Qin variant.

he already knows how to read qi, claims to know amestrian alchemy and has a child servant, the child posses acute sensing skills, almost pinpointing our location-

Lanhua laughed hysterically and there goes his train of thought, he shot a side glance at his younger siblings, cursing their eccentricity while he was at it, can't a guy read a letter in peace?

"For someone who never used a jian he was quite good!" He eavesdropped, Dai was focused on whatever story she had for him, she's talking about someone he has no idea of nor interest.

"Do you know of his whereabouts?"

"...almost pinpointing our location. The child might be a problem in the future, we request our Lord's opinion on the matter.

On another note, he seems to be a descendant of the Sage of the West, he's known around town for his golden eyes, but his hair is black just like ours. As for his relationship with His Majesty, we suspect they’re lovers, judging by how they act when alone.’

Shuang folded the letter, satisfied with the information gathered, now that he's done he can join their conversation and hopefully change the subject.

"The letter said they had captured him and planned to give him back," his sister sighed, how good of a fuck was this guy that she's so hellbent on having him back? "Those idiots lost him before sending a report, the letter said they had lost him because suddenly he learned waidanshu. Made a wall to block them and all that. Isn't he amazing?" Shuang frowned, this description sounds familiar.

Dai hummed. “Know waidanshu and martial arts? Seems quite the catch if you ask me.”

"Lanhua, does he have black hair and golden eyes?" He tested, the girl blinked, taken aback for a very brief time before nodding in her usual preppy way. "Because he's banging Ling." Seeing her face drop is admittedly funny, Shuang was holding his laughter pretty well until Dai decided to rival their sister hysterical laughter from a moment ago. Lanhua's face was red from humiliation,
and in a burst of anger she slammed the table.

"This is not funny!" She protested admits their laughter, the rebel leader raised a hand, managing to stop. The former third prince stopped after he wiped a tear off his eye whilst catching his breath, Lanhua watched everything with puffed cheeks.

"Yes it is." Dai responded.

"Now that we have this information what we must do?" She changed the topic to save face.

"Wait for your big sister, she must be on her way."

"Hmm, I'm surprised you accepted Dai's plans big brother." That makes them two. Shuang sighed, he can feel Dai's smugness in the air, arrogant prat, he hates what he's about to do, but Lanhua is curious. Oh whatever.

"He has the better plan, can't say the same for the end product." It was his turn to smirk, Lanhua glanced between her two brothers, only now aware of their conflicting ideals.

"So what is your plan for the country?"

"You see, to me the reason Xing is in such state is because different clans stay in power, and each clan only cares for the well-being of themselves." He started, for now she seems attentive, good. "So what if only one clan stay in power forever? The harem system would still be in place, but instead of each prince representing their clan they'd all be considered from my clan, and their mother's clan would in turn be treated as a consort clan, having certain privileges and authority over the other clans but still below mine." She nodded, musing on his proposal, she wasn’t sold on his idea yet, however.

"But most clans wouldn't accept this easily." His sister pointed out, her curiosity turning in interest. He nodded, confident he can bring Lanhua to his side if he brings a convincing argument to the table.

"You're right, they wouldn't, which is why only those who do accept would have the privilege to enter the harem. Between having considerate power or no power at all, I believe most clans would oblige." He paused to see how she would react, and after humming, he continued. "For those who
"And people would accept you so easily." Dai butted in, it took him longer than expected at least. "This not even taking into consideration the fraying influence on faraway provinces who are more likely to rebel."

"You talk as if your system would work." Shuang provoked.

"The Heng Empire is a prime example your plan wouldn't work."

"And Creta is so prosperous, so was Yata three hundred years ago. No wait, they only prospered after one clan conquered all. Face it, your end goal is shit." Now this did the trick, Dai slammed the table, disgruntled that he still doesn’t agree with him.

"We aren't like Creta! We have ou-"

"The ladies are fighting again? Can't you two come to an agreement?" Dahu butted in and he breathed out in relief, thankful for the excuse to exit the topic. Yet it is weird to not have had an announcement of her arrival. Did she walked past his subordinates? Doesn’t she have manners?

"So you're finally here." Dai commented, returning to his senses in a split second.

"Hello big sister, how are you doing?"

"Yeah, and I'm doing fine Lanhua, thanks for asking." A subordinate caught up to the former second princess, who used the opportunity to hand them her helmet and shoulder pads. "So, why did you called me?" She directed her question to him, and instead of answering Shuang nodded to his younger brother.

"First some context: remember that fateful day when you three were exiled? Did you feel that something was off with Ling? With his bracelet?" She looked to the side in discomfort, and her reaction brought back memories of that infuriating day, but this time his mind went to the chilling sensation when he sensed the souls inside Ling's bracelet, and subsequently the gut punch that was coming to the conclusion that came from the Philosopher's Stone.
"Yes, felt like a bunch of people were in there, creeped me out."

"This made me thought, Ling has the advantage as long as he have that stone, so what if we made our own stone? We already know the materials, we just need to learn how to transmute it." As his words started to sink in Dahu's lips arched up in a malicious smile, being the violent hawk she is. The warrior crossed her arms, nodding in understanding after hearing her brother's request.

"So this is my job. Where do you want me to gather materials? Gushan?"

Dai shook his head. "No, that would escalate into a full fledged war. Zhongjian will make the perfect place." Their sister hummed and glanced off to the window, she stroked her chin as she did so, and it became apparent she was running the logistics in her mind.

"Then I'll tell my clan to prepare for a campaign, and my informant can suggest me the best date for an invasion. Anything else I should know?" She was ready to leave, now that, in her mind, she has all the information. Shuang swears there is one more thing, it's in the tip of the tongue, Dahu grabbed her things with his servant and in that moment he recalled what he wanted to inform her.

"I advise you to invade by the eight month. Will you need assistance from me or the Ming?" Dahu contemplated his question before staring over her shoulder.

"Financial support from the Ming would be sweet, and you said eightieth month right?" He nodded and she smiled in response. "Then I'm done."

"Don't you want to stay for the night? Or for some tea?" She turned to first stare at Lanhua and Dai, then faced him again.

"I think I'll spend the night here, but I'm leaving tomorrow, the altitude is killing my head." His servant offered to take her things one more time and she handed it back before joining them at the table, when she did so Dai was the first one to speak.

"I'd rather you capture soldiers for the most part, just saying, that will rise less suspicion." She propped her jaw on her closed fist, not caring if she is ladylike or not, and her arched brow spoke volumes of how she finds his reasoning to be idiotic.

"You don't want Ling knowing we'll make a philosopher's stone?" She scoffed. "He'll retaliate
anyway."

"Yes, he will, but if he doesn't know we have a philosopher's stone we will have the surprise factor."

"You underestimate his intelligence. Look, I'll do as you say, but only because it's easier to capture soldiers. Happy?"

"Happy."

----------------------

The moon was high in the sky and his brothers are asleep, as for Dai, he woke up wanting to go to the bathroom and curiosity settled in when he thought about the letter Shuang was reading earlier, and the former third prince had to see it's contents or else he wouldn't be able to sleep anytime soon.

He entered his brother's office without regards of appropriate conduct, it isn't a problem if nobody knows of it. Dai scurried the letters until he saw a wrapped paper with a camellia pin, he undid the letter and quickly read through the contents inside of it, for the most part he didn't care, and then, he read the last part of the repot and shock almost made him drop the piece of paper.

Coupled with the request from about four months ago, the pieces were beginning to form a picture he's angry about: Ling is in love with a foreigner, this small slip a possible threat to the path he laid out to him, and to think this person has considerate power over Hongzi is disgusting. Ling should know better than to let love dictates his actions, no, it isn't Ling's fault, he's too young and naive. It's that man.

"What are you doing in Shuang's office?" Dahu's asked out of nowhere and he all but jumped, having to put a hand on his chest to calm his throbbing heart. Then it hit him: Dahu is going to invade Zhongjian by the eightieth month, when that man returns.

"Nothing, wanted to read a letter, don't tell Shuang about this." She just shrugged and was close to leave.

"Dahu, I need to ask you one more favor." He cried out before approached his sister, who looked
indifferent but was listening. "A man with black hair and golden eyes, he will be in Zhongjian when you invade. He knows amestrian alchemy, capture him."

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this is the beginning of the 'Imperial Court' arc, it pretty much builds to the main plot points of this arc so forget what I said two chapters ago. f(^^'

remember when I told you to pay attention to Shuang and Dai? This is one of the reasons. Also also, another character is introduced, say hello to Dahu, she is mentioned on chapter 8 when Shuang and Dai are introduced.

as always feedback is appreciated. ^^
Resolution

Chapter Summary

Developing some characters :3 a bit of Alphonse/Mei like chapter 22.

just a small NSFW warning by the end of the chapter, just Feng being Feng.

Chapter Notes

I have characters' designs, YES! *throws confetti*

see here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Since the Empress Dowager returned news of her safety spread like wildfire, and along with it, news of His Majesty's deal with the rebel leader, which had mixed reception. The court hasn't changed much, the time Her Royal Highness was away helped Ling mature in a sense and raised the court's opinion of their young monarch, now that it's clear he doesn't need his mother to be a capable ruler. Because of the incident the court demanded a raise in security and her work time skyrocketed, she barely have any free time and when she have those she's too tired to hang with her peers.

Lanfan knew the promotion to commandant would require more effort from her, she thought she was ready when she asked her father for advice, that she just needed to work harder, manage more people, she helped her father with this. She thought she knew the job and it was her undoing, sometimes Lanfan doubts her own ability to handle such position, giving orders is one thing, delegate is another, now she has an idea of what Ling's job looks like and she can't imagine the pressure he must have on his shoulders.

She was in her office, her office! How outlandish it sounds, the young commandant shook her head, she should be used by all the attention by now, and her father is here for her too. On the table was a letter from the Chief Controller about recommendations for the various posts that need reinforcement, including guards for the Hall of Tranquility and the Heavenly Apartment. Ling will hate that he'll get more guards, but likely to approve of more guards to his mother.

She went for another document, an empty piece of paper meant to write down in detail a list of who will be deployed and to where, this is the first big thing she'll do as commandant and it makes her heart rate accelerate.
She heard a knock on the door and almost jumped. "Lanfan, you there?" Her father’s voice calmed her down, feeling more at peace, she relaxed in her seat.

"Come in." Her father bought with him two boxes wrapped in furoshiki and she frowned in suspicion.

"Bought some food, thought you'd like."

"Changmi's folk did it right?"

"And I wrapped them!" He chimed and she wanted to hide her face, the sole reason to not do so was because of the enticing smell coming from the bento and it's size, the wrapping implied three or four boxes and she could use some food. Lanfan moved the papers to the side and her father gave her the box, unwrapping them himself. Inside of the boxes were all kinds of food neatly arranged and done to resemble cut animals, she looked up only to meet his smiling face, not knowing how to react besides asking 'what the hell?'.

"I'm not a little girl anymore."

Yufan sighed. "I wished you were ten again. Scrap that, seven." Her father whined and went to the sofa with his bento, he was ready to savor his meal when he looked at his daughter eating like she haven't seen food for a week. Lanfan ducked her head when caught in the act, mortified to see her father's reaction.

She raised her head again to look at the blank paper on the desk, then to her father enjoying his meal. He used to have this position, it doesn't hurt to ask for his help.

"Dad?" This bought Yufan's attention so she continued. "I need to assign roles to new recruits, but I need help."

"For what exactly?"

"Where do you think I should put new guards? And how many? I have a list of places the court want reinforced but..."
"But?"

"I don't agree with some of them." She confessed. Yufan rested the bowl on his lap to think.

"You should do what you think is right."

"Is that how you did it in the past?" Her father nodded.

"Yup, and if the court have a problem they'll give you feedback."

---------------

"Are you out of your mind!?" The General's berating caused Lanfan to lower her head in shame, she wasn't expecting such outrage. "I can understand not deploying that many guards to the harem area, but not reinforcing the Imperial residence?" He was baffled and the whole time she squinted her eyes, hoping to be swallowed by the floor and vanish. Now that he pointed it out it does sound like a terrible idea, but she had her reasons to do so.

"Calm down, Qianshuang, the Commandant is new to the role, she was just hasty, nothing more."
Lady Linyu responded, her calm and collected tone somehow making Lanfan comfortable enough to talk, but she did as little as raise her head before Lord Xing talked in from of her.

"We're lucky she committed such error in a time of peace, as temporary as it is. Lanfan is it?" Lord Xing paused to wait for a response, part of Lanfan was apprehensive to nod, but years of discipline talked louder and she did it anyway. "I don't care about your intentions nor your relationship with His Majesty, when making this kind of decision don't think of The Son of Heaven as 'Ling', but as the leader of our country and the most important person in Xing. Understood?"

She muttered a meek 'understood' and she hated how submissive it sounded, and while this isn't like it is with Ling, with dozens of old people bombarding him with criticism – she has no idea how he can maintain his face, there's only five other people in the room and she's red in embarrassment – this feels humiliating.

"Lanfan," Ling's voice calmed her down, and even if she was dreading his response, she lifted her
head. "redo the list. I'll wait for the new version, for now you're all dismissed." The Generals exited in order of importance with her going last, if Ling wanted to talk to her she doesn't know, since she left in a haste.

The guardian and commandant was surprised to see her father still in her study, seemingly eager to know the result of the court. His masked enthusiasm only served to drain her even more and she just handed the paper to Yufan as she walked to her desk to make another list, this time keeping in mind that Ling's apartment has to have more guards.

Things looked easier this time around when her father suggested writing notes about respecting Hongzi's privacy amongst other things. The new guards will patrol the inner and outer courts of the Imperial Hall along with the vicinity of the Heavenly Apartment. She left the thing as it is for now and went for a walk, planning to look into it later, for now she wants to hangout with Yongji and knowing her, she must be with His Majesty.

She learned from a courtier that they're in the forbidden garden with Mei and Alphonse, and with spring the colors of the garden turned a vivid hue, with flowers blooming and birds returning to their nests. They loud chatter clued her into their location and so Lanfan hurried to the ground pavilion, the moment they caught her presence all semblance of sound vanished.

It felt odd, for starters, and seeing now how laid back they look – Ling isn't even seating and Alphonse is leaning on Mei – and how quickly the air changed from friendly to distant in a blink of an eye by her mere presence, it felt wrong.

"Hey Lanfan! Need something?" Ling chimed and she doesn't know why but it felt so dismissive, he doesn't want her here? Is he angry about the list? This uncertainty hurts, it hurts to feel unwanted.

Lanfan wished she had her mask at the moment, having to depend on her clothes to hide her face. "I-it's nothing, I, I'm just walking by, that's it, nothing more. I'll go back to work." She rushed the later part and bowed to excuse herself.

It was an irrational action on hindsight, but she wanted to get rid of that feeling. Lanfan looked over her crossed arms, the outer court looks so vast and solitary from the stairs of the main hall, kinda like how she's feeling right now. Maybe she should brush it off, who knows, she might be overthinking, they're hiding something from her and that is the only thing she is sure about. Lanfan sighed, they're a bunch of jerks.

A shadow was cast on her and instinctively she looked up, and as it happened it was Yue, offering
a small sachet, smiling while doing so. Lanfan shyly reached for the sachet and opened the fabric, inside was a delicate sweet from Wa she rarely got to eat. She faced the secretary with hopeful yet confused eyes and was met with the same welcoming smile from before.

"I saw you looking all gloom, wanted to do something to fix it." She sat by her side and mirrored her pose. "You want to talk about it?" Lanfan finished eating her sweet before looking at Yue one more time and turning her head sheepishly. Yue has such a demanding job and not even once she saw her complaining or down in the dumps, it makes her previous actions look like a child's tantrum.

"How? How do you manage to smile all the time with such a demanding job? Don't you feel pressured to have your job at a young age?" She was staring off to the outer court and couldn't see the smile on the woman's face fade as she looked down to reflect on her question.

"If I have to be honest," Yue started and Lanfan turned to listen. "I was surprised when I received this job, yes I was first place in the Imperial Exam, but even then, it felt surreal, y'know? This isn't the kind of job you receive as a first timer, but it didn't stop His Majesty." Her eyes were distant as she glanced at the orange sky. Lanfan remained silent, busy contemplating the Imperial Secretary and the new information presented to her.

"I didn't thought I was prepared, that I could handle it, the future looked so scary at the time. Her Royal Highness helped a lot training me for a year, and there was the time the late Emperor Changwu reprimanded me, he was so frightening, I felt like giving up." She smiled to herself before turning to Lanfan, the teenager immediately lowered her head, this sounds like her experience today. "All I could do was work for Hongzi, and the more I did it, the more I felt ashamed for thinking about giving up. He was, he is so young and an Emperor already, he has the entire country on his shoulders and to top it off, he has to live up to Kuanzhi and Changwu, two emperors loved by the people."

"What about now? Don't you feel pressure from the court?" She was honestly curious. Yue scoffed and this made her avoid her gaze.

"The court will always nag you, no matter how well you perform. They're just bitter young people are on positions of power, you'd do well to ignore it." This came from experience, no doubt about it.

"But how do you know you did the right thing?" She knows she must be sounding desperate, but she needs all the advice she can get while she can, to ease her fears of now, and to better prepare for the future.
"To me the opinions that matter the most are of Lord Xing, our Lady and Hongzi. You must decide for yourself which comment to listen to." She raised her hands suddenly, adopting a more harmless and casual posture. "But don't get disheartened by making the wrong choice, or beat yourself down for failing."

"I'll keep this in mind, thanks Yue."

"You're welcome."

----------------

Ling entered his room and slumped on the nearest chair, a letter in hand, today was exhausting and now he's reminded of the factionalism happening in his court, only this time he knows exactly what each 'faction' is: supporters of Changwu, or change, and supporters of Kuanzhi, or tradition, each group having similar views as them. As for Yumei.

"Don't worry Your Majesty, I'm not in this silly feud, I promised your father to protect you, and I'll see this promise through."

Having nothing to do Ling looked to the table, a file was laid there and he frowned, glaring at the thing quizzically. Beside it a note from Yue: *the file you requested from Master He*. Ling blushed, having remembered exactly what he requested of his tailor and now regretting it, it feels so desperate to do what he wanted to do, it can be just curiosity, of course, but it can also mean his hormones are speaking too loud.

Or both.

Ignoring any sense of dignity he have the young emperor reached for the file and looked at the two papers inside of it, feeling his curiosity quenched and mind wander at each information he gathered and compared.

"What are you doing?" Feng asked over his shoulder and his heart almost jumped from his chest, Ling instinctively his the papers on his chest and his cousin rolled his eyes. "You already know his height so wh-, don't tell me you're comparing your measurements? How cute." He glared and Feng ignored him, leaning on his shoulder to take a peak at the papers.
"I heard amestrians have bigger dicks." His cousin remarked nonchalantly and his face heated, Ling turned anyway, glaring to his older relative. "In average of course. Tell me, do you want to see his package?" he never thought his face could get even hotter, damned be his cousin, Ling freed himself from Feng and raised from the chair to face his cousin. This is so embarrassing, why he feels the need to be like this?

"Can you not? Seriously you're so depraved!" He is mortified already and Feng hasn't even started, he sighed in exasperation and faced him again, this time any hint of jest was gone.

"Look, your virgin ass can't escape this topic forever, so I want to help before you decide to do something stupid. So tell me, do you want to fuck him?" Ling avoided his gaze, too shy to be able to face Feng. "I'll take this as a 'yes'." 

"Why are you doing this?" He asked, feeling too mocked to fight back.

“Because I think it’s about time you stop acting like you’re eleven when we talk about love, you’re what? Eighteen? And you’re still shy when I say profanities, how are you going to act when he arrives? Greed seems to be as obscene as I am.” He hates that he is right, but Greed isn’t like Feng, he would respect his space.

“Greed has decency, unlike you.”

“I’ll pretend I believe that guy with major player vibes won’t try anything with you once you two are alone inside closed doors.” He took his chair completely and started to play with signature fan, Ling wanted to drag him out of his room, he wants to be alone for now, he’s tired and he doesn’t want to entertain his cousin.

“You talk like Greed would try to seduce me first chance he gets.”

“He did with Lanhua.” He did what…? “That’s how he got that expensive changshan.” He didn’t try to mock him this time, he was only informing him like he usually does, but still, this hurts, more than he wants to admit.

‘If I didn’t knew who you are I’d try to hook up with you.’

“I hate to admit you’re right. So, what you came here for?” He just wanted this to be over with,
"Aww, don’t be sad Ling! I’m here to help you prepare for when your man arrives, I want to talk about all the boring shit no one wants to hear." He peaked that. "It will be the perfect moment to spill all your doubts, and I'll help. Hm, what do you say?" Cheeky little bastard, Ling couldn't help but chuckle, that was clever of him. The emperor closed the doors leading to the balcony, feeling his mood improve and faced his cousin, a cheeky smile spread across his face.

"So, what boring shit you want to part with? Before I start spilling my doubts."

"There are rumors about a certain connection between your friendship with Greed and the recent investigation of the Xia, they think you're purposefully incriminating poor Lord Xia, to get rid of the opposing clans one by one."

Ling sighed. "If only it was this easy."

"Some people may capitalize this Ling, be careful. Lord Xia is an ally of Lord Xing, those against your grandfather will do anything to get rid of him." He was dead serious, this is a big problem, but Feng got one thing wrong.

"Lord Xia is a turncoat." Ling corrected. "The court is divided by people who agree with Lord Xing's ideals and those who agree with father's."

"Yumei told you this?" Ling nodded. "Do you trust her?"

"Yes," Ling's mind went to the day he visited the general in her office. The steadiness in her posture, the conviction in her eyes, he's sure of his choice. "those eyes aren't of a liar. Father's last words were for her, a vow to protect me. I just don't know why she's such a bitch." Feng hummed after listening to him, taking into accounting all the information he gave him.

"Protect doesn't mean coddle."

"I guess you're right." They exchanged smiles and Ling looked to the balcony door, then to his cousin when he proceeded to stretch.
"I'm done here." He mentioned before looking at Ling's desk. "Are you writing Greed? Have you thought about sending him love poems?"

Ling blushed. "No!"

"You don't need to be open about it, use symbolism. Trust me, it helps with the longing." Ling stared at floor, thinking about giving it a shot, whilst his hands were on the doorknob. "Do you want me to ask the Court Provisioner to commission a fake penis for you?" He asked, deadpan. And Ling looked to the ground once more as the doors opened, this time done with Feng's shit.

"Really?" Ling snarled, Feng rolled his eyes, impatient with him as well.

"What? You thought I wasn't serious? It helps with the sexual tension, trust me." He mocked.

Ling sighed. "Do whatever you want."

"You'll be thanking me later." Feng singsonged before leaving his room.

Once left to his own Ling leaned on the rail to watch the garden before him, the orchard is full of flowers in this seasons, soon some of them will bear fruits and that he can't wait. Ling heard a knock on the door and was ready to snap at the unfortunate soul who decided to interrupt him, but.

"Ling?" His mother called.

"Enter." Linyu entered the room and checked on the place, tidying some of the clutter she found in the way, then walked towards her son. When she got close enough his mother leaned on his shoulder.

"Can't believe I missed your birthday." She lamented. "And such an important one too, my Ling is an adult now." She was happy, he could hear in her voice and chuckled in response. Eighteen now, he won't be treated as a child emperor anymore. His mother went to the rail, with her head lowered. Ling wanted to reach out until he heard a wail.

"I won't be your regent anymore." She bemoaned. Ling, even tough confused, touched her
shoulders, trying to comfort his mother.

"You're still General of the Court for all Purposes." He tried and she glanced up, pouting, yeah it didn't work.

"But you're already fancying someone, I've heard the rumors."

"But..., I don't like princess Zhou." His mother scoffed in response.

"If you really think I believe that stupid rumor you don't know your mother. It can't be Xiong, is it Greed?" It won't work lying to her, and it already proved to be near fatal. Seeing no other option Ling brushed his shyness aside and nodded. This cheered his mom somewhat and she straightened herself. "He's too conceited for my tastes, but you do you. As long as you don't destroy our clan or country in the process, I'm happy."

"You're not putting much faith in me..."

"Talking from experience. How is the saying? 'A life of love is happy, a life for love is foolish.' I didn't listen to it at the time, Yufan is a godsend." So what grandpa said was true, she really have an affair with General Kui, and to think she had it since young.

Since she was young.

"Mom..." He started, trying to be as tactful as possible. "The reason General Kui visited me in the Azure Palace when I was a kid..."

"And taught you how to ride a horse?" She laughed nervously. "Yes. Mother wanted to strangle me, specially after she discovered he's a Yuan. When I think back on it we were such idiots, our entire clans would be executed if Changwu had found out." He can't even begin to imagine grandma's wrath, being from the Han and all that. This new information also puts another thing into perspective, and that is that for all intents and purposes, General Kui is pretty much his father and he doesn't know how to feel about it.

"Just promise me one thing Ling, don't tell anyone our affair started in my youth. People think I'm just a lonely lady desperate for attention and it's better this way, I can keep everyone safe."
"Yes, mom." Ling looked at his own arms on the rail, contemplating on his mother's decisions and how it must have felt to enter the harem so young and in turn fall for the enemy, did she even know he was the enemy? To think she had to face a bunch of crap when she was his age, thanks to jealous wasps who tried to turn her life into hell, and over something she never wished, it's infuriating, and yet, she didn't give in. She didn't turn her back on her feelings, she persisted, and now they can be together, albeit not officially.

Ling thought of Greed and how Xing would receive him, would they see what he sees and love him? He's related to the Sage of the West, and he wish this will garner the approval of his people. It hurts to think that he can't be with the one he loves without facing judgment, and that is why knowing what his mom went through sparked a fire inside of him.

He will confess his feelings, he wants to make things official if Greed and his clan accepts, he is in love with Greed and he will act on his feelings, tradition be damned.

Chapter End Notes

I'll explain in a later chapter what Ling meant by 'fuck tradition', no Xing isn't homophobic, there's no place for this shit in my fic.

furoshiki is that cloth you see in anime or japanese tv shows were they wrap food, gifts and whatnot.

Hope you like the chapter! ^^ comments are always appreciated.
"Alright listen," Greed started, absentmindedly tossing a ball between hands. "We're playing for now, we're not hunting bears. Understood?" Dolfu tilted his head to the side and Greed smirked. "Of course you didn't." The former sin resigned to the situation and got up, the dog's ears perked up, ready to catch the ball. It amazes him how much Dolfu has grown, he went from adorable fluff ball to bear hunter during the spring, and now, in this hot summer season, he hopes he can call for help on command. 

"Catch!" He hurled the ball as far as he could and Dolfu didn't wait to run after it, Greed put both hands on his hips, as of now he's satisfied. Playing with Dolfu feels refreshing and his happy barks put a smile on his face, the dog soon returned, wagging tail and all that, and put the ball on his hand.

"Yang, you know what to do." It was the only thing he said before distancing himself from Dolfu, as ordered, Yang got the dog to approach him and when the tang dog did, his servant fell on the floor.

It sparked a reaction from Dolfu, good, he's doing well for now. When it became clear to him that Yang isn't getting up he barked frantically, yes, that is what he wants. Dolfu turned to him and started to run in his direction, and Greed would be so proud, if he didn't stop mid walk to look somewhere else.

At first he just thought Dolfu was tired, the former sin was about to get his dog's attention if he hadn't felt someone approaching, turns out it is Xiong. He glared at his friend and motioned him to go away, to see if Dolfu's attention goes back to him, his ears went to a rest and he resumed his walk. It's a shame, Greed hoped today would the day Dolfu wouldn't get distracted in the midst of
Regardless of what happened he is good boy and deserves to be praised for doing his job, and so Greed ruffled the fur around his neck, following up by calling Xiong back.

"Look what I bought." He waved a letter in the air for him to see and Greed doesn't know why, but he felt his excitement rise with the view of the letter, eager to have it in his hands and read it's contents, all of this because there’s only one person he knows that writes him regularly. Part of him wanted to make fun of himself for acting like this, imagine how embarrassing would it be if the letter wasn't from Ling?

"It just arrived. He's writing an awful lot to you lately don't you think?" Xiong commented as he analyzed the details of the letter, handing it to Greed when he was within reach. The letter is identical to the ones before it, a thick, ornate paper with a bright cinnabar cherry blossom pin holding the sash down.

"Guess so. Yang! Dolfu! Let's go home!" Dolfu had just handed the ball to Yang, then they raised their heads in synch and Greed chuckled, such pair he adopted. Since the incident Greed decided to stay in the abandoned temple for a few reason: for starters this is more convenient to him and safer for Yang, after hanging with the kid for some time he came to the conclusion he can't feel rocks and is prone to stumble and fall.

"Another letter from Ling?" Yang asked once he got to his side and Greed took this opportunity to take his hand.

"Yep."

"Can you read this one for me too Master?" He innocently requested and he'd let at that, if an idea hadn't come to mind the next instant.

"Only if you say that you're an annoying peepsqueak." His pouts never gets old, Yang faced him, then the ground, and then faced ahead, he’s musing over this and Greed is loving every minute.

"Ok, I'm an annoying peepsqueak..." He declared, with the enthusiasm you'd expect from an upset tween. "...who happens to serve a major jerk."
Greed laughed. "Never change kid!" After he learned waidanshu with Yuan life has been so easy and convenient, the temple don't look like a wreck anymore, no broken roof, no broken door, it is decent again. This called for a change in decor and some of his things were then moved to the ground floor.

He still remembers Xiong reaction when he saw the renovation. It was during January, when the cold proved too much.

"That's cheating."

"That's using your resources."

Dolfu ran ahead of them and laid next to his desk, Greed sat on his cushion and unfolded the letter, curious to what Ling has to say today.

Greed cleared his throat.

"Three days feels like three autumns
The flowers of spring blooms and withers
The birds of summer long for their partners
But the frivolities of life means nothing to a dragon
And yet it seeks the colder seasons,
Lost in the gold labyrinth of the wolf's eyes,
Yearning for the time when the moon shines the brightest."

"Huh, he's not talking about birds this time, at least not entirely."

"He's getting bolder." Xiong jested, Greed looked up to see Yang frowning and Xiong avoiding eye contact.

"Is something wrong?"

"Dragon symbolizes the Emperor, so he's talking about himself." Yang informed.
"Really?" So Ling was writing about himself this whole time... Is there more symbolism in the letter? He understands that the first part is just about the passing time, and the moon is brighter by autumn. Autumn, isn't it when he comes back? And then Ling talks about a labyrinth made of gold. It can't be, can it? "What does wolf means, in xingese culture?" Xiong was holding his chuckles when he asked him, which is making his suspicion only stronger.

"It depends on region, some clans view it as a guardian, a messenger from the gods themselves. Or..." Xiong dragged for suspense, barely containing his grin. "Greed."

He didn’t knew if he wanted to smile or frow, either way he was conflicted, trying to find the right reaction to such a reveal. Since when does Ling feel like this? He can't believe it and yet it makes so much sense, he darted his eyes to the pile of old letters and skimmed through them, just to be sure and yes, Ling have been confessing his feelings since spring. How he didn't notice that? How can someone be so dense?!

Why is he happy?

"So... How are you feeling?" Xiong started, trying his hardest to contain his excitement, almost like he knew about it for a long time and is rooting for Ling since then. No really, since when Ling felt like this? He's feeling off the hook and it's not even funny.

"I'm curious too!"

"Well, I don't know, I'm surprised I never noticed. I find him attractive so that's a good thing." Yeah, for now that is as good as an explanation as he can get. It can't be that he reciprocate his feelings right?

Right?

"Still can't believe you seduced our monarch." Xiong teased, shaking his head in mock-disappointment. Now this he is something he’s comfy with.

"Give me some months and I'll overthrow your empire!" Greed boasted, joining in the fun. Xiong chuckled and he grinned in response, he likes this, this feeling of lighthearted fun. Soon the sun will set and they mutually agreed to go to the hot springs to bath and relax, at some point Dolfu wanted to jump in the spring, adamant about staying by his side, so much so it was ignoring
Greed’s order to sit, and that marked the end of their bath.

The walk back to the temple was soothing, the orange hue of the sky coupled with the chirping birds and the damned cicadas that, for once, aren't getting on his nerves, it all added up and they stopped on a waymark to watch the sun set, the last warm rays shining on his skin, Greed doesn't remember the last time he felt so well like this. This survival training is taking a toll on him and he can't wait to end this.

"I have an idea." Xiong voiced suddenly as the last bits of sun went down the horizon. "I can help you sneak out of the mountain. There's going to be a play on a nearby theater, it is about King Wen of Zhou. What do you say?" Greed chuckled to himself, the prospect of sneaking under his master’s nose is tempting, and he still gets to see a play. Nice.

"That sounds like fun!"

"You remember how to conceal your qi right?" Xiong asked to make sure. Greed nodded. “Good, so we’re ready to go.”

“But how do I conceal my qi?” Yang interrupted, feeling lost and upset for being left out. For a second Xiong just blinked at the boy before facepalming, realizing his slip, the young lord crouched near Yang to give a more approaching air to the kid.

“Do you know about the meridian system?” Yang nodded slowly. “find and control your eight meridians, if you can do that you can hid your qi from others.” While Xiong instructed Yang Greed sat on the ground to meditate, controling said meridians is troublesome for a novice like him. He doesn’t think Yang will have much trouble considering the boy is gifted.

After Xiong made sure they managed to conceal their qi they sneaked away from the mountain and went directly to Greed’s former room through the window to get some new clothes. Once Greed and Yang were dressed the trio went to the other side of the city, closer to downtown.

People could be seen heading to the theater a few meters away from the building and Yang’s excitement had shown amidst the children’s chatter and the enthusiastic music that gets louder the closer they get. On the outside the building had intricate roof and wall decorations, paper lanterns sticking from the roof illuminated just enough to give the place an artistic vibe.

Inside was nothing fancy, but the snacks offered are pretty good, they also offered liquor, that is
always a plus. They sat on cushions on the floor and Greed’s attention went directly to the stage, the thing is in a simple shape, and reminds him of the ones in Amestris, but what really sets it apart is the backdrop.

“Have you seen this play before?” Greed asked Yang while the act hadn’t began.

"There are so many plays about King Zhou, so I don't know. I like the one about the Battle of Xinyun.” The lights centered on the stage and the scene was set: a guy receiving a letter to surrender or be overwhelmed by the imperial army, his army's morale dropped to the ground but some generals were adamant in facing them head-on. Greed likes that attitude.

They're the rebel army led by Zhou Kang, and when he declared to the messenger that he will fight, Greed wondered if all of this happened. The play focused more on Kang's POV during the skirmishes and Greed realized the actor is using the same fighting style he's currently learning.

"When this all took place?"

"More than a thousand years ago." Xiong answered without batting an eye on him.

Another difference from amestrian theater that he noticed and loved was the battle choreographies, it was so artistic and yet so fierce, keeping his eyes glued on the stage every time a battle happened.

In the end the rebel army succeeded in defending their territory and the last act takes place during a hearty banquet, where General Zhou Kang announces his intention of ending the tyranny of the Xia empire. The crowd cheered for the actors after all of them lined up to bow down in gratitude, the cast left the stage and while some people already planned to leave some opted to stay for a little longer.

The mentioning of the Xia during the running of the play sparked some questions, like did every clan established an empire before? Also how ironic is that the two clans present on this play are the ones he lived for a while, Greed took the last sips from his cup whilst pondering on clan relationships and for how long some of them takes place.

"What do think?” Xiong asked after he finished the cup, Greed raised it one more time so his friend could refill it, and in turn he poured more liquor in Xiong's cup.
"Did all of this happened?" Yang talked in front of him, not that he minds, he'd probably ask the same things given the chance.

"It's the battle of Houling Slope, I can borrow the Zhoushu so Greed can read it for you." Yang's eyes started to sparkle in interest and Xiong chuckled in response, Greed just watched the convo, glad that Yang feels safe to open to other people besides him, even if it's just Xiong, it's a beginning. "And you?"

Greed shrugged his shoulders. "I'm a sucker for underdog stories what can I say?"

"And fantasy? There are some fantasy-driven tales from Wen, even romance if you're interested."

"Is it melodrama, you xingese love melodrama." Greed bemoaned and Xiong bursted in an alcohol-induced laughter. Seriously, he doesn't think Lanhua have read a love story to him that didn't involve some drama, that or shit rich people wrote out of boredom, kinda like old amestrian literature, the kind Lust would read and maybe chuckle, saying it was typical foolish human whims.

He knows she liked them, she wasn't fooling anyone.

"We do." Suddenly Yang yawned, they looked at him simultaneously then faced each other, time to go home.

Xiong accompanied him until they have reached he dojo, Yang was sound asleep on his back and for a moment the former sin considered sleeping in the dojo, but quickly brushed it off and walked the rest of the way to his camp.

"Yang." Greed nudged the boy. "Yang we're here." The boy slowly raised his head from his shoulder and let escape another yawn, Greed crouched near their bed and Yang crawled under the blanket, as for him Greed changed to more comfortable clothes before going to bed, and as he did so his eyes laid on the pile of letters.

Ling's confession came back fresh and it kept him awake at night, as good as it is on one's self esteem, he doesn't think he's the ideal pair for Ling, he doesn't think he reciprocate the feelings, doesn't think he has ever loved, to be honest. Was his relationship with Sophia romantic? Yes, did he love her? Probably not, he did kill her in cold blood, felt miserable for a long time after the incident, but he still murdered her by his own volition.
'But you regretted it' His mind suddenly supplied and Greed snapped from his half-sleep state. 'You wished things hadn't gone that way, like you said you were miserable. Sounds like love to me.' What the fuck? They can talk to him? No, wait, this can't be it, they aren't conscious as far as he knows, must be his brain doing tricks on him.

Now why his mind chose Bradley of all people to say that is beyond him.

'Considering you're everyone, then yes, we're conscious.' Lust butted in, 'We only manifest when you're losing conscious, or when you want to.' Who'd want to talk with these losers?

'You apparently, because we're talking right now.' Lust replied, losing her patience with him. Greed rolled his eyes, please give him a break, when he thought he had finally got rid of them and their toxicity, and since when they talk about love without being condescending? It's him talking to himself no doubt.

'It's amusing how much in denial you are, what? Think we're going to hurt your precious princeling?' Good grief it's the bitch now. 'I'm not a bitch! Stupid jerk.' Irritating Envy never gets old but he's not in the mood to engage it, even Wrath is better.

'I'm flattered.' He could hear Envy cursing in the back of his mind, he still can't believe the surreality of this. If they could talk to him all this time, why only now? 'Your oblivion was getting on my nerves, as endearing as it was in the beginning.'

'I'm oblivious to what old man, be clear.'

'You're in love with the boy, trust my judgement, I know the feeling very well.'

'Believe me he knows, it was rather cute, how Wrath acted was he met his wife.' Lust added in her usual coy self, like they were on good terms. This conversation is only making him angry, for all the shit they have done to him in the past, and now they're here, acting like they care.

'We cared when you fled, we felt hurt, betrayed, but a century can change a lot of things, you should know this better than anyone, Mr. Ultimate Shield.' She sighed, and something about it felt off, as if she was telling the truth. 'You should go to sleep.'
He likes this plan.

'Good night you assholes.'

-------------------------

He opened his eyes and was met by the clear blue sky, Greed sat to have a better look at his surroundings, the vast greenery welcoming him, the lavish arrangements and the exuberant trees, he knows this place very well, better than anyone else.

On the main path leading to the mansion he caught sight of Gloria and a sudden urge took hold of his body, he wanted, needed to see her again, he was about to get up when.

"Henry?" This voice, it tugged on his heart. "I'm not done yet, don't tell me you didn't paid attention to my reading?" She sounded hurt and he turned to get a better look at Sophia, her curly brunette hair always looked so soft against her face, and her gentle eyes didn't match at all her temper. She huffed and closed the book. "Maybe I shouldn't have read a book to you after you just returned from your game." She raised to her feet and looked down.

"We should go to your room." He raised his eyebrows, this is getting interesting, he also stood up, ready to embrace her in the small of her back.

"Since you're suggesting." He purred but Sophia put the book between them.

"So you can sleep, and I can continue my book." His shoulder slumped almost immediately after, that was a disappointment. He put his hands casually on his hips and walked ahead of her.

"You're no fun sometimes did you know?" She walked even faster so she could pass by him.

"If I give in to your whims so easily you'll start thinking you can do anything."

"You know I can't resist your low collars. Hey, do you want to go out someday? Just you and me, riding the horses in the woods, I promise to not hunt any animals." He caught up to her and proceeded to massage her shoulders, the way she tensed only to relax right after, to then tilt her
head to give more access to her shoulder, he had to resist the need to kiss her neck. They approached the front door so he playfully pushed her, she slapped his arm when he got closer and when they entered his Father's house Gloria was waiting for them on the foyer.

She all but jumped from the seat in excitement when she saw them and hurried to their encounter, she looked so lovely in her casual dress, the soft pink matched her blonde hair, but not as much as the darker colors she started to use once she became queen. His future wife hugged him and leaned in for kiss, and how can he say no to that? It was a chaste kiss - they were in Sophia's presence after all - and she addressed the other lady.

"I wanted to talk to you!" She grabbed her hands and Sophia was torn between confused and happy. "I bought many books from my house, we can check them on the library, if you're ok with it, that is." Sophia turned her head to look at him, wanting his input, and Greed nodded in the direction of the library, only he and Pride frequent the place, Lust usually orders people to fetch her books, so this shouldn't be a problem, and if it is he'll see to it.

Sophia sighed. "We better get going then, before this one get any ideas." She teased, is she provoking him? Because he feels that way, Greed coquettishly ran his hands on their shoulders before having his arms around them.

"I can take on both if the ladies so desire." Gloria giggled while Sophia rolled her eyes playfully, both pushed him gently, with Gloria declining the offer by promising to do it 'another time' and Sophia telling him to get lost. When the ladies passed through an arch and away from view Greed sighed, having nothing to do.

He has three options: sleep, train or play the piano, he'd rather do the latter, now to find the ballroom. The room wasn't hard to find, his feet took him there almost automatically, not really surprising considering he loves to host parties. Once Greed was a feet apart from the door he heard the crispy sound of a bamboo flute and his heart skipped a beat, pleasantly surprised by something he didn't thought was possible.

When the nobleman opened the doors he was greeted with a calm cheerful song and Ling sitting on the rails of one of the balconies, he didn't react to the doors and continued playing. For some reason he's wearing your typical elite clothes instead of his normal attire and something about him wearing more fitting clothes ignited a flame inside of him.

"You like it?" His soulmate coquettishly ran his fingers on the rail despite the fake-innocent tone of his voice.
“Very much.” He didn't make any effort to hide his desire and it drew a smirk from Ling, his normally dark eyes were even darker with lust.

“The music or me?” He teased. Greed smiled with his eyes closed, savoring the moment, he loves it when Ling is teasing, wished he could do that more often. His want was drawing him in, Greed leaned his arms on the rail, locking Ling between them, and got very close to his face, almost touching their foreheads.

“Both.” They smiled in unison and Ling closed their distance with a kiss, it was passionate and needy and he wanted more, he always wants, and right now he wants the most if to feel Ling.

Greed pulled him out of the rail so they can get even closer and Ling held onto his shoulder for stability, their kiss got deeper, hungrier, and the sin felt as if he couldn't have enough of his princeling. Biting, nibbling his lips, forcing little gasps out of his mouth, Ling ran one hand on his scalp and in response Greed sneaked a hand under his shirt, something he could never do with those fucking robes. A mewl escaped from his partner's lips and it only encouraged Greed to ravish him even more, Ling pushed him to get some air and they stayed there, looking into the other's eyes and breathing heavily.

Ling's red lips were enticing him for another round, and he'd do just that if it wasn't for the dark red sky looming in the horizon, the winds also got strong. "What happened? A storm?” Ling noticed his shifting gaze and followed his sight, his shiver was visible and with time Greed noticed why. The red sky is too reminiscent of his time possessed.

"Should we go to my room? I can close the curtains so you don't see the sky."

"Yes."

"M-my Lord! Lady Sophia and Her Highness! They were assassinated!” He abruptly turned to the door where the familiar voice was, and, for some reason, it is Yang.

"What?!” Without a second thought he followed Yang, he doesn’t know if Ling is following but he hope he is, as much as he trust his abilities he can’t trust what will happen if he stay alone.

They arrived in the library and some of the Devil’s Nest gang was there, Doc in particular was checking on their limp bodies, the wound in their stomachs and their lifeless eyes a haunting image. “What happened here?”
“My best guess is death by stabbing, they were attacked five times each. Those are deep stabs, I don’t think they’d survive anyway.” A deafening thunder howled nearby, bringing with it the strongest of flashes followed by rain, the wind outside only made the scenery more chaotic and to top it all off, bullets could be heard from afar.

Another lightning descended from the sky, showing a shadowy figure on the tall window, confusion was his first emotion until Greed saw liquid dripping from it’s hands. It fled, breaking the window, the sin chased after the murderer, not heeding to Yang’s cry. He hopped on his horse and hunted the cretin to the city, the place was engulfed in flames, but it didn’t stop him. Greed rode and rode but lost sight of the person, he stopped the horse and heard roofbeats coming closer.

When he turned the animal he was greeted by Ling and Yang, the young Emperor looked around, terrified of the hellish landscape before him: Children, adults, elders, you name it, dead, their corpses carelessly tossed to the sides or in the ground. The rain spread the blood, painting the streets a red mirroring the nightmarish sky.

“Greed where are we?” The homunculus scoped the area and to his chagrin, he knows this place really well, know these people really well. They were his to guide, his to protect, and he sacrificed them for a blood seal.

“Soapman.” The winds got more violent, Ling hugged Yang to protect the child and Greed looked up to the darkening sky, the sun was completely covered by the moon and a black door materialized in front of it.

“Why you did this!” Ling asked, vexed. “A king should work for his people! Look at what you did!” He was shouting, this was a complete one-eighty of how he was treating him minutes ago. Yang looked at him, his terrified expression crushed him.

“Hengli, I’m scared.” in the corner of his eyes he saw small black hands rush to Ling and Yang, an eye opened beneath them and his heart started to race, Ling tried to run with Yang but the small hands held them in place. Greed rushed to save them but was halted by something pulling his arm. He was ready to tell whatever it was to fuck off but was taken aback, it was a homunculus, but who he had no idea of, while he was wondering what that things is it stabbed him the gut and left him there to watch as Ling and Yang were sacrificed before his eyes.

No, this sucks, he doesn’t want to dream of this anymore.
Greed raised from the bed, recovering from that terrible nightmare, first thing he did was check on Yang, he was sleeping, safe and sound. Greed let out a deep sigh, his oldest memories are starting to resurface, ‘A king should serve his people!’ Greed smirked, if only Ling knew what a trash person he was, he wouldn’t feel even a modicum of what he does currently.

"Do you think Greed already discovered your feelings?" Yongji dubbed the wildcat plushy, asking him in a childish tone. Ling took hold of the monkey plushie laid on the floor and played along.

"I think he's clueless so in my recent letter I'm more upfront." This time he really hopes Greed realizes his feelings, the pining is killing him and he wants an answer, at this point he doesn't care if it's positive or not.

Scratch that he wants it to be positive.

"Shouldn't you just tell him what you feel and be done with it? Why so many symbolism?" Ling looked to the stone pavement while she played with the plushie's arms, waiting for his answer, it is fear of rejection, but he doesn't want to admit he is afraid. Greed is a casanova, he discovered that in the time they shared a body, and for how long he lived he must have had a myriad of lovers, he doesn't know how he ranks up to them.

"I felt overwhelmed," he at last admitted, returning to his normal pitch. "he's experienced, had many lovers, in contrast I... you know. I don't think I can hold up to any of his past lovers." He held the monkey plushie in his arms for comfort, this is getting depressing, his eyes darted to the kakigori he surprisingly hadn't finished in one go and got another spoonful.

"Well, you'd be his first xingese lover." He knows she's just trying to help, but this only reminded him of Greed's time working for Lord Xia.

"Lanhua is his first xingese lover." He finished his dessert and pouted, why it had to be her? From all of his forty or so siblings why it had to be exactly her? The heavens hate him, there's no other explanation.

"But there must be something he likes about you." 'You look so beautiful, like a painting.' He's blushing and he knows that, when Greed told him that he felt so happy, it’s a shame he didn’t meant anything.
"He likes when I use eyeliner, said I looked like an ink painting."

"Aww! That's so cute, he really said that?" Mei butted in, Xiaomei in toll, she stopped in front of them and eyed her brother. "What are you doing half naked in front of a damsel?" Ling self-consciously looked at his attire, an open jinbei and short shorts, not a big deal.

"You two have seen worse."

"What are you two doing?" This time she eyed the plushies, Xiaomei jumped on the bench and was about to nib on a dog one before Yongji snapped her toy from the panda.

"Talking, Yongji was curious about my letters." She audibly gasped in excitement and the Son of Heaven chuckled, in this regard she's very similar to his grandpa.

"Did he respond?" His silence was enough of an answer to her. "Then when he arrives you need to confess your feelings!"

"But, I, how, how do I-"

"Here, I'll help you," Mei borrowed Yonyon's dog plushie and sat on a bench facing theirs. "Think I'm Greed."

"I'd rather have Al play Greed."

His sister rolled her eyes. "He's suave right? I know how to play these types." She quipped and held the plushie in a way to control it's arms like they're doing.

"Then you go first."

Mei cleared her throat. "Yo, princeling!"
"I can't do this." Yongji started to laugh and Mei got upset.

"Ah Ling, why?!"

"Your Majesty..." They heard Lanfan softly speaking behind Mei, Ling all but jumped, fearing she might have heard part of their convo. Lanfan sit there awkwardly after they became dead silent, it's just like that day. She brought with her a pot, but he's uncertain of it's contents. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing! Just playing with Yonyon's plushies." She didn't buy it and it's obvious why, Lanfan looked to the ground, she wasn't embarrassed like last time, only bummed.

"You're not going to tell me..." There was something vindictive about her voice, Lanfan fished the content of the pot and revealed they are cookies, a good assortment of them, she ate a bunch at once and turned her back to them, ignoring their cries.

"You should tell her." Yongji suggested, likely feeling bad for keeping her out of this.

"She'll tell mom, and then I might as well give up on Greed." This is unfortunate, he doesn't want to keep secrets from them, but Ling can't see any alternatives.

"To think you want to marry him!" Mei squeaked.

"I'll not lie this is quite scary and exhilarating at the same time, to challenge the status quo like this." They moved on to other topics after this, talking about recent festivals and future ones, life on the palace and after they moved to their homelands. They were having fun until Mei sighed, Xiaomei laid on her lap and she caressed the animal.

"Ling I'm sorry, I lied to you."

"Lied about what?"

"Remember when I told you Prince Zhou was the only prince I considered my brother? I lied, there is another one." His gut is telling him it is one of the rebel princes, this is the only reason his mind
can come up with for why she sounds so remorseful.

"Is it one of the rebels?" He hoped he was wrong, but sadly she nodded.

"I don't think you know this, but my mother died when she gave birth to me, Master Tao said our father felt guilty and so he'd spend time with me, the one he chose to raise me was Lady Yin, I still consider her my mother." He...doesn't know how to respond to this, it makes sense that Changwu would appoint a woman from his clan to take care of a motherless prince, and now that he think of it, now he knows how the Chang survived the combined threat of the Wu and his clan.

"So Shuang is like a real brother to you?" She laughed nervously.

"I don't know if I can say that, we had a falling out once we returned from Amestris. When you promised to protect my clan and we were assimilated, he felt betrayed, he didn't want to talk to me, we haven't talked ever since and I don't think we'll ever talk again, not now that he's the enemy. But!" She clasped her hands in front of the other and Xiaomei imitated her. "Please do whatever you want to Shuang, but please don't execute him!" That's a strong request. Ling pursed his lips, in one hand he doesn't want to spare the man who kidnapped and probably made his advances on his mother; on the other he knows the pain of losing a family member, he was devastate when he lost princess Aisha, like she was when she lost Prince Zhou, Mei must me scared of losing Shuang too.

"Your Majesty." Now Yue interrupted them. "The Zhu and Tang clans are here, court will begin immediately like you requested." He dismissed her and got up, their talk had come to an end, not that he's terribly sorry for it, Yue couldn't have come at a better hour.

"I'll see what I can do, but I can't promise anything."

-------------

Some stupid birds woke him up, Yang had already raised from bed and was outside with Dolfu, Greed sat on the bed, still a bit shaken by that nightmare, and to think it started as a wet dream, as shitty as that was he's glad for it, imagine how awkward it would be otherwise?

Dreaming of Soapman made him remember the tragedy that happened during and before it, it was the first time he questioned Father and the first time he rebelled.
"The streets could only be described as one thing: chaos. It was different from Cameron's civil war, this one had minimum involvement from the army, but it was still orchestrated by his toxic family. Get two prominent families in the area, commit murder, frame the other, get their followers riled up, let the shitshow begins. Mob mentality is a curse and obviously they'd exploit it, the only thing Greed had to do as de facto ruler of the place was to execute the culprits, but make it so brutal people will protest, now kill them too with the pretense of treason.

"Humans are so predictable it's pathetic! We make a spark and they start the fire, I wonder what they think of you now, Duke of Cameron." Envy tried to provoke him, to no avail, Greed's attention was entirely on the corpses of his people, his things. It's the third time he sacrificed something for Father.

"What are we going to gain from this?"

"Huh?"

"Father becomes the perfect being, what do we gain?" Envy frowned, not liking his train of thought, of course it wouldn't, they can't comprehend the idea of thinking for yourself.

"Are you questioning Father, Greed? That's not very wise of you." Envy threatened and Greed smirked, if it really wanted to be effective it shouldn't be using Gloria.

"Heh, I could be. What are you going to do? Tell Father?" This made it shut it's trap. What Greed didn't expect was for Envy to really tell Father and then listen to that bullshit of 'You don't want what you think you want my dutiful son, I know this better than anyone. Your wants are my wants Greed.' He can't believe he listened to that and took it to heart. He fled that same day, after immobilizing Envy.

"This is impossible! You're betraying our Father?!

"The impossible don't exist you ugly bitch.""

"Oh, you're awake." Yang entered the temple and sat near the bed. "How was your night Master Hengli?" Awful.

"Ok, I think I love Ling too." He wanted to continue, but Yang all but bounced on his feet.
"This is good right?" His eyes were wide and sparkly, and Greed felt bad for what he is about to tell him, he really likes the idea of him and Ling, he can guess why.

"I don't think so." Seeing the boy so visibly deflates crushes him, but he won't lie to him.

"Why?"

"I'm not the ideal person for him."

"Why do you think that?"

He killed Sophia when she discovered Father in the basement, she trusted him with the information and was met by a claw in the stomach; Gloria told him how much she wanted to have a family and see them grow whilst wanting to grow old with him when he mentioned immortality, she poured her heart to him and he answered by destroying her gut. "Because I'm a monster that don't deserve to be loved."

"W-why are you saying this Hengli? You, you're not a monster, you're a good person." His voice was on the verge of breaking, he doesn't blame Yang to think that, he saved him and showered the boy with love and care, but this line of thinking is terribly naive and he should know better.

"What do you know about me? I save you once and you think I'm a good guy? You thought the same about your parents and look what they did." He shouldn't have said that, it was incredibly insensitive and he knows he hurt Yang yet he believes he passed his point across, the kid's face closed and for a moment he thought he would cry, but no, he just got up.

"You want to be like this? Fine! Be a self-loathing prick! See if I care!" He stormed off the building, brushing past Master Xuan who was surprised to see Yang in such state. He entered the building, visibly confused and worried.

"What did you said to him?"

"That I'm a bad person."
"And what makes you think that?" He pressed, Greed grumbled, he didn't want to pass through this twice in a row, can't a guy get a break?

"I killed a lot of people in the past." He didn't expect that, he can see it in his face. His teacher stroked his chin, seemingly not sure how to respond.

"So did our Great Lord, is he a bad person then?"

"This is different, I killed a city worth of people."

"Then I have to admit, this is a bad thing. It reminds me of a general of old, he massacred an entire city to avenge his father." It does sound like him. "But after this, he ensured his people never suffered from famine and promoted education in his lands, he still did bad things after this, sure, but we most take into account everything. Do you think he's a bad person?"

Greed tsked, he always does this. "You want to pass me a lesson don't you."

"I'm your teacher first and foremost, your wellbeing matters to me." He smiled to reassure him. "Morality isn't black and white Greed, I think you should measure in your good deeds too; do they outweigh the bad? If not, nothing is stopping you from changing for the better." He needed to hear that, even if he's still afraid of telling Ling everything, this is a good first step. It just doesn't make any sense, he moved on from all that decades ago, why is it resurfacing now? Is it because of Ling, or is it something else?

"I shouldn't let who I was in past affect who I can be in the future, right?" Master Xuan nodded. "Why are you here?" His master straightened himself, returning to his serious posture.

"Tomorrow is the last day of your training here in the mountain. I hid a treasure on top of Baisheshan, if you can find it you can return to the manor." This is the best news he heard today, he can't wait to sleep in a proper bed, first thing he'll do is phone Ling an-

"You can't use alchemy nor waidanshu."

Chapter End Notes
Jinbei is a kimono cardigan.

I uploaded very fast no? It's because it's my birthday and I wanted to give you a gift. With this said, next chapter won't come till december I think, november will be full of tests and I want to focus almost entirely on that. Sorry for the incovenience (>人<)

Hey guys do you know about the infamous pokemon 24h livestream? If my fic were that livestream this chapter is when Impidimp blocks our view of Ponyta for the 2nd time. :V

What are your thoughts on this chapter? If you liked leave kudos/comments, they make my day and help me a lot with this fic. :3
If you don't know what to say or is too shy you can just drop a emoji you feel describe your feelings the best, it is not something to be ashamed of, every comment means a lot, no matter how short they may be. :)
The air in the Main Hall was tense, so tense Ling thinks he can cut it with his dao, members of the Zhu and Tang clan are present, including the Tang prince – the youngest of the bunch. He feels bad for his younger brother, he looks so lost and is just a tween, around Yang’s age if he remembers correctly, and if Feng’s investigation about his clan’s former plot to put him on the throne is right, his opinion on the Tang lowered drastically.

Hongzi left his thoughts to the side, for now he needs to do his job. He can talk to his little brother after this end. “Thank you, Tang patriarch, Zhu matriarch, for personally coming to this council. It makes things easy for me.”

“You honor us Your Majesty.” Lord Tang replied before both lords bowed in respect.

“I believe both of you read the letter and know why I called you here.” This cued Yue to hand him Feng’s report, just to make sure he did a quick read on his cousin’s overview. Fighting over a castle, this irks him on a spiritual level. “Without interrupting the other, I want to know about the Battle of Hongsha Castle. Starting with the Tang.” Lord Tang bowed once again in gratitude, until now he is acting so calm and gracious, Ling doesn’t know what to make of his calm demeanor.

“We just wanted our castle back, nothing more.” This provoked the Zhu clansmen, but gadly they remained quiet on their seats. He’s not exactly wrong, but there’s more to it and he isn’t considering it, which is strange considering his stance on the Ruan and Qin case from almost a
year ago.

He still can’t believe how fast time has passed.

“Do you have anything to back up your claim?”

“The former Lord of the castle, Tang Hao, he was a distant relative of my father.” This isn't what he want actually, a document would be preferable.

“Anyone can say anything Lord Tang Shao, a written proof would be preferable.” Exactly! His mother sudden rebuttal caught him off guard. Thanks to the Lord’s silence another person bowed in haste and Hongzi gave them the permission to talk.

“Since Tang Hao’s inheritance of the castle was recognized by the court at the time there must be an official document in the Hall of Literary Grace.” Hongzi didn’t waste any time and ordered Yue to fetch said document, his secretary bowed and left the room.

“What’s you relation to the Tang clan?” Ling asked, for curiosity’s sake.

“I’m the inspector of Shanjiao Your Majesty.”

“What’s your name?” His Royal Mother asked, on closer inspection he thinks this person is a woman, must be around his mom’s age.

“Roxiu My Lady.”
“You think fast, I like that.” Roxiu bowed deeply in respect. Now with this over he can ask the Zhu for their side.

“Since Secretary Yue left to fetch your document,” Hongzi directed this part to the Yuan before turning to the Zhu collective. “we’ll hear what the Zhu has to say.” the group nodded slightly while their Lady bowed with her palms on top of each other.

“What Lord Tang forgot to mention is Tang Hao’s Zhu lineage, he was closer to our family in fact, so if anything the castle should be ours, as it was always intended.” He manage to hear a hint of anger on her voice, and the mention of Tang Hao’s Zhu side of the family sparked something in Lord Tang. To think they were allies…

“Again I’ll have to ask for proof.” They seemed to come more prepared than the Tang, Lady Zhu took a letter from her sleeve and one of his servants brought it to him. The document didn’t specify to who the castle should go, but it does mention how important it is to a farming village in the border of Ge province thanks to it’s channels and his desire to hand it to the Zhu for this exact reason. This isn’t an official document however.

“Lord Tang, why did an artisan clan like yours engaged in war with an allied clan? Why is this castle so important?”

“Since the Yin rebelled we feel threatened by it’s presence, Yan is at our doorstep and if they attack we are at a geographical disadvantage. Hongsha castle will serve as our last line of defense if an invasion does happen.” Ling pursed his lips, his reasoning is good too, now if only Yue got here with that document, it would ease things for him. Oh well, since she haven’t arrived he’ll have to move topics.

“We’ll have to wait till Yue arrives to make a proper judgment. Until then I have with me an investigation report regarding Prince Zhu’s death, here it says killed in battle. I want to know if this has anything to do with the Battle of Hongsha.” The mood inside the court changed drastically, the somber look in the eyes of the Zhu and the nuanced guilt in the faces of the Tang talked about a possible future where they can restore their alliance, but little did it serve to calm his anger, on the contrary, it only fueled it. You have two clans that were allies since god knows when, fighting over land, and thanks to this petty fight, his brother had to pay for it. Why they had to come to this?
"He fought till the end for our people, it's a shame he had to go like this." An officer of the Zhu lamented and some of his group nodded in agreement, others kept quiet in his respect. He's sure that the Tang would try and say something, but Yue had finally arrived with the document, and such they kept their mouth shut.

His secretary handed him the paper, which had Kuanzhi's sign in it along with the Minister of Personnel of the time, this should be enough to prove their inheritance. "You won't like this." Yue informed in his ear, oh great, Ling scanned the paper quickly and found out that his grandfather or the former minister declared that the castle belong to Tang Hao, and his descendants. "There should be something in Master Feng's report."

"Let me see." Feng did collect information about Tang Hao and his descendants, considering it's relations to Prince Zhu's death this is no surprise. It seems that both clans have equal claim on the castle, Feng also made a small annotation, saying that he should consult someone from the ministry of personnel. He'll do that but first.

"We'll continue this council tomorrow, if some of you are direct descendants of Tang Hao, I'd like to talk to you specifically. As it turns out, both clans have a claim on the castle and I'd rather settle it with an officer from the Ministry of Personnel present." They kowtowed, some visibly confused, others mildly upset, and then Ling remembered something. "Ah! And I want to talk with Prince Tang. My servants will prepare accommodations for you to stay the night. You're dismissed." Both groups left and Ling walked down the stair to meet with his younger brother, as he closed their distance the younger sibling fumbled on his feet, not knowing what to say or how to act when he finally settled for a simple bow that Ling interrupted.

"I'm going for a walk, want to join?"

"Ah!-y-y, yes!"

"You have a meeting in an hour." His mother chided halfheartedly, Ling waved his hand with as much enthusiasm as her and left to the Imperial Garden.
This time he hanged around the lake, the lotuses are so colorful this time of the year and he wanted to relax by their side, their bright pink complemented the jade waters of the lake, and then the white stone passageways and bridges added a touch of harmony and elegance that could be only topped by the pavilion located in the same area. After they stood on top of a bridge said pavilion came into view and his mind went back to his dinner date with Greed.

If only he knew at the time how deep he would fall for his friend and partner, when he returns he want to dine there with him again. Hopefully this time they won't be just friends eating together.

"Brot-I mean! Your Majesty, are you okay?"

"Huh? Ah! Yes, I'm quite fine! And you can refer to me as brother."

"You wanted to talk to me." Ling nodded and went to the railing, two ducks swam by and distorted his reflection, this place is so pretty, why he doesn't walk here often?

"Yes, I want to know how you're doing, and how is life in Xiyun Palace?"

"It's great, I'm very quiet and have a hard time looking at people's faces or interacting with them, but my house is quiet and the landscape inspiring. It helps me to paint." It's good to hear that, that he can enjoy a normal life without societal pressure, yet.

"Be honest with me, did you want to be emperor?" His gaze was completely fixated one the lake, too nervous to tell him the truth. His brother gave a deep sigh after a while but didn't look at him directly, opting to look at his reflection on the water instead.

"No, not really." Meek, young and doesn't want to be emperor, that's the perfect recipe for a puppet emperor. Ling started to wonder if his passiveness wasn't groomed into him, and this made him feel bad.
"I don't know your name yet." Ling gave a nervous laugh, ashamed for forgetting a simple detail, his brother seemed to not care as much as he thought he would, being too busy looking at the greenery in the garden.

"What is Bao doing here?" Lord Xing suddenly talked, having come from the opposite direction. Ling just faced his grandfather and tutor whilst Bao bowed to him.

"I called the Tang and the Zhu clans, then I decided to have a walk with Bao, right?" The younger sibling nodded and their grandfather nodded.

"It's a good thing that I found you here. I wanted to tell you something."

"Yes, grandfather."

"I'm returning to An in two days, it's about time to be honest and your Royal Mother is back, you don't need me."

"It was an honor to have you here with me, thank you for your assistance." Out of habit he was going to bow but Lord Xing stopped him mid track.

"An Emperor musn't bow to anyone." He reminded him cheerfully. "Have fun you two." He said before excusing himself and going on his way. After Xing Quan was far enough their resumed their walk, it was around the lone willow tree that Bao lost balance and almost passed out in front of him. Ling got hold of his sibling and ordered the servants following them to bring something for them to eat, they were left with his bodyguards in a matter of seconds and they helped him bring Bao to the pavilion.
The table had piles and piles of empty dishes and for the first time he wasn't responsible for it, at least not entirely, the household servants soon arrived to take the dirty dishes while bringing more food, since it became apparent that what they initially bought won't satiate both siblings appetite. As for Ling, he's surprised Bao ate as much as he does, he'd expect this from Dahu or Miao, but not from frail-looking Bao.

"Aren't they feeding you in Xiyun palace?" He was joking, and made sure his tone was lighthearted enough for him to notice. As for Bao he raised his head, still munching on the bittersweet pork.

"Yes. We ate before arriving, and my cousin asked if I was fine. That came out of nowhere, I feel like my condition is worsening."

“This is unfortunate, if there’s anything I can do for you, you can tell me.”

“Actually, there’s something I want to request you. News of my condition reached Yin Shuang and he’s been sending letters wishing for my condition to improve, he also sent gifts and food, but uncle tore the letters.”

“So you can’t show me….do you think he’s sincere?” After that talk with Mei he’s willing to give Shuang the benefit of the doubt, It can be, however, that he’s just trying to raise his public image by treating his younger siblings well like he did with him.

Bao shook his head. “No….actually, I don’t know.” He stopped to look at the table, seemingly torn about something Ling can’t see. “His clan shaped our beliefs of well manners and benevolence, but he also kidnapped your Royal Mother and used her as hostage.” This is a sore reminder and good argument against him, Ling is just glad she is here in the palace with him, safe.

“He seemed worried about the current state of my clan and wanted me to seek refuge in his manor. But it could be a ruse! What if he turns me into a hostage to force my clan to his side? I don’t want that, but I also don’t want to be at home, not when we’re engaged in war with the Zhu, I fear for
my life big brother, can I stay here until things calm down?” He was frightened and it compelled him to accept his request in a heartbeat, but this can be a plan made by Shuang, mistress Ruan was a good example, use his compassion against him to put a spy inside the castle.

‘Ling, I think there's another spy inside the court... I think Ruan was just there to distract us from the real rat. Shuang seems to act based on what occurs inside the court.’ Maybe he’s overreacting and Bao is telling the truth, he needs an unbiased input first.

“I’ll talk with my mother about this, if she accepts you can come live with me.” His eyes shone with hope and he bowed, staying in this position while talking.

“Thank you Your Majesty!”

Ling just hopes he’s doing the right thing.

---------------------

“Today we’ll start your test.” Master Xuan announced, part of him was excited, he’ll finally return to the manor, but he can fail and probably stay here until he returns to the palace, or die. There’s a lot at stake here. Another part of him was in deep regret for Yang’s absence, he shouldn’t have drove the boy away, specially when knowing the shit he went through “If you find the jewelry I hid on top of the mountain and return it to me, you’re free to exit the mountain.”

“Allrighty. On top of the mountain right?” His teacher nodded and that was all he needed, to the top of the mountain then.

“But first, give me your palms.”
“Huh?”

“Come here Greed.” He did as told and extended his palms, he didn’t know what to expect, but from all the things his mind could come up with Master Xuan slashing them was definitely not one of them. It was so fast his mind couldn’t come up with a reaction in time, conforming to hissing when Master Xuan bandaged the wounds. “To make sure you don’t use alchemy.”

Greed tsked and moved on to his test, it can’t possibly take more than a day to climb Baisheshan, the problem will be finding the jewelry.

“What kind of jewelry is that?”

“You’ll know when you see it.” Fine, be cryptic then.

He walked casually to the former bandits’ hideout after a quick pause in his camp for supplies and memories from that day he rescued Yang flushed back to his mind, he wanted Yang to trust him and his eagerness to reach out to him yesterday just proved that the boy does care for him now, when this test ends he’ll talk to him, it’s the right thing to do.

From here on the path was foreign to him although simple and without any hardship, from there he got a broader view of the rural part of Wenchang, where the crops merged in a vast sea of green. The best strategy is to keep on one side and that is what he’s going to do, he expects to finish this today and right his wrongs.

Yes, this sounds like a good plan.

Greed entered in another forest, not so different from the one he visits daily on the other side, and he took on a more careful approach, these places are perfect for an ambush and he felt nervous, his hands aren’t in the best shape for a fight. The quick rustling from a bush sent his body on brief frenzy, ready to fight whatever was going to jump on him, but nothing came, must be the wind, Greed calmed down and scanned the area for all sorts of qi and cursed himself when his sensing
was dwindling, like it does from time to time.

There was also the chance they are concealing their qi, and that is alarming.

One more step, it was all it took before he was ambushed by a single person, using a saber identical to Ling’s, this passing tough of Ling gave the attacker the opening they wanted, Greed crossed his arms instinctively and in a split-second noticed the idiocy of that, getting a cut on his forearm for his troubles. It goes to show how much he relies on his shield.

He got a hold of the staff he took with him just in case and ignored the sharp pain in his palms, regretting his initial apprehension of drawing his weapon. Both fighters came to blows, with each harsh impact of metal on wood an unpleasant pulse vibrated in his ears with more strength than the others, and that’s when his neidanshu decided to come uninvited and read the ambusher’s qi.

It felt uncanny to fight using both eyes and sixth sense, but it was also easier, almost like he can predict their moves. With time he started to notice a pattern on his attacks and such used an opening in their attack to hit their rib with his staff, only it didn't work and they locked the weapon in their hand, making Greed open to attacks. Without warning Greed slashed the inside of his attacker's right arm, using a dagger he hid in the arm-guard he stole from the dojo to leave a deep cut, a handy trick he loved to use during his aristocratic days. The person kicked him away and fled, leaving Greed alone for the day.

---------------------------

He can feel small life forms flying by in a stuttering pattern, sometimes they would land softly on the lake – judging from the stagnant qi – and fly again, rinse and repeat, they’re dragonflies if he remember correctly

"There's a dragonfly on your hair." Hengli pointed out, half-caring.

"A dragonfly?"
"Yeah, those long insects....shit, how can I describe it." He looked everywhere but to him according to his jing, Hengli got closer and on a knee, making sure to take one of his hands. "They're long and slim," he draw a straight line in his palm, "and have wings, like this." He finished his drawing in time for a dragonfly to land in his shoulder, Hengli approached his hand so the animal could walk to his finger and laid it on his palm. "Or I could've done that, can you feel it?"

"Yes...it's nice."

The memory drawn a smile to his face, this wasn't the only time Hengli went out of his way to help him and he appreciates his caring nature, which is precisely why it hurts so much to see him calling himself a monster, that he doesn't deserve the love people show him even after all he does to them. He felt his throat tighten once again and so he buried his face on his arms, he's about to cry and he's furious this is the only thing he does, Hengli needs help and he can't offer it. But he wished he could, wished he could make Hengli see that he is deserving of love and care.

A soft humming of an erhu made him uncurl and scan the area, there's a person playing close to him, they have a faint smell of orange, it can't be Xiong, his scent is usually stronger, fresher, as if he just had taken a bath.

"You're the kid who walks with Mu, isn't it?" The man spoke softly, it's just Lord Bang, he sniffed involuntarily and chastised himself, he didn't want to be caught crying. "Why are you crying? And where is Mu?"

"I don't know where he is, nor I care."

"Do you want to talk about it?" And after it was apparent he was hesitant. "I can help you sort things out."

"Fine. Hengli thinks he's a monster, I tried to tell him this isn't the case but he's stubborn." There was moment of silence, with only the music keeping him company, when it stretched for far too
long he became impatient. "Lord Bang?"

"Some monsters are benevolent creatures, have you told him that?" He doubts that would've worked, and now he doubts Lord Zhou will help, yet for some reason he didn't want to stop talking.

"But he's convinced that he's an awful person that shouldn't be loved."

"This couldn't be farther from the truth..."

"You agree, right? Hengli is a good person, I think that, your family thinks that, even Ling thinks that. Why he feels like this? It's not fair." And right after he discovered his feelings for Ling, is he fearing something? If only he could open up to him.

"This is sadly result of years of toxic upbringing, you know this better than I do." The truth hit like a wildboar, Hengli did mentioned once that he had fled from his father, at the time he thought it was a cheap trick to get him to trust him. He always sounded so cheerful and full of life, it never seemed like he had a trash childhood, now he believes wholeheartedly.

"His father is garbage, he didn't deserve a son like Hengli." He stopped his song and seemed to have laid the instrument on the floor, now solely focusing on him.

"What were we talking about?" He's serious?

"Are you serious? We are talking about Hengli!"

"Oh, Mu is a good kid, even if he doesn't want to admit. What do you think of him?" He remembers Hengli and Xiong mentioning this once, how Lord Zhou can forget bits of
conversation. Damn he didn't thought it could be frustrating.

Yang pouted, returning to his curled position. "He's amazing, thanks to him I feel loved again." He paused to smile to himself, remembering the day he invaded the bandit hideout to rescue him, how worried he sounded when he reached his cell, and how happy he sounded when he was sure he was safe. "You know he cares, and he's so full of life, oozing with personality, I never get bored when I'm around him. He's a dramatic try-hard though, but I like him the way he is."

"Those are beautiful feelings, you're like brothers, am I right? That's the impression I have at least." The Zhou elder hummed and got his instrument back, starting another music, a more upbeat song. "But shouldn't Mu be the one hearing how important he is for you?" At first he didn't know what to say, he was at the same time berating himself for not doing this and surprised by how blunt and true this is. He wants to see him now, pour his heart to him, and preferably save Hengli the same way he saved him.

"So there you are." Master Xuan said after finding him? Lord Zhou? He stopped before them and turned to him. "Greed was searching for you before parting." This made his throat tighten, Greed must be feeling miserable, when he needed Yang the most he put his feelings before Hengli and fled. He needs to atone for this.

"Where is he?"

"Don't worry, he's just doing a test, he must return by night or tomorrow morning. You should wait at the dojo or the manor, your choice. As for you." Now he walked closer to Lord Bang, audibly done. "You can't flee from home like this, your family is worried y'know."

"Oh hey Guizhang, since when you returned?" Master Xuan sighed and helped him up. "Yang come with me. We can wait for Mu together." The boy nodded and walked absentmindedly towards Master Xuan and took his hand, Hengli will take a while to return, he better think on what to tell him.

--------------
Any semblance of road disappeared, he will have to climb, and he doesn't like that, not because he
doesn't know how to, he's very capable thank you very much, it's his hands that worries him. That
was so sadistic and mean-spirited, does he want him to die?

Greed started to climb and hissed when he felt a sharp pain in his palms, he returned to the ground
to apply a soothing balm on his hand, when he resumed the climb it still hurt somewhat, but for
now he’ll have to suck it up. His previous training helped him hold his own weight, he’s sure his
speed is improved, but the ever present pain is getting in the way.

What was a simple task became a chore thanks to his handicap, his hand slipped and his heart
skipped a beat, he almost fell if he hadn’t strengthened his grip on another rock, however, the
action sent a sharp and strong pain in his palm that extended to his entire arm. Greed stopped to
breath heavily, his arms are trembling, he needs to find any kind of surface, now. Ignoring the
excruciating pain, he stopped going up and went eastward, the sun is starting to move west too, he
needs to hurry if he wants to finish this today.

After a short amount of time he found a flat surface and rushed on top of it, his pain be damned.
The former sin quickly undid his bandage to take care of it, the balm can only do so much with him
overworking his hands, he reapplied the medicine and wrapped his palms again with less difficulty
than before. For now he needs to eat.

The food he bought with him was all stolen from the manor, and for this exact reason they taste
sweeter than all the crap he cooks. Easy things to eat, like dim sums, and a bento he doesn’t know
to whom it belonged, he feels bad for their cook, who will have to redo their breakfast and god
knows how much these people eat. He was half-done with his packed lunch when he heard the
high-pitched cry of a falcon, Leng landed next to him with a letter attached to it’s leg.

‘Be careful of the winds at the top.’ He heard the falcon fly away and looked at the thing
uninterested. Since he had nothing to do while eating, and since he knows he can talk to them,
Greed decided to ring his brothers.

“Wake up dickheads I’m bored.”
“Never thought you’d resort to name-calling, you were better Greed.” Lust was the first to answer, she sounded indifferent, as if she was already expecting this.

“Well, I’m part Envy now, what did you expect?”

“Too bad this didn’t make you less dense.”

“It did make me more obnoxious.” He could feel Envy scoffing, part of him is still convinced he is just talking to himself, making things up as he goes along and he doesn’t like the implications this have on his mental health. “Being serious now, I want to talk. Do you really think I’m in love?”

“You can search for my memories of my wife, when we met.”

“You’re being oddly nice.”

“We’re forced to live together, there’s not much I can do.”

“What ever old man.” He did as suggested and fished for Wrath’s memories, he found their first date and replayed the whole thing, he must be honest, Ms. Bradley was a snack, and Wrath is tactless and lack charm, how he even scored with her is beyond him.

“I’m hearing this.”

“Good for you.” He can see Lust chastising him quite fervently, no wonder guy is scared, no, this isn’t what he wanted him to see. He can feel how happy he is when they’re together, how he always seem to look forward to meet her again or how protective he is of his wife, this looks like how he acts around Ling. Now is official, he’s in love with Ling.
“I should thank you and all, but something is bugging me. Why are y’all acting like we’re buddies? Have you forgotten all the shit you made me go through? First you resent me and now you’re acting like we’re a happy family. Fuck you all!”

“Gree-”

“Shut your fucking mouth and let me finish. What? Because I rule this body now you’re all licking my boot? I’m the new Father, is that?! Can’t you think for yourself, you have to be mindless dolls, following the next person in charge? It was the same with Pride, don’t you lot have dignity? No self-respect?” He finished his rant, outside his body was fuming, leave it to his family to rile him up. A silence took place and for a moment he thought they went back to the corner of his consciousness, he wouldn’t be surprised, but that is disappointing.

“Not everyone is as courageous as you are Greed, keep that in mind.” Lust reminded him, not angry or hurt, just…, indifferent, like he usually is. What she said made him curious, is she implying he isn’t the only one that wanted to rebel?

“What do you mean?”

“We wanted to live, obeying Father was our only way to do so.” She clarified and he threw his last assumption to the window, so much for having faith in them.

“You could always rebel.”

“And risk being assimilated by Pride? No thanks.” Envy scoffed. While he can kind of understand their fear, he still feels like something is missing.

“But you still never questioned his actions.”
“Because to us it made perfect sense, but now that we’re living inside of you, sharing your experiences, it’s different.” God he hate how condescending Wrath is, and what is he implying? That now they can feel sympathy?

“I’m done with you lot, I’ll try to see things from your perspective, doesn’t mean I’m forgiving you, not even close, I just want to understand.”

“Who are you talking to?” He all but jumped and looked at the source of the voice, Master Xuan was there, looking mildly concerned for his pupil. Greed looked around, trying to find the right words, how can he explain what just happened? He can’t, that’s the truth. At least not in a way that won’t make him look like he has a disorder.

“Myself?” He tried to play it off but his Master’s deadpan expression wasn’t giving him any hope of evading the topic. Xuan sighed and sat by his side.

“You’re acting weird since yesterday, should we talk about it?” His tone didn’t leave much room for negotiation, Greed sighed in defeat and looked down, rubbing his nape in comfort, just the thought of voicing his concerns suffocates him.

“I doubt you’ll believe it.” He tried to push it all away one more time, he smiled to himself, yes, nobody in their right mind would believe the nonsense that is his life, only those involved, and they’re far away. Maybe this is why it hurts so much, he have only himself to tend these scars, even though he connected to the Zhou, he’s alo-

“How are you so sure? If Ru Jin’s story is true, anything can be.” He didn’t consider this, from the myriad of things Yang told him about the book he can see why his Master would think this, her story is so out of this world.

Just like his.

“Nothing is impossible.”
“Pretty much.” And so he told Master Xuan everything from Father, to his creation and eventual betrayal, to his death and resurrection, his second death and resurrection, to now. He paid attention to Xuan’s expressions, to see what he thought of everything. The older man stroked his chin, absorbing everything Greed laid out to him, his mentor inhaled deeply, then exhale slowly. Greed was getting nervous, unsure of what his teacher thought of him now.

“It seems to me that you’re afraid of His Majesty’s rejection.” He said amidst his thoughts. He doesn’t know why but, this feels so familiar, but he can’t put a finger on why. “You must tell him everything if you wish for this uncomfortable feeling to go away, for this weight to be lifted.” This felt like an attack to him, tell Ling? All of this? He can’t. It feels almost preposterous to do so. Greed shook his head, he’s afraid, yes, that seems like it.

“That’s the problem, I’m scared of his rejection like you said. Does it need to be right away?” He bemoaned, not feeling ready to do this just now.

Xuan got his feet and fixed his clothes. “No, take your time, gather your courage. But remember that being brave isn’t the same as being fearless; courage is when you do what needs to be done even if you’re afraid. It’s ok to have fear Greed, it means you care.” He said softly to accompany his tender smile, something that was rarely seems, Greed smiled in return, and when his mentor offered a hand he took it. There was work to be done and he had to keep moving.

“Are you my teacher or my therapist?”

“In martial arts your biggest enemy is yourself, you won’t advance with this lump on your conscience. If it helps, you can meditate to keep your siblings in check.”

“I’ll kep that in mind.” That’s enough talking, Master Xuan left and Greed packed his things and looked up, he thinks he can see the top of baisheshan, and his hands aren’t pulsating anymore, if he hurry he can finish this today.

He continued his trail up, trying to ignore the stinging pain in his palms, his hands probably lost
any chance of closing from this ordeal, he’ll charge this from his master. The sun was more noticeably on the west when he got to the summit, Greed looked around, in every crease and rock and found a wood necklace in a crook between some rocks. The consultant sat on the same stone and examined the necklace: it’s a lacquered wood necklace comprising of beads, there’s eight trigrams carved in eight different beads. These trigrams are used in waidanshu, only when he returns he’ll know it’s use, for now Greed wore the jewelry and thought of his siblings.

‘We wanted to live, obeying Father was our only way to do so.’ This is tragic, and honestly, isn’t it what he did too? Greed rummaged through theirs memories, and stayed there on top were the winds were harsh, trying to see what was it that they always wanted, they are parts of Father, his alter egos, if he can understand them, maybe he can make sense of that asshole.

He wanted to love and be loved, that he already knows, Sloth and Gluttony are pretty simplistic too, but Sloth didn’t sign up for that horrible job, no one would want that, and now he knows what Envy wanted was to form bonds with others, most likely their family, their grief over Lust’s death pretty much confirms it, he still feels bitter for all the awful things they did, but he also kind of feels bad now for treating them like shit. Lust, it’s difficult to tell, she and Wrath are the worst, it seems like they’re just living.

Father is also so complex, he took the form of the person he criticized, did the things he made fun of, Greed gave a bitter laugh, in the end they’re such pathetic creatures. The former sin got up and dusted his hands. “Let’s make a deal shall we? You don’t sabotage my life and you can live a happy life, filled with love. What do you say?”

“Will it have lots of food?”

“Yes.”

“honestly I preferred the other girl.”

“And what? You think this is a democracy? I run this body.”
"As for me I prefer the boy."

"So we’re in agreement?" He heard a chorused ‘yes’, good, now it’s settled. If they feel what he does this is a good first step, if he can redeem himself, so can them and if they don’t, well, he can always try and shut them forever.

--------------

First thing he did when he got to solid ground was rush back to his camp, Dolfu was the first to greet him, running to his encounter, Greed crouched to embrace it comfortably and was met with kisses and sniffing, he really wants to know where he was, he entered with Dolfu in his arm and deflated a little when he didn’t saw Yang, only Xiong, looking mildly upset.

"You stole my lunch."

"Sucks to be you." They kept staring at each other and in the meantime Greed laid Dolfu on the ground. Xiong’s eyes moved to his neck and his eyes widened, Greed touched the beads in his necklace in self-awareness before facing his impressed friend.

"You passed the test!"

"You know what this is?" He just raised his hand and Greed saw the same beads wrapped around his fist. "What is this?"

"A bagua bead, it lets you transmute without drawing the pentagram. It doesn’t work for me for obvious reasons." So this is what it does, Greed took the necklace to get a better look at it, now he only needs a better formula for his shield. "You can finally talk to Ling." He gave him a dirty look
“And only two months left, man I can’t wait to see him play the flute.” Xiong started to laugh and it got Greed by surprise, then immediately he frowned, is he missing something?

“Sorry, I didn't mean to.” And he laughed again, Greed only waited till he stop and brushed a tear out of his eye. “Is that you sounded too eager to it, I couldn’t.” There was still laugh in his voice and then things clicked, don’t tell him…

“Is that an innuendo?” Xiong nodded. “For what?”

“Blowjob.” You learn something new everyday.

“Tell me where’s Yang?”

“In the manor waiting for you.” He'll have to relocate his things sometime, but not now, today he just want to rest and right his wrongs and. 'If I didn't knew you were Ling I'd hook up with you.' He smacked his own head, an action he regretted instantly, what and idiot! Ling wasn't angry because he was down to fuck, he was angry because he got rejected, he needs to fix it and soon. "You ok?"

"Huh? Ah, yes. Let's see Master and be done with this." They walked to the dojo, chatting about different things, and when they talked about music Xiong mentioned how he wanted him to play a pipa just like him, to which Greed joked saying he'd rather play a ruan. Xiong mocked threatening to choke him if he chose that instrument and in turn Greed provoked him, ending in both not-quite-sparring-more-like-wrestling. In the end it was Master Xuan who found them.

"You boys are having fun, should I join?" He said deadpan as he unsheathed his sword. They froze for bare seconds and sat in seiza position.

"We're good."
"We're fine."

"Looks like you finished your test, good job Greed." Now was the perfect time to make him heal his palms, Greed got up and approached their Master, showing his palms to him, urging him to clean his mess. Master Xuan just looked unfazed at his bandages before looking at him straight in the eye. "You have your bagua beads, you can heal yourself."

"And how do I do that?"

"Praying hands." He said as he moved away from them, Xiong followed their teacher and Greed stood there, he did as instructed and voila, shockwaves emerged from his hands, more precisely his wounds, and he could feel the cut closing. Greed stared at his hands in awe, admiring the speed in which the beads activate, it's the closest he will have to his former regenerating ability and he'll take it.

The first one to greet him in the manor was Bang following by Ran, who told him to take a bath as soon as possible, and who is he to counteract the lady? He did just that once he got to his former room, and when he went to the living room to lazy about Greed was surprised to find Yang there expecting him.

"I want to talk."

"Then talk."

"You are worthy of love, and I don't want to hear 'buts', you deserve it and even if you think you don't, it's here and it's real and we all love you! So please don't think you're a monster, please master Hengli." His first reaction was shock, he didn’t expect to be lectured by Yang, and then he was touched, after all that he said Yang still reached out for him, and to hear a measurement that yes, people love him, specially from Yang, meant a lot.

"After all that I said you still latch on me?" Yang rested his arms, still not getting rid of his angry
pout, and sat closer to him.

"You're good person, because what monster save a dying, disabled orphan he sees in the wild? The same with Dolfu, the same with your late friends of Debiyu's Nesu! I bet they all thought you are an amazing person and I do too. You changed all our lives for the better, so when...so" He sobbed and it tugged at his heartstrings, it's the first time he feels like this. "So when you say you don't deserve our love, it hurts! It hurts because you give us so much for nothing and it feels like I'm giving nothing in return when you deserve the world!" Yang can't control his tears anymore, his throat is hurting, he has an idea why but he’s not sure.

"You're the best thing that happened in my life, I don't know where I would be without you, so please, don't say you aren't worthy of love...." The kid gave a final wail before sobbing uncontrollably on his lap, Greed felt something run down his cheek and picked it up, only to wet his fingers, the former sin watched his hand awestruck, contemplating when was the last time he cried, then he looked at the kid responsible for said reaction.

"What kind of deal?" The white figure in front of him didn't move, instead it remained in it's place with that wide grin plastered on it's face.

"You'll live again, but as a human. What do you say?" That's too good to be true, Greed was in his fair share of deals to know there's more to it.

"And what is your condition, because I doubt you'll be giving something so important in a silver plate." It's grin got more twisted, and something reached to the core of his being, a kind of raw primitive fear that was gnawing on his mind.

"Someone will lose theirs, so, do we have a deal?"

"I know how this works, if I accept you'll kill someone I care about, know what? You can get your deal and stick it, I don't want it." The thing laughed, and it somewhat felt familiar, something about it's voice, it's masculine voice: loud, deep, boisterous.
“I didn’t expect you to answer like this, you really are different! And to think you came out of him.” It chuckled a bit more before composing itself, so it was a test, and he passed. “I'll give you life, but you’ll have to start anew.” This is a better condition, Greed shrugged, it's the best he'll get, he was satisfied dying that way, it guaranteed that the people he came to care about continued on living, he's offering a fresh start and he won't complain. When the homunculus was about to shake it's hand it avoided him. "Huh, you're not curious to why I'm doing this?"

Greed looked around, that is good question, but he has a reason not to mind. “Instead of wondering why I'm living I rather just live y’know? I won't lie, knowing the truth might be tempting,” he stopped to think about everything he can do with his new life, the new people he'll get to meet, the old ones he'll get to reconnect, and it drew a smile on his face. "But there are things more important than that." He was confident in his answer, and seeing the white thing without words was great.

"And I thought none of you got that!" It was exhilarated and took Greed aback, another test on top of the former? What the hell?

"Who are you?"

"I go by many names, I'm God, I'm the World, I'm the Universe, I'm All, I'm One, and." it got his hand and slowly Greed saw it take his form when he have the complete shield, simultaneously he heard a sound in the door, as if something was being engraved in it. "I'm you."

He looked at Yang who is finally stopping and is now hiccuping and he smiled, he doesn't know if Truth is watching or not but he found one of them, someone who's very important to him. He shook the boy since he was a good time in this uncomfortable position, and when Yang looked up he patted his head. "Thanks Yang, I needed to hear that." The kid got on a more comfortable position and Greed got up, he'll have to dry his face.

"Your pants, sorry."
"Don't worry, it's leather."

"What idiot wears leather in summer?"

"This idiot." Greed went to grab some tissues for both of them and while Yang cleaned his face his eyes went to the phone and he almost shouted. Ling! He needs to talk to him.

"Yang can you give me some space? I know we just had a bonding moment but I need to make a call and I want some privacy." The boy raised an eyebrow.

"Is it Ling?"

"Yes it's Ling, now go play with Dolfu, it's missing you." He waved his hand dismissively and Yang exited the house, now to confront Ling, he needs to let the princeling knows he's fuckable, and gorgeous, and that he knows he's head over heels for him. Sounds like a good plan. He picked the phone and hoped for Ling to pick it up.

"Hello." How much he missed his velvety voice.

"Hey princeling! How're doing?"

"Greed? Shouldn't you be in the mountain?"

He smirked. "Just passed a test, now I'm free from that place."
"That's nice to hear, now we can talk again." He can feel the happiness in his voice, and now that he knows his feelings, he can guess why.

"So what are you doing now? You must be free right?" Ling hummed.

"Reading some reports, and it's almost time for dinner." His partner singsonged and he chuckled, some things never change. "What do you want to talk to me?"

"I like your ass." Ling froze on the other side, he froze. What the hell he just said? That is so uncouthly of him, this should be reserved for bed. Which idiot he got this from? Is it Envy trying to fuck with him? 'Compliment her looks!' Envy advised Wrath. 'You have a nice butt.' Wrath told his girlfriend before getting a well deserved slap in the face.

Even after death he fucks with his life.

"Greed?"

"Ling, I." He stuttered, why is he stuttering? His brain is panicking. "Ignore what I just said!" And he slammed the phone, Greed huffed and slumped on the floor, running a hand on his hair in frustration, what is wrong with him? Why he just acted like a tween who never talked to people before?

Great, just great, he doubts Ling will want to talk to him now.

------------------

He didn't know what to make out of his conversation with Greed earlier, he must admit he liked the compliment – as inappropriate as it was – and his antics were odd, he never thought a sweet talker
like him could get nervous like that. He wants to believe it's because Greed is so head over heels for him he can't act properly, but he knows it's wishful thinking, an indulgent thought nonetheless.

Ling closed the doors connecting his room to the bathroom and moved the phone next to his bed, not near his face, that's beyond foolish. The Emperor threw himself on his bed, he is tired and clan disputes proved to be the most annoying thing he could ever solve, his eyes are tired from reading all those reports.

Ling looked to the side, head still burrowed into the pillows, and stared at the lacquer box and note on his bedside dresser, he knows very well what this is and blushed at the prospect of using the item inside, his body, however, was very eager and made sure to make him know. His curiosity was taking the best of him and now that he's alone it's the perfect opportunity to test said item, and such he got up, using his arms to lift his body, Ling sat on his bent knees and took the small ornate box from his dresser, following by taking the note.

He knows his vision is tired, but his curiosity is speaking louder and he absolutely needs to read the note, that, after a few words, he discovered are instructions on how to use his new..., his new..... object, yes, that is also a way to put it. The young emperor put the note back on his dresser and put his attention solely on the box, he stood there looking at the thing accusingly, feeling his resolve to use it crumble the more he stared at the thing, like there's an invisible force not wanting him to open the box.

Ling sighed, feeling his entire body deflate, Feng is right, he really acts like an immature tween, the teen breathed deeply to relax and made his mind, he'll do it, but only because his sexual tension might get in the way. He opened the lid, barely catching a glimpse of his new toy before the phone started to ring and he almost threw the thing in a panicked rush. His heart was racing, as if he was just found doing something inappropriate, slowly, Ling crawled to the other side of his bed to reach the phone, he calmed himself down first before picking it up.

"He-Hello?"

"Hey Ling." Ugh his voice, his deep, smooth voice sent a bolt of excitement to the pit of his stomach. He needs to relieve this tension, again. "sorry for what happened earlier." He sounded apologetic and it helped calm him down. Earlier? Does he mean when he complimented his butt? But he liked that.
"You're not making fun of me are you?" He made sure to sound pouty, Greed tsked on the other side, seemingly unsure of what to do.

"Of course not! I mean, don't get me wrong you do have a nice ass, but that wasn't a very gallant thing to do." He can feel Greed cupping his neck. Before Ling could even notice he had a big smile across his face, yes! He likes him, he-

Wait it can be lust.

Anyway, he knew Greed isn't depraved like Feng suggested. Take that Feng.

"Surely you like something else beside my nethers." He said half-jokingly, half-expecting that he will say something about his looks, or his personality.

"Huh, yeah, I find you good looking." Greed mentioned nonchalantly, but Ling could grasp a hint of a flirty tone in that and his heartbeat again started to accelerate.

"Really?" God he sounds too hopeful. "Then you've read my letters?" The other side became silent for a while and his nervousness decide to show itself.

"Yeah, took me more time than I'd want to understand them, but. Sorry for taking so long to notice." Greed apologized again and he felt like chuckling, this feels familiar. Instead, Ling's hope skyrocketed, why else would he say those things to him if he didn't felt the same way he does?

"Then this mean-"
"Ling, I need to tell you something." Greed's tone was grave, and Ling’s enthusiasm was curbed to the ground.

"What is it?"

"I discovered my family are conscious. But they can't deliberately control my body, I, I'm doing what I can to make sure they don't hurt people, but I'm afraid the-"

"Greed, don't worry, you promised me remember? And if they try to do anything funny, I'll make sure they won't." Ling won't say he's afraid, more like wary, but he won't show this to Greed, he needs him right now, and if he can reassure his partner, he will.

"You're so cool, I love an assertive man." He felt like squealing, he's hitting on him, hitting on him! Ling threw himself in the bed, feeling all the weariness melting away. The young emperor can't believe this is happening, after all these months his love was finally reciprocated, he won't be alone this new year and he just. Can’t. Wait.

"Compliment me more." Ling rolled, supporting himself on his elbows taking on a playful stance, he heard Greed chuckling on the other side of the line and he giggled in response.

"Let's see." He started, provoking Ling in a coquettish tone. "You're beautiful, intelligent, resourceful, and too fine a wine for a fool like me." No, why he had to say this? If anyone is the fine wine it's him. This more gloom side of him must have been brought by this sudden revelation, like that day with the rapier. He knows what to do.

"Don't say that! This may be true." He heard a small 'hey!'. "But there's no one in this world I want more than you." He's saying the truth, his heart wants Greed and no one else, and if there's one thing he wants his confession to do, is to get his feelings through him.

There was a long pause on his side, and then. "And I know 'want' better than anyone."
"Then?" He can't contain his smile anymore, Greed likes him, he really likes him!

"Yes, I accept your feelings." Yes! "And Ling? Two months, you better have your music ready, I can't want for you to play flute. You better make your clan name justice." He purred in the end and that's when he realized what he meant, truly meant, he felt a fuse of excitement run through his body and face, his entire face got red. Just now he had to use a double entendre.

"Greed!"

"What?"

"You just said how inappropriate you were!" And just when he had recovered from his lust, can't he be any more of a pervert?

"But that was because you were in your office, now you're in bed, I can say these things. Can you blame me? You're pretty hot." His husky voice enticed a little gasp out of him, and he regretted immediately. "Was that a gasp I heard?"

"No!" He started to laugh, deep and sexy and ugh he hates him!

"Don't worry, two months, remember that, we'll be seeing each other then." His consultant reassured him and this managed to calm him down somewhat, if only because of his last words, they caught him off guard.

Now more calm, Ling smiled. "Yes."

Chapter End Notes
and after this Master Xuan forced Greed to write every bad thing he has ever done and counteract by writing a good thing instead in the next page. :v

and Ling asked for Feng's help regarding relationship and sex. xD

If you liked the chapter leave a comment or kudos, they mean a lot and thanks for my readers for your kind comments.
Also thank you guests who are always leaving me kudos, you guys rock

Oh, I have a twitter if you want, I'm @OnoMikki, just ring me up if you're a reader of this fic and I'll start to post updates on twitter, I may even post the images of the characters, now that I have a tablet.
(be warned that my twitter is a pokemon/Leon spamfest :V)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!