Secret Route Unlocked

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>M/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>人渣反派自救系统 - 墨香铜臭</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Liú Qīnggē/Shěn Yuán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Shěn Yuán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Fake/Pretend Relationship, Original Character(s), Humor, Romance, Sharing a Bed, Handcuffed Together, Everyone Thinks They're Together, Unrequited love for Luo Binghe, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Eventual Happy Ending, Don't copy to another site</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Secret Route Unlocked

by [Kyogre](http://archiveofourown.org/)

Summary

Getting out of an arranged marriage by pretending to date? Check. Thrown into a trial while tied together? Check. Forced to share a room and a bed? Check. Kiss under the influence? Check!

Every tired, cliche romance trope possible as applied to liushen.

feat. Luo Binghe's journey through unrequited feelings and making one (1) actual friend
Chapter 1: Arc 1 - The Enemy is His Fiancée

When Liu Qingge caught sight of the young woman sitting next to his sister, he actually cringed and swayed in place, as if fighting the impulse to run.

Fascinating!

Shen Qingqiu, who had arranged to ‘visit Qi-shimei’ specifically then with the hopes of seeing this special event, felt very pleased with his own foresight. His timing had been perfect.

Like any sect worth its name, Cang Qiong excelled at spreading gossip. No matter what happened, no matter how small or mundane the news, all twelve peaks would be aware by the end of the next meal, or else the disciples would kneel in front of their halls for failing the great gossip legacy of their predecessors.

That was why the entire sect had known almost as soon as she arrived that a young woman had come looking for Liu Qingge. He had naturally been absent at the time, but instead of being discouraged, she had taken up temporary residence at Xian Shu Peak while waiting for him to return.

Young women having an interest in Bai Zhan’s War God was not precisely unexpected or even rare, but this one had a special ace card — her Duanmu family was close to the Liu family. In other words, she was a childhood friend!

In fact, she was a childhood sweetheart who’d had her heart set on ‘Liu-gege’ for years.

...Fishing for this information had netted Shen Qingqiu some very odd looks from Mu Qingfang — because, apparently, the original goods Shen Qingqiu had relentlessly mocked Liu Qingge about it when they both ran into this Duanmu Yao at the Immortal Sword Conference before last — and a gentle ‘suggestion’ to visit Wei Qingwei and his possession detecting sword again. Touching upon things related to the shared backstory was dangerous indeed.

But he couldn’t help it! This was an event completely absent in the novel, since Liu Qingge would have long since passed away in the original work.
Seeing that Great Master Liu square off against a love-struck maiden, who could resist? Not this former reader, certainly.

So when he heard that Liu Qingge had returned, Shen Qingqiu decided that it was the perfect time to bring some tea leaves over to Xian Shu and immediately hurried over, excuse in hand and faithful favorite disciple in tow.

He had actually beaten Liu Qingge there by just enough time for Luo Binghe to brew the excuse tea for his master, Qi Qingqi, Liu Mingyan, and the infamous Duanmu Yao herself. They had just taken their first sips when the great War God stalked into the sitting room.

And gave the reaction of a man confronted by his worst fear. Who knew Great Master Liu had fears at all?

Shen Qingqiu hid his smile behind his teacup. Qi Qingqi shot him a disgusted look. Liu Mingyan closed her eyes and appeared to pray — for patience, or maybe for her brother.

“Liu-gege!” Duanmu Yao exclaimed, rising to her feet with an adoring smile. “Liu-gege, you’re here!”

In a flash, she darted around the couch to appear at Liu Qingge’s side. Shen Qingqiu’s eyebrows climbed as she proceeded to fearlessly latch on to his arm and beam up at him.

Liu Qingge’s expression was like quickly cracking stone, by contrast, both frozen and unable to withstand the assault. It was funny... but also a little pitiful. This man really had nothing but fighting in his brain. Having his sword arm suddenly embraced between the soft mounds of an enthusiastic beauty, he was completely out of his depth.

Not particularly subtly, but far less forcefully than usual, he tried to tug his arm free.

Duanmu Yao’s grip only tightened. Vaguely, Shen Qingqiu could tell that her cultivation was actually quite high, so it wouldn’t be possible to get free without an outright struggle. Looking up at Liu Qingge with a fixed, unwavering smile, she pressed even closer until she was all but leaning her head against his shoulder. ...This sweet couple gesture let off an incredible amount of intimidating pressure. This opponent was no joke.
Well. Trying to seduce or maybe intimidate Liu Qingge into a relationship would indeed take great fighting spirit.

“It’s been so long! You must have been busy with your duties, Liu-gege,” Duanmu Yao gushed. “Last time she came out of closed door cultivation, Auntie said she hasn’t seen you in years. But she was very proud when I told her about all your achievements!”

Liu Qingge twitched one eyebrow slightly. Seemingly understanding the meaning behind his look, Duanmu Yao pursed her lips and averted her eyes.

“...And she scolded me for not advancing my cultivation enough,” she admitted sulkily. The only thing missing was scuffing her toe against the ground. Even though Shen Qingqiu estimated her to be well over the vague maybe-20 age she looked, she definitely hit the cute aesthetic hard. “When she was my age, Auntie had already brought down a demonic sect and found her fated rival...”

The dull tone of the last remark in particular spoke of a reprimand heard far too many times.

Unsurprising. The ‘auntie’ she was referring to, the Liu clan matriarch, was incredibly fierce — the arc where she descended from her secluded cultivation to pass judgement on Luo Binghe as her daughter’s beau had been incredibly popular through her sheer force of presence. A not so small group of the truly degenerate had called for a mother-daughter sandwich.

Her son and daughter had inherited Liu Qishuang’s heroic temperament. Without a drop of sympathy, Liu Qingge nodded in agreement with his mother. Liu Mingyan mirrored him.

This girl clearly didn’t want a rival, she wanted a husband, Shen Qingqiu thought. But unfortunately, she was fishing in the entirely wrong pond.

On the other hand, if she had the mother’s approval — well, well, well...

Qi Qingqi kicked him under the take, shooting Shen Qingqiu another disgusted look. Had his spectator’s interest been showing too obviously?

“But you know, Liu-gege,” Duanmu Yao went on, biting her lip, “I also asked Auntie about our
Shen Qingqiu could have sworn Liu Qingge’s hair stood on end, his ponytail bristling like the real tail of a spooked cat. “Focus on your cultivation,” he cut her off abruptly and obviously.

But that word she started to say, the one that made Liu Qingge do something very much like panic...

Just like before, Duanmu Yao only tightened her grip on his arm and continued to smile, bland and unwavering. “I asked her about our en-gage-ment,” she pronounced loudly and distinctly.

Shen Qingqiu flipped his fan open, hiding his face just in time. Fine tremors ran through his shoulders as he struggled to hide his laughter.

Engagement? Engagement!! Liu Qingge was engaged, to this meng-selling girl?

His eyes darted to Liu Mingyan, to check her reaction for comparison, but what he saw made some of Shen Qingqiu’s amusement drain away. It was hard to judge her expression behind her veil, but her eyebrows were furrowed in a way that spoke of genuine internal conflict as she stared fixedly down at the hard wood of the tea table.

Although Duanmu Yao was a good amount older than her, Shen Qingqiu had somewhat assumed they were friends, being two young female cultivators of close families. After all, hadn’t Duanmu Yao stayed at Xian Shu Peak with Liu Mingyan for the last while?

And yet, that wasn’t an expression of support at all.

“That’s why I came to see you,” Duanmu Yao continued, when Liu Qingge didn’t try to object again. “Because Auntie gave her go ahead.”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes snapped back to her.

“The wedding will be in three months,” she confirmed.
Wait.

What kind of sudden development was this?

“Yao-jie, that’s going too far,” Liu Mingyan spoke up quickly — since Liu Qingge didn’t seem capable of it, his entire body stiff.

Finally stepping away from him, Duanmu Yao reached into her sleeve and pulled out a folded paper that she held out to Liu Qingge. “It’s Auntie’s decision,” she said. “It’s all in this letter.”

When he reached for it, Liu Qingge seemed to almost miss, his hand unsteady. As he unfolded the letter and slowly read the contents, Shen Qingqiu watched his expression — the way he went pale and looked about to break out in cold sweat.

“Brother?” Liu Mingyan prompted.

“It’s,” Liu Qingge forced out the words, “true.”

He didn’t say anything else, only staring at the letter, as if hoping it would somehow change contents.

Liu Mingyan turned, nearly glaring. “Yao-jie, what did you say to her? There’s no need to rush.”

“Don’t misunderstand, I didn’t ask Auntie to set a date,” Duanmu Yao shot back, her pretty face creasing unhappily for the first time. “It’s just... I asked her for pointers like usual—” which meant a practice match, “—and well, you haven’t heard yet, but I’ve finally mastered Tian Xing. Father even confirmed me as the successor. I guess Auntie decided there’s no point in waiting anymore.”

Oh, the Tian Xing sword. Right, Duanmu family... It finally started to come back to Shen Qingqiu.
This had been a thing in the novel. This cultivation family’s claim to fame was that they had been entrusted with a powerful sword of legend, Tian Xing. They also practiced a unique sword style... or something like that.

More importantly in the context of a stallion novel’s setting, one of Luo Binghe’s wives had been from this clan. Not this girl, thankfully, but a relative. A sister, Shen Qingqiu thought, remembering the complex that Duanmu... Yi? Yin? had about her more talented older sister who went into seclusion because of grief — over her fiance’s death, it seemed.

That Duanmu Yin? Ying? had ended up mastering Tian Xing just in time to use its spirit sealing properties to help Luo Binghe get the Xin Mo under control when he was sent on a rampage (again). Unfortunately, the mystic blade broke from the strain of the feat.

But if it was the older sister who took the sword instead, and she married Liu Qingge... Shen Qingqiu glanced behind him at his favored disciple, standing behind his chair with an expression of polite disinterest in the ongoing drama. Immediately noticing his master’s attention on him, Luo Binghe smiled and leaned in a little in anticipation of any request Shen Qingqiu might make.

Shaking his head slightly, Shen Qingqiu turned away.

“You mastered Tian Xing?” Liu Mingyan repeated, her tone oddly troubled. “But even so, three months is too soon.”

“Is there something to wait for?” Duanmu Yao shot back. “This was decided long ago by our families. It’s our duty.” Her lips thinned unhappily, as she looked at Liu Mingyan and Liu Qingge with a hint of being wronged. “Why are you so against this? Is there someone better for this than me? I will do my best to make Liu-gege happy, so can’t you give me a chance?”

In terms of making Liu Qingge happy, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t make any judgement about her capabilities. But she was right, her other credentials were the best suited. Their families were close, her own cultivation was certainly not low, she had even mastered a mystic weapon of great power. Whether they were returned or not, she had tender feelings for her fiance, and she didn’t back down even when faced with his unpersonable demeanor.

As far as arranged marriages went, it was... a good match. Such things were exceedingly common in this setting. To protest too much was unreasonable.

It was all logical, very logical.
However, what was with this atmosphere? This setup? Wasn’t it basically ‘reluctant beauty pressured against her will?’ Maybe it was because, in the end, he was a person from the modern era, but Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help feeling like something was squirming in his guts as he watched this scene play out.

In person, it wasn’t nearly as amusing as he had anticipated.

“I... understand,” Liu Qingge spoke up, with great effort. His face was almost ghostly white. “I will —”

Shen Qingqiu closed his fan with a loud snap that completely shattered the tension.

He hadn’t really known what he was doing, but the bewildered, hopeful look he received from Liu Qingge made him absolutely certain he needed to do something.

This was for the good of the plot and Luo Binghe’s future harem, he told himself.

“Yes. The old ‘fake lover’ excuse — it was the only thing Shen Qingqiu could think of. Anyone who knew Liu Qingge would of course call bullshit immediately, where would this man get a cultivation partner? But judging by the way her eyes widened in shock and her mouth hung open, Duanmu Yao bought it hook, line, and sinker.

“You?! That’s why you came?!” she stammered in disbelief.
...Wait.

It... it wasn’t entirely unreasonable. Shen Qingqiu hadn’t been subtle about his timing, and from her perspective, what reason did he have to be there for their drama? But it would be a different matter if he was actually involved.

‘Miss, you’ve misunderstood! This old man just came to spectate!’ Shen Qingqiu wailed mentally, while his expression froze in its usual bland mask.

“Sh-Shizun?! Then you and Liu-shishu are like that after all?” Luo Binghe added oil to the fire, staring at Shen Qingqiu with a face of supreme betrayal. There were, horrifyingly, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. “I knew it, you were always acting so close...”

‘No, Binghe, you’re misunderstanding too! This teacher is trying to help you — if this girl gives up and goes into seclusion to sulk, your future wife (one of them) will be able to get that mystic sword...’

But unexpectedly, it was Liu Mingyan who dealt the final blow. She had been staring intensely at Shen Qingqiu since he spoke up, but now, brows furrowing, she seemed to come to a decision.

“That’s right,” she said, her tone entirely too steady for the misleading thing she was saying. “My brother and Shen-shibo... have become very close.”

‘Don’t say it like that!’

And then.

The worst, most terrible of all.

The System chimed in his mind.

[Liu Qingge flag obtained] it reported. [Secret route unlocked]
Excuse me, what? What?!

What flag?! What secret route?! Had everyone, this entire world, gone mad?

“You’re wrong! There’s nothing like that!” Liu Qingge, who had been just as stunned as Shen Qingqiu, finally managed to regain the power of speech. Unfortunately, by this point, his absolutely true protests sounded like a poor attempt at covering up the scandal. His frantic glare darted between his sister, Luo Binghe, and Shen Qingqiu. “There’s nothing between us!”

By the time he looked at Duanmu Yao, the girl was trembling with rage and tears. Whatever she saw in Liu Qingge’s expression seemed to only make her more certain of her mistaken assumption.

She whirled toward Shen Qingqiu, gnashing her teeth. “It’s because of you! I heard about you, Shen Qingqiu! You... you scum! I won’t let you get away with, with seducing Liu-gege!”

Turning on her heel, she fled.

“Ah,” Shen Qingqiu finally managed a sound, futilely lifting one hand as if to stop her.

...What just happened?

The one true spectator remaining, Qi Qingqi, smirked. “So it’s like that? You guys should have just told us,” she drawled. “I’ll let the sect head know about this... happy development.”

~.~.~

It had taken a while to calm down the tearful Luo Binghe, which required first seeing themselves off Xian Shu Peak, since Qi Qingqi’s mocking didn’t help at all. Liu Qingge had vanished at some point in the chaos — probably for the best. Frankly, Shen Qingqiu had been more than fed up with the entire business, so he had done what he always did.

He pretended it had never happened.
So what if Liu Qingge couldn’t look him in the face and perpetually stared at some point over his shoulder when it was time for the monthly ritual of cleaning out his meridians? So what if maybe Liu Qingge’s fingers twitched slightly when he grasped Shen Qingqiu’s wrist, as if he could barely stand touching him?

So what if Bai Zhan’s ruffians began to act more obnoxious and belligerent than ever, invading Qing Jing Peak over and over again to make a mess of his forest and his cute disciples?

So what if Luo Binghe never quite stopped sending Shen Qingqiu unhappy, slightly forlorn looks?

So what if Qi Qingqi was clearly not above gossip, no matter how much she rolled her eyes at Shen Qingqiu when she thought he was being nosy, and thus every Peak Lord was struggling not to snicker at their next meeting because they had all heard the juicy details of the ‘Shen Qingqiu, that scum, seduced our fair maiden Liu and broke up the engagement set up by his family with a nice cultivator girl of noble standing’ special show?

So what if the System dropped some ominous thing and then never mentioned it again?

So what? Did Shen Qingqiu care?

......Yes. He did, actually, but like hell he’d show it! All these things, he could tolerate and hope they would go away after a while. Before too long, some new scandal would replace this mess in everyone’s minds, he had thought.

What he did not account for was Liu Mingyan one day turning up at Qing Jing Peak and requesting to see him.

Closing his eyes, Shen Qingqiu did his best not to groan. He couldn’t have missed the way Ming Fan kept glancing at her with questions in his eyes as he led her to the pavilion where Shen Qingqiu was waiting. Nor did he miss the throngs of disciples that gathered along the path to catch a glimpse of the newest round of hot material for the grapevine.

A few months ago, he might have worried about how this would be interpreted in light of the original goods Shen Qingqiu’s poor reputation with women. Now, he knew the rumors would be all about another man.

Was this an improvement? It didn’t feel like one.
The look Luo Binghe shot Liu Mingyan as he set down her cut of tea was frigid and distinctly confrontational. This is your future wife, Binghe! Another thing gone completely wrong, Shen Qingqiu sighed internally. He took a long sip of the warm tea to soothe his nerves.

“Liu-shizhi, it’s a pleasure to have you here,” he said, setting down his cup, “but this teacher wonders about the reason for your visit.”

Unfazed by his bluntness — appreciating it if anything — Liu Mingyan nodded in acknowledgment. “This disciple... would like to ask for your help,” she admitted. “Shen-shibo, do you remember what happened at Xian Shu peak with Yao-jie?”

‘How could I forget?’ Shen Qingqiu wondered sourly.

“...Please!” Suddenly, she bowed her head. “Don’t clear up that misunderstanding! Please help me cancel my brother’s engagement!”

Oh.

Well, he hadn’t seen that one coming...

Luo Binghe bristled and glared at her. “How can you ask Shizun to do something like that?” he demanded. “Why should Shizun lie and let that woman drag his reputation through the mud just for —”

“Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu said shortly, making his disciple immediately fall silent, sulking. “I don’t mind lying to help Liu-shidi,” he went on. “But I suspect there is a reason you are here and he is not. Is this really what he wants?”

Furrowing her brow in determination, Liu Mingyan squared her shoulders and admitted, “No, he never asked me to do this. He believes in duty, and he greatly admires our mother in particular. If it’s her orders, he’ll do it even if he doesn’t want to.”

Shen Qingqiu nodded, having expected this. “Then, since this is a matter of your family, does an outsider like me have the right to interfere?” he said. “If that’s his decision... Are the two of them
really that mismatched? She didn’t seem like a bad girl.”

Pushy, but how else would she get close to Liu Qingge? If they were to be married, at least one of them needed to take the initiative.

“They don’t match at all. You haven’t seen them interact much, but it only gets worse the more time they spend together. But that’s not the reason,” Liu Mingyan said. Finally reaching for her cup, she rested her fingers against the sides and ran her thumbs over the rim. The tea rippled lightly, disrupting the reflection of her veiled face on its surface.

Shen Qingqiu waited, letting her gather her thoughts.

“Our family... wanted to arrange a marriage for me as well,” she revealed, her tone quiet and subdued. “But my brother strongly opposed it. He said that... I should be able to choose my own path and who I travel that path with. In the end, Mother and the elders were unwilling to continue fighting him over it, so they just let it go.”

That was new. This was a character detail that hadn’t been in the novel at all. Although... choosing her own path and who she traveled that path with certainly suited Liu Mingyan’s strong, resolute character and the small flash of romantic softness that threaded through her strength.

Yes, she had even said something like that, hadn’t she? ‘You are the one I choose,’ she’d said to Liu Binghe when she gave him the lovers’ token sword tassel.

If only Bing-ge had chosen her in return! But alas, a stallion novel and its pandering couldn’t commit to a single winning love interest.

“I’m sure that’s what my brother really believes in his heart, and what he really wants,” Liu Mingyan said, looking up and meeting Shen Qingqiu’s gaze. “He protected me back then, and I want to protect him now. But... I still lack that strength. That’s why...”

This... Shen Qingqiu felt a little thrill of excitement. This was almost perfectly a scene of a beauty asking for help from the hero! So noble! So lovely!

“This teacher will lend you his strength,” he agreed before he even realised.
Liu Mingyan beamed — under her veil. But he could tell her entire countenance lit up with relief and gratitude. Truly, a magnificent sight. Sighing to himself in satisfaction, Shen Qingqiu lazily waved his fan.

At his shoulder, Luo Binghe made a face, then stood up straight like a soldier volunteering for a suicide mission. “If that is Shizun’s will, then this disciple will do his utmost to help!” he declared staunchly.

Shen Qingqiu patted him on the shoulder. “You just focus on staying away from those Bai Zhan ruffians,” he said. “Remember, you can just run away. They’ll probably be even more unruly for a while because of this.”

“Shizun, how can I run when they’re insulting you and attacking our Qing Jing Peak?” Luo Binghe protested, his lip jutting out mulishly. “They were saying that you don’t deserve Liu-shishu! That you corrupted him! How can Shizun possibly be unworthy of someone? Shizun is the most outstanding—”

Liu Mingyan set her cup down onto the table with a dull, resounding clunk. It was empty, even though Shen Qingqiu hadn’t caught a single glimpse of her veil shifting.

“That, I can help with,” she declared. Her eyes narrowed dangerously. “The next they come, I’ll set them straight.”

Of that, Shen Qingqiu had little doubt. Those fighting-obsessed meat heads, confronted by their master’s beautiful younger sister? They’d collapse from an existential crisis just trying to figure out whether and how to fight her, because they knew nothing else. However...

“I’m afraid they don’t come on a schedule, and Binghe won’t be able to send you a message in time when they arrive,” Shen Qingqiu pointed out.

“Then I will come every day,” Liu Mingyan decided.

Qi Qingqi would kill him. “Your training?” Shen Qingqiu brought up weakly.
“I will train here. With Luo-shixiong,” she said calmly. “After all, during the invasion, he won his match.” Her eyebrows slanted down. “I lost mine. And now, even Yao-jie has mastered Tian Xing... I won’t fall behind.”

That was hardly a fair comparison. After all, Luo Binghe was the protagonist! And furthermore, his opponent had been just a demon elder, while Sha Hualing was a demon saint and their leader. Even with his halo, Shen Qingqiu wasn’t particularly sure what Luo Binghe’s odds against her would have been.

However, he didn’t want to say something to undermine his disciple’s accomplishments. So instead, Shen Qingqiu settled for, “Then I will leave him in your care, Liu-shizhi.”

It was settled. That day, over tea and sweets, a terrible accord was born.

~.~.~
Choosing

Notes: I’m just going to warn everyone now — I don’t really have a clear plot for this story, so it’s a bit of a meandering mess and the pacing is all over the place. This pairing is also a bit hard because there’s not much (non-pining) content...

~.~.~

Chapter 2: Choosing

The trait that Liu Qingge hated the most was indecisiveness. He had always strived to act swift and sure, without any uncertainty or doubt. If there was a problem, he faced it head on. If he didn’t like something, he rejected it. If he made a mistake, he acknowledged it.

So, frankly, he was pretty furious with himself.

What he needed to do was find Duanmu Yao, correct this misunderstanding, and prepare to be married. There was no doubt in his mind about the correct course of action. Their families, the elders, and his mother had all made it clear — this marriage was for everyone’s benefit. Even if Liu Qingge didn’t understand how or why, he would obey.

He knew the limits of his own wisdom. In the eyes of immortals, he was still a green sapling, and much of the world had yet to be unveiled to him, especially on the matters of relations between people. So even if he didn’t understand, a reason must have existed.

There should have been no doubt that this was the correct way.

And yet...

Shen Qingqiu hadn’t mentioned the incident at Xian Shu the first time Liu Qingge slunk in — there was no other way to describe it, pathetic as it was — to his bamboo hut for their regular appointment. He didn’t tease or prod or even sneer like he used to, only holding out his hand and waiting in patient silence as Liu Qingge cleared out his meridians.
He didn’t say anything the second time either, but by then Liu Qingge knew he couldn’t continue on this way. There was less than a month left.

“Why,” he forced the first word out with great effort, “did you lie back then? About me having a... a...”

A cultivation partner. A _lover_. Preposterous — there was no such thing and never had been. Duanmu Yao might have misunderstood, but Shen Qingqiu had started it by lying to her in the first place.

Liu Qingge could feel the other man look at him, and he could see his free hand tighten around his fan where it lay in his lap. But he refused to look up from glaring at his own fingers wrapped around Shen Qingqiu’s wrist, still carefully circulating qi through his meridians.

Shen Qingqiu made a thoughtful sound, but he did not answer directly. Instead, he asked, “Liu-shidi, what would happen if you really did have someone in your life?”

He didn’t see why it mattered, but Liu Qingge answered honestly. “It would be called off,” he said.

Their Liu clan might have been martially focused and rigid, but they were not cruel or inflexible. There had been a clause in the engagement contract from the start, allowing it to be broken off if either Liu Qingge or Duanmu Yao found someone else their heart was set on.

“Because your family would respect your choice,” Shen Qingqiu confirmed. He nodded, strands of dark hair slipping over his shoulder with the motion. “Do you... want to find someone?”

Liu Qingge’s fingers twitched around Shen Qingqiu’s wrist, and he quickly forced his concentration back to his task, ignoring the question. The other man didn’t press, and they sat in silence until he finished and slowly withdrew his qi.

“Liu-shidi,” Shen Qingqiu prompted again, as his hand was finally released.

Lips thinning, Liu Qingge glared bitterly down at their knees and polished wood of the tea table next to the couch. “...I don’t,” he finally forced out. “I’m fine the way I am.”
Shen Qingqiu lifted his fan and snapped it open, doubtlessly hiding his pleased smile — as if the way his eyes curved into happy crescents didn’t give him away. “I thought so,” he said. “It’s not that you’re unable to find someone, it’s that you’ve decided not to look, right? Then that’s your choice too, and it should be respected just as much.”

...Was it that simple? Dedicating his life to cultivation and battle was all Liu Qingge wanted. He didn’t feel like anything was missing. On the contrary, trying to force in something — someone — else felt nothing but painful and distressing.

There had to be a reason why everyone thought it was necessary. Something he didn’t understand yet.

And yet, even though it was the correct path, Liu Qingge couldn’t make himself object and stop Shen Qingqiu’s nonsense.

“I just can’t stand seeing my shidi get forced into something,” Shen Qingqiu continued blithely. “But just not wanting a partner might be hard to argue, so Shixiong will help you out this time! Just a little white lie should do the trick.”

The lie being that they were... partners.

Underhanded tricks were indeed Shen Qingqiu’s purview, but Liu Qingge didn’t sneer at the man this time. After all, he was genuinely trying to help. In fact, Liu Qingge wasn’t sure what to say at all. Finally looking up at Shen Qingqiu’s half-hidden face, he felt his own expression soften.

He should thank him, this person who tried to help him without being asked or asking anything in return.

...

—He couldn’t do it. Liu Qingge’s face flushed as he tried and couldn’t manage to push out the words.

“Liu-shidi?” Shen Qingqiu called out, his eyebrows rising in concern. He even went as far as to start fanning Liu Qingge lightly. His expression was still cool, but there was no doubt he understood the main gist, and that he was laughing at his junior martial brother.
Growling lowly, Liu Qingge waved his hand to bat the annoying fan away from himself. “She will have sent a message to my mother,” he warned, his mood growing grim and sour just thinking about it. “Mother will have planned to return for the... wedding date. When she finds out, she’ll come here.”

“To judge for herself if your chosen partner is worthy of you,” Shen Qingqiu nodded along in understanding, as if every word wasn’t underlining how ridiculous the situation was.

Yes, Liu Qishuang would doubtlessly come to judge whether Shen Qingqiu was worthy of her son.

Liu Qingge’s cheeks burned just thinking that.

How was he going to face her? Look her in the eye and hold his head up high, and say, ‘This is the one I choose. The one I l— lo—’

Impossible.

Shen Qingqiu had been watching him, no doubt inwardly laughing again at the expressions he was making and the shades of red he turned. He looked ready to offer more comforting pats, but his lighthearted enjoyment cooled slowly as Liu Qingge appeared increasingly torn.

“How was he going to face her? Look her in the eye and hold his head up high, and say, ‘This is the one I l— lo—’

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“Liu-shidi? Is it that terrible?” he wondered, his mouth and eyebrows tilting with wry amusement. “I suppose my reputation is not the best...”

“That’s not it,” Liu Qingge said sharply, almost offended. “Mother won’t care about that. She always makes her own judgements. But... But some find her... overwhelming.”

She had reduced to tears and sent running everyone from disciple hopefuls to clan elders to actual demons. Even if she didn’t suspect anything, even if she actually approved — and Lui Qingge truly wasn’t worried about that; this Shen Qingqiu had turned around his own abysmally low opinion, after all — Liu Qishuang wouldn’t make it easy for them. She had never gone easy on her children, Liu Qingge knew that better than anyone.

Could he really expect Shen Qingqiu to handle his mother’s brand of tough love? The man thought
riding a horse was too much work.

But Shen Qingqiu’s expression was calm and even anticipatory — judging by the faint twinkle in his eyes. “I look forward to meeting such an illustrious elder,” he said. Liu Qingge thought he meant it too.

...The thought of introducing him to Liu Qishuang didn’t bother him in itself, Liu Qingge found as he turned it over in his mind. The martial brother who had saved him from his own mistake, who didn’t hesitate to risk his cultivation and his life for a disciple, whom he trusted his back to in a hunt. Who liked to act cool and elegant while hiding his ridiculous, fussy nature — Liu Qishuang would smash right through all his pretenses and pin him within two sentences.

Liu Qingge’s lips curled. If anything, he was looking forward to that meeting.

For the first time in over two months, he felt himself begin to relax.

Yes, maybe this was for the best after all.

It was a dishonest method, but the feelings behind it were good. This way, he wouldn’t need to tie himself or Duanmu Yao down to a marriage neither of them could possibly be satisfied with. He could continue to give his all to Cang Qiong and his juniors, seniors and disciples here.

If he didn’t understand the wisdom of the elders’ decision, how could he carry it out correctly to begin with?

And even if someday he finally came to understand what guided his elders and mother into arranging the engagement in the first place, even if someday he came to agree with it and found in himself the longing for a companion... He would find them and win them over on his own, with his own strength and ability.

Yes, this was right.

Liu Qingge looked up only to find Shen Qingqiu hiding behind his fan again. He held it up higher when Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow at him.
Rather than smug or pleased with himself, as Liu Qingge had expected, he appeared almost flustered, his eyes darting away and then back to his shidi, narrowing in something like annoyance or accusation. As usual, Liu Qingge had no idea what was going on in his head.

But this time, it made Liu Qingge’s smirk deepen.

He really was looking forward to introducing Shen Qingqiu to his mother.

~.~.~

One day before the three months were out, Duanmu Yao returned to Bai Zhan Peak. In anticipation of his mother’s arrival shortly, Liu Qingge was present this time. His disciples hastened to inform him of her coming, and they had also taken the initiative to lead her to Bai Zhan’s least damaged hall to wait for him.

They even served her tea.

Liu Qingge was not unaware of the trouble they caused Qing Jing Peak, or that this trouble had only increased in the last three months. His disciples were not fond of Shen Qingqiu, their disdain cultivated over years of unsubtle tension and conflict. Like this, they were basically showing their clear preference — except that it went against what their master had supposedly chosen.

It seemed Shen Qingqiu was right, and these children were in need of more training.

The disciples who had been fluttering around Duanmu Yao, completely helpless in front of a beauty, paled when Liu Qingge strode in. Narrowing his eyes, he clearly conveyed a single command — ‘Scram.’ And scram they did.

“Liu-gege!” Duanmu Yao beamed at him. Sliding to the side, she patted the empty space next to her on the couch.

Liu Qingge ignored her and dropped into the chair opposite her, the tea table with one leg missing between them. “Why are you here?” he asked without preamble or subtlety.
She was too old and too used to him to react to just that, but Liu Qingge still tensed instinctively after every thing he said to Duanmu Yao, some part of him remembering and dreading her tears from their younger days. She had ended up crying just from something he said far too many times, like most other girls he had interacted with, and to this day Liu Qingge didn’t know how to determine where the breaking point would be.

Even more than Duanmu Yao’s tears, he remembered the way his mother would sometimes sigh afterwards and the feeling of shamed failure it would evoke in him.

Duanmu Yao’s smile wavered slightly. “Liu-gege...” she sighed. “Are you really going to break off our engagement? I... I know you don’t feel that way about me, but maybe once we’re married, once we spend some time together...”

“We’ve already spent time together,” Liu Qingge pointed out — correctly. “It’s been years. What are you expecting to change?”

Her shoulders stiffened, but Duanmu Yao continued to smile, no matter how forced. “But even so! You know, if you regret it later, I won’t take you back so easily,” she softened her tone into a lilt. “There’s plenty of fish in the sea. I’ll have a hundred suitors every day!”

“Good,” Liu Qingge said honestly, nodding.

It was good. He didn’t dislike her, and if she found someone else to direct her feelings toward, it would be for the best for everyone involved.

“Liu-gege!” she protested, the smile finally slipping off her face.

Unhappiness welled up in her eyes. A thin line formed between her brows, and her lips pursed together tightly, as if holding something back. It was an expression that made a faint shudder go down Liu Qingge’s spine, because it meant they were on the inescapable downhill path toward tears and recriminations.

Along with dread, Liu Qingge felt a strong sense of unwillingness. Everything he’d said was correct and the truth. Was he supposed to lie? Back down?

But he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to lie, and he didn’t want to back down.
It was always like this. Neither of them was willing to change or give ground, and instead every conversation, for years, became a test of Duanmu Yao’s endurance, ending in tears.

Couldn’t she at least get angry? Liu Qingge knew that she didn’t hesitate to throw her weight around with others, just like the way she barged into Xian Shu Peak to wait for him. Couldn’t she yell at him instead? If they fought, even if he won, he felt he would at least understand her a little.

But it was always like this.

“Liu-gege, how can you possibly go this far just for that... that scoundrel?” Duanmu Yao pleaded. There was no other word for it. Despite her attempts to sound demanding, her voice held an unmistakable plaintive note that grew more pronounced with every word. “I found out about him! He’s absolute scum! He’s not someone you could ever respect, much less... much less... He must be lying to you somehow!”

‘That is none of your concern,’ was what Liu Qingge intended to say.

“What do you know about Shen Qingqiu?” was what he said instead.

He said it sharply, his own words taking him aback. He was well aware of Shen Qingqiu’s reputation, after all, and so was the man himself. The past was undeniable, and it was no surprise that Duanmu Yao was concerned. Anyone who didn’t know Shen Qingqiu personally within this past year would have thought Liu Qingge had lost his mind to become close to him.

...So why did Liu Qingge feel a stab of irritation at hearing her say those things?

“I know what he was like. He never fooled me,” he went on — realizing even as he spoke that he was defending himself, something he had never felt necessary before. “Then and now is different.”

Duanmu Yao’s lips quivered, before she bit them furiously. “...I always knew you might not choose me. I know that,” she said. “But, for someone like that? I can’t understand that! I can’t accept that! Why?! Why would you choose him?”

Since he hadn’t ‘chosen’ Shen Qingqiu, there was no answer to this question.
But even so, it was annoying. What right did she have to act like no one would ever choose Shen Qingqiu?

“You don’t know anything about the person he is now,” Liu Qingge snapped.

Duanmu Yao paled, and there was a wet sheen in her eyes. She opened her mouth, but she couldn’t force out a single word. Her silence on the verge tears left Liu Qingge speechless in turn.

Casting her eyes down, she finally murmured, “That’s it? Already, you believe him that much more than me? You care about him that much more than me? All those years, and yet...”

The next thing he said would send her running away, Liu Qingge had learned from dint of painful experience. Even after knowing each other for over two decades, they always ended up like this.

What Liu Qingge hated most was hesitation. Letting out a short, sharp breath, he faced the inevitable.

“Go,” he said.

Duanmu Yao’s shoulders hitched. Spinning on her heel, she fled.

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Notes: I don’t want to chance coming up with Chinese names, since I don’t really understand them. So the name “Liu Qishuang” is shamelessly taken from The Villain’s White Lotus Halo (which is another fun novel, by the way, I recommend it). “Duanmu Yao” is also from another novel, but I forgot which one. I think it might have been Poison Genius Consort?

~.~.~

Chapter 3: Skill and Satisfaction

Three months had passed, and the day declared by the Liu matriarch had come. Liu Qingge should have been preparing to marry a beautiful young cultivator maiden. Instead, he was preparing to introduce his scum villain (fake) boyfriend to his mother.

Despite his excitement at meeting that fan-favorite character, Shen Qingqiu struggled to bite back a yawn.

Did they really need to do this at the crack of dawn? And to arrive at the Cang Qiong’s sect gate, at the bottom of the stairs up, right at dawn, they had naturally been forced to rise even earlier.

Liu Qingge had of course looked exactly as peerlessly beautiful as always when he showed up to drag Shen Qingqiu out of bed, practically kicking down the door of his bamboo hut. Liu Mingyan, in tow, was equally put together. And Luo Binghe, who insisted on coming along for... moral support perhaps, rose far too early every day to begin with.

Surrounded by these morning people, Shen Qingqiu felt somewhat resentful — and also rather sheepish. He had his pride as a peak lord and, furthermore, he was presenting himself to “the inlaws” so to speak. He could only hope he looked more awake than he felt.

He surreptitiously pinched himself under the cover of his wide sleeves and scanned the slowly dawning sky.

But even with this vigilance, he didn’t notice the slightest sign of Liu Qishuang’s approach.
Without even ruffling the leaves that had fallen onto the stone pathway overnight, she appeared in front of the gate. This was the power and skill of a Nascent Soul stage expert!

In that moment, the first rays of the rising sun angled over the mountains, chasing away the shadows and casting the path in a golden glow. The same golden light washed over Liu Qishuang’s figure, her simple white robes shining. Her sense of dramatic entrances was truly refined.

Compared to her daughter, who had the beauty of an immortal from the heavenly realm, the Liu clan matriarch was described as possessing the appearance of a legendary hero. Shen Qingqiu could now say that was an entirely accurate description. He could also say that Liu Qingge very much took after his mother. The slant of her eyebrows as her gaze swept over the four people who had come to welcome her, in particular, was exactly the same as the look Liu Qingge would wear when dropping into an ongoing battle.

Then her expression broke into a strong, warm smile, and Shen Qingqiu felt a sense of vertigo as he instinctively tried to imagine Liu Qingge doing the same.

“Yan-Yan, it’s so good of you to come greet Mother,” Liu Qishuang said to her daughter, spreading her arms as if welcoming a hug. Neither of the Liu women were the sort for excessive gestures, however, so Liu Mingyan only took a few steps forward and touched her mother’s arm, while a hand rested on her shoulder. All the same, the harmonious atmosphere of their reunion was unmistakable.

There it was! Shen Qingqiu had known to expect it, but even so... hearing such a cutesy nickname used for the calm, dedicated Liu Mingyan, by the straight-backed, imposing figure of her mother... The mental disconnect was real.

With some intense interest, he glanced at Liu Qingge, full of anticipation of what his nickname would be.

...Come to think of it, what had Liu Qingge’s birth name been? Would his mother still use that?

“It’s been too long,” Liu Mingyan agreed, just as warmly.

Liu Qishuang nodded. “And look how much you’ve grown. Your cultivation is going well,” she praised.
Her smile was hidden by the veil, but the way Liu Mingyan ducked her head and the crinkling at the corners of her eyes gave away her happiness.

“Now, be honest with Mother,” Liu Qishuang went on. “Do you also have someone you’ve chosen? Get it all out there now.”

“No, nothing like that,” Liu Mingyan quickly assured her.

Liu Qishuang didn’t raise an eyebrow with doubt, but it was still clear as she turned to look at Luo Binghe, who Shen Qingqiu now realized had been watching the loving mother-daughter exchange with an unreadable expression.

Ah, if only, Shen Qingqiu sighed in his heart.

Liu Mingyan shook her head. “This is Shen-shibo’s disciple, Luo-shixiong,” she explained succinctly — making it obvious Luo Binghe was there with Shen Qingqiu, just as she had in part come to show support to her brother.

As such, Luo Binghe warranted only a quick look before Liu Qishuang’s attention turned back to her daughter. “We’ll catch up later. I want to hear about everything.”

“I... have not achieved any victories,” Liu Mingyan admitted, somewhat sulkily.

Her mother chuckled. “I did not ask for any, only that you give your all in everything you dedicate yourself to.”

Liu Mingyan nodded, accepting the gentle rebuke. “There was an invasion,” she said. “All of us here fought. It’s good story, I will tell Mother later.”

By some unspoken cue, she knew that she had been prompted to depart. So, turning away, she headed toward the stairway up the mountain. Passing Luo Binghe, she pulled him along as well. Naturally, he tried to dig in his heels, frowning and darting a glance toward Shen Qingqiu.

But his teacher only waved lazily for him to move along. With a displeased grimace, Luo Binghe
allowed himself to be dragged away.

As she made her way past her brother, Liu Mingyan had stopped to give him a nod of support and say, “Good luck.”

Then, finally only three people remained at the sect gate.

“Well, then,” Shen Qingqiu spoke up, “shall we head up? Does Madam Liu wish to visit Qiong Ding first? Or will you honor my Qing Jing Peak with your presence?”

Better Qing Jing than Bai Zhan, which was never in any state to host visitors. And... Shen Qingqiu would not deny the desire for some home field advantage.

“No need,” Liu Qishuang said. And, without fanfare, settled on the ground right there, pulling her sword up to rest against her shoulder.

Following her example, Liu Qingge immediately dropped to sit cross-legged on the stone as well. Shen Qingqiu between them and stifled a sigh. Really, they were both wearing white! How were the poor disciples going to get those stains out? But what could be do except find a semi-smooth low boulder to settle down on as well?

Folding his hands in his lap, he waited. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Yao’er sent me a message that she’s going into seclusion. She even left Tian Xing behind,” Liu Qishuang told her son. “Fool boy, why did you wait so long to tell her you have someone already?”

That would be because he didn’t have anyone, actually.

But Liu Qingge endured the reprimand stoically, offering neither apology nor explanation.

“You still haven’t learned anything except fighting. I know this temperament of yours, it’s just like mine when I was young, and I am telling you this for your own good. If you don’t learn how to treat others, you will regret it. You’ll realize too late when you need those skills desperately,” his mother went on. Despite the scolding, her tone was not harsh. “No matter what kind of man your
partner is, how can he be satisfied if you don’t know how to treat him with gentleness?”

...

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t stop his eyebrow from twitching slightly at being suddenly dragged into the conversation. And did she have to phrase it like that?

Instead of responding, Liu Qingge turned to him — as if to say, ‘It was your idea, you deal with this.’

How rude! For whose sake were they doing this charade?

There was only one thing to do. Snapping open his fan, Shen Qingqiu held it up to hide half his face and buy himself time. “I’m quite satisfied, Madam Liu,” he assured her.

He wanted to follow it up with a compliment, but... Saying something honest, like how reliable Liu Qingge was, would sound too distant or bland for a lover, wouldn’t it? But he also didn’t have the shamelessness necessary to lie about this kind of thing outright.

He fluttered his fan lightly as Liu Qishuang turned to him instead. It was only a look, so why did it feel like he was about to get attacked at any moment?

“Are you,” she said. It was not a question. “Let’s get to it, then. Who are you, and what is your relationship with my son?”

She just asked like that.

Shen Qingqiu cleared his throat. “I am the current lord of Qing Jing Peak. As such, Liu-shidi and I have known each other since our days as disciples here at Cang Qiong, and we have gone through many trials together. Initially, we... did not see eye to eye, but recently we’ve been able to come to a new understanding and grow closer.”

“And now you’re cultivation partners,” Liu Qishuang said without a speck of delicateness.
She looked terribly unimpressed as Shen Qingqiu struggled to keep his expression blank and Liu Qingge just closed his eyes, as if willing himself away from the entire situation.

Even if they weren’t lying, this would be humiliating. Why did Shen Qingqiu have to endure this “be introduced to the parents” setup without even the benefit of an actual lover?

“You’re cultivation partners who cultivate together,” she repeated.

...Was she waiting for them to confess their lies?

......Was that an option?

Shen Qingqiu was seriously considering the possibility of just explaining the situation and throwing them at her mercy — she loved her children, surely she’d understand, and hadn’t Liu Qingge agreed with Shen Qingqiu’s reasoning for breaking off the engagement? — when the decision was taken out of his hands.

A shudder went down his spine as the terribly familiar unnatural thing chimed in his mind.

[System warning: You are currently on the secret route. Mission: Gain Liu Qishuang’s approval. Revealing the ruse will end the secret route and lead to deduction of 200 points as penalty.]

Wait.

What.

What?! Why? Well, he did remember something about a secret route being unlocked... But when did he agree to this mission? Bull***!

200 points wasn’t terrible. He could afford to pay that. ...But it wasn’t a small amount either.
Steeling his nerves and forcing down his embarrassment, Shen Qingqiu drew himself up. “That’s right, we’re cultivation partners who cultivate together,” he echoed tonelessly. His tone was firm and a bit cold, but he couldn’t help raising his fan a little more, defensively. “And if I might enquire why Madam is so concerned about this matter?”

The corner of Liu Qishuang’s lips curled upward. “Hm... Offering tips?” she suggested.

T, tips? Tips?? For ‘cultivating together,’ which was so completely equated to sex that it was no longer even a euphemism?

This woman! Why!

She was definitely enjoying this.

Helplessly, Shen Qingqiu glanced at Liu Qingge, his supposed partner (in this crime). However, he should have known better than to expect any help from that front.

Liu Qingge was doing a wonderful impersonation of a statue. Chin tilted up, he stared calmly into the distance. His entire demeanor was completely removed from the situation, as if he could see no evil, hear no evil. It was escapism refined to perfection.

Shen Qingqiu deeply envied him in that moment. Later, he swore, he would get his repayment for being left alone to deal with this matter.

But for now, he only mentally rolled his eyes.

Just as he had mostly regained his mental equilibrium, Liu Qishuang went on, “If Master Shen is ‘satisfied,’ then perhaps there is no need...” She paused. “But I hope your partner is equality ‘satisfied’ as well. So, fool boy, how are his skills?”

Liu Qingge blinked quickly, pulled out of his protective trance at being addressed all of a sudden. His expression was uncomprehending as he glanced between his mother and Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu felt a horrible sense of foreboding.
“His skills?” Liu Qingge repeated blankly. His brows furrowed a little as he considered the question far too seriously. “Hard to say. I always take the lead.”

...You! You have no idea what we’re talking about, do you! Naturally, since Liu Qingge had completely blocked out the entire conversation up to that point.

“No no, I have skills…” Shen Qingqiu gritted out, snapping his fan shut and gripping it tightly. “There’s nothing wrong with my skills! In combat or otherwise!” He might have died a virgin and been no luckier in his second life, but still!

“You’ve never beaten me,” Liu Qingge pointed out, unimpressed.

“I’m going to beat you right now,” Shen Qingqiu thought. Indeed, if Liu Qingge had been within reach, he may have well gotten beaten over the head with a fan.

Instead, Shen Qingqiu narrowed his eyes. “Is that really how you feel about Shixiong? Please think carefully about your answer.” Making sure Liu Qingge was paying attention, he pointedly darted his eyes toward Liu Qishuang.

Yes, think carefully about how you talk about the person doing you a favor! And also your (fake) lover!

And finally, Liu Qingge seemed to understand. Clearing his throat, he corrected his assessment. “You... have some ability,” he offered.

...Is it that hard to compliment someone? Great Master Liu!

Apparently, it was. Because Liu Qingge felt it necessary to add, “You should train more. And stop letting your disciple give you so many snacks.”

OK, first of all, those snacks were divinely delicious, and just for that, Shen Qingqiu would never share any with Liu Qingge. But also, “I’m afraid I just don’t have Liu-shidi’s strong stomach, to devour any old monster I happen across,” Shen Qingqiu said icily. “After all, I’m an ill man. Just being up and about so early is a struggle. And sitting on the cold, hard ground like this...” He
ducked his head, making an expression of enduring suffering.

Liu Qingge, knowing full well that Shen Qingqiu was just fine if the poison was not flaring up and it indeed was not, only gave him a flat look.

Then, standing up in an annoyingly smooth, elegant motion, he walked over to Shen Qingqiu and, before he could react, picked him up. One arm under his knees, one behind his back — wait, wait, wasn’t this basically a bridal carry?

“Liu-shidi! What are you doing?!” Shen Qingqiu hissed.

“You said you didn’t want to sit on the ground,” Liu Qingge said, shooting him a look. Without moving any further, he dropped back onto the stone Shen Qingqiu had been sitting on.

Without letting him go.

So in other words, he was supposed to sit on Liu Qingge instead?!

Well, it was more comfortable than a bare rock, if only a little. To be honest, Liu Qingge had somewhat bony thighs, so...

That wasn’t the point!

How could the blasted man look so calm about this? What kind of idea was this? Was he trying to make fun of Shen Qingqiu? Or was he actually this socially inept? Regardless, this completely ridiculous — and Shen Qingqiu couldn’t get off because the damned lunatic was still holding on to him, rather tightly at that. He could have wiggled loose, but what kind of peak lord wiggled like a worm?

Despite his earlier thoughts, Shen Qingqiu didn’t have the guts to actually beat Liu Qingge over the head with his fan, so he settled for slapping his shoulder in a furious staccato. “Liu-shidi!” he hissed again. “This is not appropriate—!”

Except. Maybe it was?
After all, they were supposed to be a happy pair of mandarin ducks, lovebirds, cultivation partners, the whole works. Shen Qingqiu had gotten so caught up in arguing with Liu Qingge that he forgot their original purpose.

Surreptitiously, he glanced over at Liu Qishuang.

She had been watching the entire show with a placid, amused expression, cheek resting in one palm. Seeing that they had remembered her presence, she smiled.

“You really do have strong feelings for him, Qingge,” she mused. Her tone was painfully fond. “I’m glad.”

Liu Qingge stiffened, his mouth opening to protest before Shen Qingqiu pinched him.

Unexpectedly, Liu Qishuang smirked at them. “Alright,” she said. “If you’ve committed yourself to this, I’ll accept your dedication.”

‘Oh. Here it comes—’ Shen Qingqiu thought.

She clapped her hands together once. That was the last thing he remembered before everything went dark.

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Shen Qingqiu woke up in a cave. The ceiling was half covered in shadows. The only light came from glowing pearls set in the roughly-hewn stone walls. The floor was hard and very cold. His robes were doubtlessly dirty and felt slightly damp. There was a red cord tied around his wrist. At the other end of its very short length was Liu Qingge, who lay on his back staring at the ceiling with an expression of extreme agitation.

Closing his eyes again, Shen Qingqiu tried to remember why he had agreed to do this.
Something about a pretty girl, wasn’t it?

And yet here he was, cold, sore, miserable, and tied to a man. A beautiful man, but a very annoying one. He really should have just stayed in bed.

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Chapter 4: Trial Raider

Finishing the last of her tea, Liu Qishuang let out a slow breath and set the cup down with a gentle clink. “I see. So he’s that kind of person,” she mused.

“That’s right! Shizun is an incredible person!” Luo Binghe burst out, across the tea table from her. “He risked his life to protect even this lowly disciple! Shizun is strong and kind and—”

Before he could get too agitated, Liu Mingyan, who was sitting next to him, tightened her grip on his arm and firmly held him down. Already trying to rise, Luo Binghe dropped back down into his seat, expression sulky.

“Brother arrived just as Shen-shibo was about to exchange blows with the demon saint despite his condition, and he drove them off,” Liu Mingyan went on. “Since then, he’s been helping Shen-shibo clear his meridians of the poison once a month. They’ve... gotten closer since then.”

Making a sound of agreement, Liu Qishuang nodded along. “I see, I see,” she repeated. “So it was like that...” She seemed quite satisfied.

Which was the entire goal, of course, of Liu Mingyan and Luo Binghe’s retelling of Sha Hualing’s invasion, after Liu Qishuang came to find them whispering furiously halfway up the stairs about whether or not they should sneak back down to see how things were going at the sect gate. Prodding her about where Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge were yielded no results, so, with no better ideas, they took her to Qing Jing Peak and served tea and sweets.

Initially, Luo Binghe hadn’t been particularly pleased to participate, but the story was one he treasured, so he couldn’t hold himself back from praising Shen Qingqiu excessively in regard to both his master’s battle against the one-armed demon elder and especially his own match against Elder Sky Hammer — and Shen Qingqiu’s subsequent sacrifice.
With practiced, absent-minded motions, Luo Binghe refilled the Liu matriarch’s cup.

“Everyone who believes all those terrible rumors about Shizun is wrong,” he complained. “They just don’t understand Shizun’s intentions! He’s taught all of us so well and given so much to protect Cang Qiong — they have no right to slander him!”

His co-conspirator nodded. “That’s right,” she said. “There have been all kinds of rumors about Shen-shibo in the past. But there’s no need to pay them any mind.”

“When did I ever pay rumors mind?” her mother wondered, her eyebrows arching. “Yan-Yan, you’re quite invested in this. I didn’t take you for a meddling kind of sibling.”

Liu Mingyan, who had been sneaking a dainty sweet under her veil, choked and had to pound her chest while coughing. “Th, that’s—! I just want Mother to understand Brother’s choice!” she protected quickly. “Brother cares very much for your approval, you know that. So...”

“There’s no need. I have no intention of judging what kind of person Shen Qingqiu is,” Liu Qishuang said. “The only thing I want to see is the nature of his relationship with Qingge. Your brother’s feelings for him, and his feelings for your brother — as long as they are strong and firm, I won’t interfere. After all, the both of you must choose your own path in life and see it through to the end, no matter where it leads. That’s all I want for you two.”

They were a clan of cultivators and warriors, after all. It was their way to fight and to seek strength. Naturally, they couldn’t coddle their children or try to protect them from the world.

At times, they would make mistakes. Supporting the wrong faction, falling in love with the wrong person, there was no way to prevent such things, in the end. There was no road without pitfalls, no path where you did not stumble. What mattered was whether you could continue moving forward even so.

Her gaze softening, Liu Mingyan ducked her head. There was no doubt she was smiling, under the veil. Her mother’s expression, watching her, was just as warm and very patient.

Silently, Luo Binghe looked away.
“So,” Liu Qishuang broke the silence, “that’s why I want to hear about this battle of yours.”

Liu Mingyan cringed.

Yes, her battle... the battle against Sha Hualing that she’d lost...

Reaching out to pat her on the shoulder, Luo Binghe offered, “At least you had more clothes on at the end.” As if that was a kind of victory.

Her mother’s lips twitched in amusement. Liu Mingyan closed her eyes for a moment, then sharply elbowed the boy next to her in the ribs.

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In the novel, Liu Qishuang proved how completely insane she was — in both good and bad meanings of the word — by knocking out both Liu Mingyan and Luo Binghe following a thorough grilling and then dumping them into one of the Liu clan’s trial grounds, their hands tied together by a spirit cord that could not be cut. With mindfulness behind her madness, she even had the foresight to take Xin Mo.

Thus, Shen Qingqiu had somewhat foreseen this plot point being applied to himself and Liu Qingge.

...But since Liu Qishuang had knocked out even the OP protagonist through some unknown means, he decided there was nothing a scum villain like himself could do to stop it from happening and put the entire matter from his mind.

Still, he had thought she would at least order them back to the Liu clan territories first. Cultivator strength and all that, but wouldn’t carrying two grown men get unwieldy?

Unless she didn’t come alone to begin with.

No, no, the Liu clan couldn’t possibly agree to these ridiculous methods. It had to be just her. Right?
Regardless.

After pretending to be dead for a while, Shen Qingqiu had to face reality, if only because he was starting to get unbearably sore from lying on the ground.

Liu Qingge, who had been waiting for him to ‘wake up,’ noticed immediately, and they sat up together. With their hands tied together by the red spirit cord, neither of them could move freely without dragging the other along. It also limited their cultivation to to roughly... Core Formation stage, Shen Qingqiu thought, although he could neither remember precisely nor judge from his own state.

“Do you know where we are?” Shen Qingqiu prodded Liu Qingge, once they had looked around a bit.

“Trial ground,” his companion said shortly, looking thoroughly put upon — and also entirely too unruffled. Even his hair was still entirely in order, despite lying on the ground and getting dragged around for who knows how long before.

But of course, a beauty could only be artfully dishevelled as a prelude to papapa, so...

“Your clan’s?” Shen Qingqiu pretended to guess. “Do you know how to get through it?”

Liu Qingge snorted. “She woudn’t pick one I know.” Which was a fair point. Huffing as if this entire matter had been designed to personally offend him, he stalked off down the long stone hall — with no regard to how he was pulling Shen Qingqiu along by their tied hands.

He could have just hurried to catch up, but Shen Qingqiu had no desire to be tugged around like an errant balloon the entire way. Digging in his heels, he jerked Liu Qingge to a stop.

“Liu-shidi, please be a little more careful,” he said in a firm tone, as Liu Qingge turned a puzzled glare back over his shoulder.

Liu Qingge’s gaze went down to the red cord between their hands, and his eyebrows furrowed even further. However, he shifted back toward Shen Qingqiu, his stance one of waiting for him to catch
It was good enough for Shen Qingqiu, who didn’t hesitate to follow now that he was sure his complaint had been lodged properly.

They walked in silence deeper into the trial ground.

Based on the novel fluff, the Liu clan had many trial grounds in their territories, especially in the valley that served as their ancestral home. Several were above ground — set in gorges, mountain tops, forests. Many were underground, like this one.

This particular area was not entirely unlike the caves beneath Cang Qiong. It too had an otherworldly atmosphere, full of thick spiritual energy and completely cut off from the surface. In fact, the only way in seemed to be the transportation array the two of them had woken up on. It had, of course, been inactive.

However, unlike the Cang Qiong caves, the trial ground had also been purposefully altered. Although the ceiling remained rough, unhewn stone, parts of the floor and the walls have been smoothed out and even carved with pillars or alcoves for night pearls. Further in, there would doubtlessly be traps and various tests for the young cultivators of the Liu clan who came here to sharpen their skills. ...Normally, they would have been given a jade token that they could crush to be whisked away if their lives were in danger, but Shen Qingqiu had already checked his person and found no such thing.

He couldn’t tell whether this was the same trial ground that novel-Liu Mingyan and novel-Luo Binghe had been dumped in, though he hoped not. The trials there had been geared entirely toward Proud Immortal Demon Way’s main goal — more papapa — and thus would become quite difficult for two men only pretending to be lovers.

Time would tell. At least it wasn’t a secret realm, in any case. Those things were terrible.

They had passed through several halls and chambers, the only sound coming from their own echoing footsteps, when even that suddenly came to a stop as Liu Qingge halted at the edge of another hallway.

“There’s a trap,” he said.

Shen Qingqiu, who had let himself drift off into thought — shoving all the work on Liu Qingge, as he had been accused of doing — peered into the hall ahead of them with interest. Now that he was
paying attention, he easily spotted the pressure plates in the floor and the narrow openings in the walls.

“Hm... arrows?” he guessed. “That shouldn’t be too difficult.” Quite cliche, actually, he was a bit disappointed. “Although...” He tugged experimentally at the cord between them.

As they had been walking, their hands had often knocked against each other or been tugged uncomfortably when the cord was unintentionally stretched taut. Although they were both aware of its presence, it was too easy to forget about the binding and try to move naturally, only to be pulled short. Normally, dodging an arrow trap like that would be easy for cultivators of their caliber. But if they happened to lose track of the cord’s length again and were suddenly jerked off balance in the middle of a dodge...

Judging by his frown, Liu Qingge had the same thoughts. Then, his expression hardened as he came to a decision.

Shifting his arm, his took Shen Qingqiu’s hand and gripped it tightly.

...Yes, that’s what it was. Handholding — like kindergarteners on a fieldtrip. What was this, the buddy system?

“Liu-shidi...” Shen Qingqiu started to protest.

Liu Qingge’s face twisted into a scowl, but he refused to look at Shen Qingqiu.

He had a point. It was easier to remember to move together like this, no matter how ridiculous it was. Sighing, Shen Qingqiu gave in.

“Keep up,” Liu Qingge ordered and started toward the boobytrapped hall.

It took two steps in to trigger the mechanism. Then, with a dull sucking sound, arrows poured out of the holes, so thick they nearly blocked the view of the other side. Had they tried to make up for quality with quantity?
Liu Qingge didn’t hesitate to rush through, and Shen Qingqiu hurried to stay beside him. It was
easier than he’d expected, to fall in step with the other man. Maybe it was because Liu Qingge’s qì
had passed through his body so many times, but Shen Qingqiu could almost instinctively tell what
he would do the instance before he moved — duck, weave aside, jump forward.

It was kind of fun like, like a rhythm dance game. And if Shen Qingqiu missed stepped, he could
just bat the arrows aside with his fan. Notably, the hands that had been tied together were his right
and Liu Qingge’s left, which seemed a bit like favoritism on Liu Qishuang’s part.

When they emerged on the other side, completely unscathed, Shen Qingqiu even smiled and
snapped open his fan to do a little victory pose.

“Skillfully done!” he praised... himself.

Liu Qingge shot him a disgruntled look and stormed off — dragging him along, of course.

He didn’t bother letting go of Shen Qingqiu’s hand. The kindergarten buddy system would
continue, it seemed.

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The paths were swept. The bamboo hut was cleaned and dusted. So was the main hall of Qing Jing
Peak. There was water and firewood aplenty. The small backlog of reports had filed. Even the
slightly squeaky hinge in the disciple quarters had been fixed. Every possible chore had been
completed in Luo Binghe’s bid to keep himself occupied.

It was already almost dusk, and yet Shen Qingqiu hadn’t returned.

“Shizun...” Grinding his teeth, Luo Binghe clutched the broom in his hands until the bamboo
handle creaked pitifully. “Shizun, where are you...?”

Liu Mingyan, who had been watching him run around all day, could only sigh. They had tried to
train as usual earlier, but Luo Binghe had been so distracted that he tripped repeatedly. After the
third time he bloodied his nose on the ground, Liu Mingyan gave up.
She suddenly felt a lot of respect for Shen Qingqiu’s patience, if that was what he put up with — as she inferred from his comments while watching them spar a few times. Luo Binghe was not subtle. At all.

“I’m going to see the sect leader!” Luo Binghe declared suddenly, apparently reaching the limit of his endurance. “He’ll help look for Shizun!”

Sect Leader Yue... just might, yes.

“Calm down,” Liu Mingyan told him. “Shen-shibo is a peak lord. He can take care of himself, and my brother should be with him. They’ll be fine.”

Luo Binghe shot her a sharp look. No matter how worked up he was, there was still a cool edge of calculation in his expression, one which he would never show to his beloved master. The difference between those two faces had taken Liu Mingyan off guard when she first saw it, but now she only stared back coolly, waiting for his reaction.

“You know something,” he determined finally.

“I suspect,” she corrected.

Shifting his stance in a way he probably didn’t even realize was subtly threatening, Luo Binghe gestured for her to continue.

“Most likely, Mother sent them to our clan, to take one of our trials,” Liu Mingyan explained. “The trial grounds can be large. They might be gone for days. But,” she added quickly, “the trials are meant for disciples still in training with our clan. They won’t be a serious challenge for a peak lord, much less two of them.”

Luo Binghe’s expression darkened as he stared at her. However, as Liu Mingyan stared back, he seemed to understand and let out a sharp, annoyed huff.

“Why should Shizun have to take some trial?” he complained. Abandoning his poor attempts at continuing to sweep the already clean path, he made his way over to where Liu Mingyan was sitting on entrance steps and dropped down next to her.
Having started out puttering around the bamboo hut, Luo Binghe had gradually made his way through Qing Jing Peak and ended up right at the entrance and the Rainbow Bridge, as if subconsciously eager to know the moment his beloved master returned. Except that he probably wouldn’t be returning that day at all.

It couldn’t have been a short trial that Liu Qishuang dumped them into. She would want to be there when they emerged, and yet she had spent half the day with Mingyan and then headed off to pay her respects to the sect leader and at Wan Jian, where she had once been a disciple herself. She might not have even left Cang Qiong yet, clearly in no hurry to return to the Liu clan.

Glancing at the sulking boy next to her, Liu Mingyan curled her lips up slightly, unseen.

“You know, Brother will protect him,” she said. “You don’t have to worry.”

“I’m not worried,” Luo Binghe denied. Tilting his head back, he looked up at the slowly darkening sky. “Shizun is strong. I know that.”

Liu Mingyan looked up as well. “You want to protect him yourself,” she said without any particular tone.

They both knew what she really meant.

Hearing it up so plainly, Luo Binghe cringed a little. It wasn’t that the other disciples at Qing Jing were unaware, precisely. Only Shen Qingqiu had managed to miss it. But none of them would be willing to bring it out into the open either.

Maybe they didn’t take it seriously. After all, which disciple wasn’t at least a little in love with their master? The level of admiration they all held toward the ones who embodied the ideal form of an immortal to them could easily overflow. It was as natural as being awed by the sun and moon — and just as unattainable.

And yet... It was just instinct. But something about Luo Binghe was not the same as others.

An excessive intensity — he carried a certain sharpness, an edge like a blade that had not yet been
fully drawn. It was a little similar to the greatest members of her clan, though not the same.

Unlike Liu Mingyan, Luo Binghe didn’t use a nameless sword as a placeholder until he obtained his personal blade. But if he did, she was sure he would be able to create a piercing sword intent on instinct alone. He had that kind of focus — or that kind of inherent nature that wouldn’t hesitate to kill and rend.

Sometimes, she thought the difference in their battles at the invasion had come down to that, more than anything.

Quietly, Luo Binghe sighed.

“They’re not really cultivation partners,” Liu Mingyan pointed out, taking pity on him. “They’re just pretending.”

“Right now, it’s just pretending. But what about in the future?” Luo Binghe said, his lips pursing together unhappily. “You can joke all you want about how much I admire him, but Shizun is a peak lord and has the elegant bearing of an immortal. It’s only natural he’d have suitors. It’s only a matter of time.”

“But in time, you will also...”

Luo Binghe sighed again. “I want to get stronger soon,” he muttered.

Liu Mingyan sighed as well. “Me too,” she muttered.

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Chapter 5: Trial Raider II

“Liu-shidi, there was something wrong with your ancestors’ heads!” Shen Qingqiu complained bitterly.

Liu Qingge grunted, the sound almost lost in the noise coming from behind them. Neither of them stopped running.

This was because a giant boulder was chasing them. That’s right, a giant round boulder was rolling rapidly after them, just like this in certain famous movies about ruin explorers. This trial ground... truly exceeded all expectations in blatantly using misplaced cliches.

He couldn’t even blame Airplane Toward the Sky’s cheapness this time, since this was definitely a different underground route than the one Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan had taken. That one had involved a lot more stripping and slime, before a powerful monster from deep within the caverns crashed in, only to be dramatically defeated by the couple, ending in Liu Mingyan nearly being dragged down with it into a deep pit. She had even wanted to cut the red spirit cord to keep Luo Binghe from being pulled down with her.

Naturally, Luo Binghe had refused and sworn to never let her go.

...For the purpose of that dramatic scene, it was impossible for swords to fly within any of the trial grounds and, thus, for them to fly on their swords. Shen Qingqiu had cursed this point several times already.

Liu Qingge’s hand tightened around his, a moment before he yelled, “Go right!”

Shen Qingqiu obeyed without thinking, following Liu Qingge in throwing himself to the right —
just as they burst out of the tunnel out into a towering open space. In fact, Shen Qingqiu reacted a hair too fast, crashing into Liu Qingge and sending them both tumbling to the floor.

The boulder rumbled past them and straight off the edge of the walkway, into the deep gorge beyond. It fell silently for a long time before the sound of a crash finally drifted up.

This was a terrible day. He didn’t even know which day it was.

“How long have we been down here?” Shen Qingqiu wondered, refusing to open his eyes. He had landed on top of his companion, which was at least something, and he could guess his forehead was pressed against Liu Qingge’s shoulder. What a position... and the damned man still somehow managed to maintain a clean, simple scent even after tromping around a seemingly endless labyrinth of dirty, moldy caves.

“About two days,” Liu Qingge estimated.

Most of that had admittedly been spent lost in a particular labyrinth section of the trial ground.

“...Get off,” he commanded after a moment.

Obediently, Shen Qingqiu rolled off. The path, running along the wall with the ravine on the other side, was just barely wide enough for the two of them to lie side by side. They sat up at the same time, but neither moved to stand just yet. Cultivators of their level didn’t need to eat or drink, and just running around for a few days wasn’t enough to genuinely wear them out, but wandering in the dark dodging stupid traps would make anyone feel tired after a while.

“All of this,” Liu Qingge said slowly, staring off toward the dead end in the opposite direction, “I will pay you back for it later.”

This matter had long since dragged on beyond what could be reasonably called just ‘helping out.’ Telling a small lie and enduring a bit from grilling was one thing, but this kind of inconvenience, especially for a man like Shen Qingqiu, would wouldn’t walk if he could ride and was always looking for an opportunity to take it easy...

How could Liu Qingge feel anything except embarrassed and frustrated at imposing this much, at owing this much?
Seeing the grievance in his proud profile, Shen Qingqiu could only feel embarrassed in turn. He was the one who started this and had made a pact with Liu Mingyan to continue it. What right did he have to complain?

“No need, no need,” he said quickly. “It’s only natural for Shixiong to do this much. Come, let’s continue on.”

He stood up and, taking hold of Liu Qingge’s hand again, pulled him up as well. But as he tried to move on down the path, he found that Liu Qingge had remained in place and obligingly stopped to wait.

Liu Qingge was scowling again.

It was really such a waste of his beautiful face, Shen Qingqiu sighed inwardly, unfurling his fan and hiding his own expression. His junior brother looked like he was struggling to say something, parting his lips only to flush red and press them tightly together again. He was probably... trying to thank Shen Qingqiu again but, being a muscle-brained battle freak, couldn’t manage this simple bit of common social nicety.

The gap between his usual domineering aura and this uselessness was so ridiculous that it became almost... cute.

...Good thing both his hands were occupied. Shen Qingqiu actually shifted a little with the sudden urge to pat Liu Qingge on the head, like he did with Binghe.

Not good, not good. He’d get gutted for sure. This proud fellow had never even lowered himself to call Shen Qingqiu “shixiong,” after all. Doing something like that, Shen Qingqiu would immediately lose a limb, if not his life.

The small motion pulled Liu Qingge out of his struggle, and he shook his head. “I will... pay you back,” he said instead, tone deeply annoyed — at himself.

Well. If it was like that...
“Alright,” Shen Qingqiu accepted this socially inept thanks. “Then I will trouble Shidi later.”

As Liu Qingge proudly took the lead down the path, there was just enough light to make out how his ears were burning with frustration.

It really was... pretty cute.

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They were crossing a very unsafe-looking rope bridge when the Great God of Recycling Plot Lines caught up with them.

There had to be something like that, right? Because why else would they still get hit by this same scenario despite all the changes in circumstances. Because just as Shen Qingqiu was yet again cursing all of Liu Qingge’s ancestors for their architectural skills and the pit in their collective brain to have created this stupid trial ground, a great tremor ran through the underground gorge, and the rock wall behind them burst apart.

The rope bridge swayed alarmingly, although at least none of the rubble hit it — yet.

The thing that emerged from the cloud of dust and flying rock shards was gargantuan. Each finger of the giant hands that continued to widen the opening was taller than a person, and the maw on its massive head could easily swallow several humans whole. It had once possessed two great horns, but one had been broken off halfway down its length. Its skin was a dusty red-brown, and its eyes glowed with malevolent flames.

It had once been imprisoned down in the monster fighting colosseum deep in the heart of the mountain, because of course this clan of battle maniacs had something like that. Over generations, however, the colosseum had been abandoned, and this monster, the last one remaining, had eventually broken its way free to rampage through the trial ground tunnels in the same mountain.

It was called a Greater Ancient Oxen Clay Soldier.

There were no Lesser Ancient Oxen Clay Soldiers in the novel. There had been some different “Ancient XXX Clay Soldiers” during one of the demon realm arcs, a few hundred chapters off, Shen Yuan remembered this because it had seemed like some interesting lore, but naturally none of
this had been explained or used at all beyond two separate instances of fodder monsters that barely warranted a mention as set pieces.

In any case, the giant monster bursting from the stone wall was indeed an ox, at least something like a minotaur, and it was indeed earth elemental in nature. This meant that damaging it was hard and not very useful, since it could restore itself by absorbing minerals from around it.

It bellowed furiously as it widened the gap enough to reach for them.

“Time to run!” Shen Qingqiu ordered and didn’t hesitate to follow his own advice — shoving past Liu Qingge and taking the lead rushing down the swaying rope bridge.

Thankfully, Liu Qingge didn’t offer any resistance and first allowed himself to be dragged along, then fell in step with Shen Qingqiu. He had nonetheless drawn Cheng Luan and sent a number of phantom spirit blades back at the monster.

The sword lights washed over the giant oxen soldier’s hide like water. It bellowed again and lifted its still trapped legs to pound at the remains of the stone wall. Each hit made the entire cavern tremble.

“It’s resistant to spirit-based sword arts!” Shen Qingqiu called out over his shoulder, although Liu Qingge had likely already guessed as much, judging from the way he clicked his tongue irritably.

They were a little over halfway across the ravine, which was a terrible place for battle — not that there was any good location nearby. With distance attacks almost useless and the prohibition against flying swords in the trial grounds, they could only fight in close quarters, but even aside from the giant size of their opponent, there was simply nowhere that offered enough footing, not on the narrow ledges that serves as paths on either side of the gorge.

Once they were on the other side, it would be easy to deal with. Once they were on the other side —!

Naturally, the bridge gave out before they could make it.

Shen Qingqiu hadn’t seen what triggered it, and he didn’t spare a second to glance back. He felt it when the ropes snapped somewhere behind them, the planks underfoot slipping away.
“Jump!” he and Liu Qingge yelled simultaneously, both already doing so.

His heart was pounding, and the situation felt incredibly desperate. But...

They were cultivators. Even with the restriction that came from the spirit cord, their lightness skills were superhuman. A long moment airborne, when everything fell away — then both of them hit the ground side by side. They didn’t even need to roll dramatically.

“Aim for the cliffside under it!” Shen Qingqiu spun around and ordered quickly, pointing back toward the giant oxen soldier.

Almost before he had finished speaking, Liu Qingge swung Cheng Luan and a barrage of energy blades shot toward the opposite side of the ravine. The nearly sheer rock wall had already begun to crack under the giant oxen soldier’s weight, and it stood no chance under this fierce assault. With the deafening noise of a rockslide, it began to collapse, taking the monster with it.

However, the oxen soldier was not willing to go down so easily. Just as in the novel, it reached out its giant hand toward the pair of trial-goers, intent on taking them with it.

‘Not likely!’ Shen Qingqiu thought, eyes narrowing.

With a flash of qi, the fan in his hand transformed into a simple sword and was flung toward the monster with all the strength Shen Qingqiu could muster.

It hit the oxen soldier like a punch to the face, with enough force to leave a crater between mismatched horns and make the monster’s entire torso reel back. That kind of blow still wouldn’t have kept it down for long — but it was enough for gravity to do its work. Before the monster could recover, it was already plummeting down into the darkness of the gorge, its echoing bellows growing more and more distant.

“Well,” Shen Qingqiu said finally, in the silence that followed. “I hope you don’t have any more complaints about my skills, Liu-shidi.”

And he had really liked that fan too... he thought with vague regret.
Liu Qingge made an odd sound.

Then, with the choked voice of a man having his arm twisted, he allowed, “...Yes, you... you fight good.”

He didn’t allow Shen Qingqiu to comment, turning and quickly pulling him along toward the entrance to another tunnel onward through the trial ground. Lifting his free hand and hiding behind his wide sleeve in lieu of his fan, Shen Qingqiu snickered silently to himself.

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When the light of the transportation array out of the trial grounds faded — Finally! Finally!! — they found themselves out in nearly blinding sunlight.

But it was sunlight! And a fresh breeze! Open skies, freedom!

“Welcome back!” someone called out. A few other voices echoed them.

The trial grounds transportation arrays were grouped together, next to the entrances of several cultivation caves as well, part of the way up a mountain in the Liu clan’s home valley. Since this was a departure and return hub of sorts, and accidents were not uncommon during training, a few clansmembers or servants were always manning the small structures nearby, with first aid supplies and even just food and water.

Reflexively, Shen Qingqiu tried to brush the dirt from his robes and straighten his hair. It was a lost cause.

Forget it. At least Liu Qingge was just as much of a sight as he was.

“Welcome back,” Liu Qishuang, who had been sitting nearby, apparently waiting for their return, called out as well. She smiled mildly as she made her way over. ...Shen Qingqiu had already learned not to trust that smile. “You’re back faster than I expected. Did you not stop to have some fun along the way?”
What ‘fun.’ Who could have fun in that cliche death trap conga line!

The Liu clan had something wrong with their collective heads!

“There’s a monster loose in the trial grounds,” Liu Qingge reported, apparently just pretending he hadn’t heard anything. Or maybe he really didn’t understand the innuendo. That was definitely possible with him.

Liu Qishuang nodded along. “Mother will teach it a lesson for interrupting you,” she agreed. She was also definitely struggling not to smirk.

Forget it, forget it. At least she didn’t make them bow three times like Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan were forced to.

“Then we will trouble Madam Liu,” Shen Qingqiu muttered dryly.

He pitied whoever actually got this woman as an in-law. Truly, only the OP protagonist was equipped to deal with her. Then, remembering her comments to him about ‘bigger isn’t better in the wrong hands’ and the ‘tips’ she actually did go on to give Luo Binghe, Shen Qingqiu spared some pity for his poor disciple too.

Fortunately, he was only pretending to marry in. Otherwise, he might really be in trouble.
Notes: In case it’s not clear, Liu mama is more or less aware that SQQ and LQG are bullshitting about being cultivation partners. She just lets them do it because they care enough to pull that kind of stunt.

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Chapter 6: Someone by Your Side

A suite had been prepared for them in the Liu clan’s sprawling manor, including a hot bath, even though it was actually only mid-morning.

“I’ll wash up first,” Shen Qingqiu declared a touch more quickly than he probably intended.

Not that Liu Qingge had expected anything else. The other man was normally incredibly fastidious about his appearance, and having to walk around in such a dirty, rumpled state must have been uncomfortable at best. He grunted in agreement, even though he wasn’t entirely sure Shen Qingqiu heard him, having already disappeared behind the folding screen.

The silhouette of his shadow across the screen’s panels was already shucking his outer robe and pulling off his belt.

Liu Qingge choked unexpectedly and quickly turned away.

He wanted to make some protest, but what was there to complain about? As a disciple, he had naturally shared close quarters with others and that had included bathing — briskly scrubbing off — together at times. It must have been the same for Shen Qingqiu, so even if they were from different peaks, the principle was the same. There was no reason to be... overly courteous.

But still. Couldn’t he have waited until Liu Qingge left the room?

Liu Qingge had been about to glance back again when the sound of splashing water and a long, content sigh made him stiffen.
He was clearly not needed. As such, he departed quickly.

Out of the room and a good ways down the hallway, Liu Qingge’s steps slowed to something closer to his usual brisk stride. Belatedly, it occurred to him that perhaps he should have told Shen Qingqiu that he was leaving and that he’d be back in a while — since there were some things he actually did need to take care of.

It had been a long time since Liu Qingge had returned to the Liu clan’s ancestral grounds, Huo Hong Valley. As such, there was a number of matters a good, filial descendant needed to attend to, but the first order of business was naturally to speak with his mother. It was a conversation Liu Qingge dreaded, well aware of his many missteps in the issue of his engagement, but it was one he refused to shirk from any longer.

Because they were similar people and because she knew her son well, Liu Qishuang was waiting for him in the gardens, exactly where he’d expected to find her.

“Qingge,” she greeted him — using the name he had earned through his efforts, as she always did when speaking as one immortal to another. Nodding in return, Liu Qingge made his way over to her side and together, they watched the wind dance through the famous fire-red trees of their valley.

They stood in silence for a long while before she spoke again.

“I will settle things with the Duanmu family. But once she comes out of seclusion, apologize to Yao’er,” Liu Qishuang said without looking at her son. “I will apologize as well. I let the engagement stand because she was so set on it, and you didn’t feel strongly about it either way... but that was a mistake. You never took her feelings seriously, and nothing could come of it if only one side made an effort.”

Liu Qingge started slightly.

So that had been the reason? That Duanmu Yao had cared and he hadn’t?

Something that simple?
He really... should have said something sooner. He should have rejected her properly, knowing that he had no feelings for her in return.

Hesitation and half-hearted actions truly were the greatest weakness.

“I will apologize properly,” Liu Qingge promised quietly.

Sunlight danced through the red and gold leaves, evoking a surprising feelings of nostalgia. He had trained under these trees as a child, before going off to join Cang Qiong and seek his own path, and although the time he had spent away from the valley had long since outweighed the time he’d spent in it, some memories appeared to be too deeply ingrained to ever fade completely.

Impulsively, he caught a single red leaf that fluttered past and held it up, lightly twisting the stem between his fingers.

It had been a while since Liu Mingyan had been home as well, and as a disciple, it would be a long time before she was free to travel as she wished. Maybe he should bring her something when he returned.

The shape of the wide maple leaf finally reminded him. Speaking of bringing things...

Liu Qishuang had been watching him with a soft smile, Liu Qingge realized when he looked up, about to dismiss himself.

“Well, the situation is less than ideal, but I’m glad I was able to meet him,” she said unexpectedly. “It’s good that your sect has people who have become close to you. If they’re willing to support you and return your loyalty, then I won’t worry or meddle any more.”

“...You worried?” Liu Qingge repeated in honest surprise.

Once he said it, he suspected that it should have been obvious from the start. That it had been obvious to everyone except him.

But Liu Qishuang took the question in stride. “Yes,” she said simply. “Even if Cang Qiong is a
great sect and one I had once been part of, my child left home while still so young, surrounded by so many strangers and without any family to rely on... I worried very much. Even knowing how strong you’ve become, I couldn’t help worrying that you wouldn’t have anyone you could trust and turn to. But it seems that’s not the case anymore.”

Slowly, Liu Qingge nodded.

It wasn’t even that she believed Cang Qiong wouldn’t have helped him. She respected the sect enough to know better, even if she had ultimately left it to return to the clan. But rather, she had doubted that Liu Qingge would turn to them for help to begin with.

...She wasn’t wrong about that. Even when his cultivation had begun to stray and he suspected that he might face a qi deviation, even now in this matter — it wasn’t that Liu Qingge had asked for help, but rather that help had been forced onto him. Both time, by that person. Thinking about it, Liu Qingge could almost hear his scolding — ‘How troublesome, Shidi. Why don’t you save us both the trouble next time and just tell Shixiong when you’re in trouble?’

He huffed, but he couldn’t muster up any real annoyance.

“I’ll be alright,” Liu Qingge assured his mother. “And... I’ll look after Mingyan.”

“I know,” Liu Qishuang agreed with a smile.

By the time Liu Qingge returned to their suite, Shen Qingqiu had finished bathing and was instead passed out face down on the bed. Despite it being the middle of the day, it seemed he had decided to catch up on missed sleep.

He hadn’t dried his long hair entirely, and it seeped water into his thin sleeping robe, which clung to his back and arms. His sleeping posture was awful, and he somehow managed to take up more than half of the massive bed. As Liu Qingge watched, he wrinkled his nose and grumbled into his pillow, “Binghe... more tea...”

Shaking his head slightly, Liu Qingge silently set a simple fan onto the small tea table and slipped behind the screen to clean up as well.

...There was an issue with this setup that the two of them wouldn’t realize until later.
When Shen Qingqiu woke up, it was already getting toward evening. He was woken up by a servant politely knocking on the door to inform him that a small banquet would be held to welcome him and Liu Qingge to Huo Hong Valley.

They had been in the stupid valley for days, Shen Qingqiu wanted to point out.

But he wasn’t going to turn down a feast, so after calling out his acquiescence, he rolled out of bed.

Brushing his own overly long hair was a hassle he’d been glad to forget about. He missed Luo Binghe’s deft assistance, and also the warm tea Luo Binghe made to help get him awake every morning. Fortunately, the Liu clan had provided clothing for him to change into, since Shen Qingqiu had been kidnapped out of his own sect with nothing but the clothes on his back.

Unfortunately, the Liu clan favored red. Red like the special spiritually strong trees of their valley that remained in autumn colors year round, red like a phoenix. The only reason Liu Qishuang had been wearing white to Cang Qiong was to pay respect to her former sect. And that was fine for the most part — Luo Binghe had naturally looked suave and handsome in red on black, and Liu Mingyan had been described as having the beauty of a new bride.

For Shen Qingqiu... he tried to add as much white as he could and then steer toward the yellows, but he couldn’t escape the overall image of a passionate flame, the wings of an embroidered bird sweeping across the hem of his outer robe and the edges of the wide sleeves.

Completely against his style.

He must have made quite the sight, because when Liu Qingge finally turned up to take him to this banquet, the man stopped and stared blankly.

Shen Qingqiu was doing a bit of staring of his own. It wasn’t that he’d never seen Liu Qingge in red, for all that the man favored plain white like many in Cang Qiong. It was just that... that red had been generally blood, not this fiery, energetic color. Combined with Liu Qingge’s perpetual stony facade, there should have been a mismatch, but somehow it only came across as charming and valiant. It even added some color to his cheeks, Shen Qingqiu noticed.
But still, how long was Liu Qingge planning to stare?

He cleared his throat, lightly tapping the fan he’d found on the table against his chin. That had been a nice touch — he quite liked this fan, with its surprisingly restrained design, for this place.

“Is there an issue with wearing your clan’s clothing?” he asked. “They were already in the room.”

Liu Qingge blinked quickly and tore his eyes away. “...No issue. Come on.”

Since he had no idea where to go, Shen Qingqiu had planned to follow him, but once in the hallway, Liu Qingge stopped and waited until he caught up. Only then did they resume walking, side by side. Well, they were both Peak Lords. Shen Qingqiu didn’t usually worry about details like that, but another, more standing-conscious person like, say, the original goods would have probably been offended by having to walk behind someone who was very technically lower than him in seniority.

Was this Liu-shidi’s attempt at being considerate? Too bad Liu Qingge was too busy staring fixedly ahead to notice the smile Shen Qingqiu shot him.

The sun was just setting, and lanterns had been lit across the estate grounds, casting a warm glow across the darkening passages and courts. The same warm light poured out of the main hall as they made their way inside.

What must have been the main members of the Liu clan were already gathered inside. Aside from Liu Qishuang, Shen Qingqiu thought he could recognize a few of Liu Mingyan’s — and Liu Qingge’s — cousins, as well as the elders who had protested quite vehemently against her relationship with Luo Binghe once his nature as a demon was revealed. As he followed Liu Qingge through the motions of offering his greetings and taking a seat, Shen Qingqiu tried to match the old men and women to the ways in which they had been defeated by the OP protagonist.

Thus distracted, it took him a moment to realize that something was a little off about their seating arrangements.

Weren’t their seats... a little too close? They were basically pressed completely side by side.
...Right. They were pretending to be a couple. Shen Qingqiu had mostly forgotten about that. But since Liu Qingge didn’t hesitate to sit down, Shen Qingqiu gracefully took his seat as well.

The meal had barely started when the first toast was called out. “Congratulations, cousin!” one of the young men seated further down the hall said with genuine happiness, as he lifted up his cup toward them. “All the best to your and your partner!”

“Congratulations!” several others chorused.

“Does this mean he beat you in battle?” a boy only about Luo Binghe’s age asked Liu Qingge with wide, curious eyes.

“No, not even once,” Liu Qingge answered before Shen Qingqiu could stop him.

“But Sister always says she won’t marry anyone who can’t beat her. Cousin isn’t like that?” the boy wondered. The older girl who must have been his sister elbowed him sharply.

Several people laughed. “If Qingge had that kind of requirement, he’d never find a partner at all,” an older man from Liu Qishuang’s generation pointed out, the pride in his tone unmistakable. Bai Zhan’s War God was a legend in the cultivation world, after all.

“I’m sure Elder Shen is a powerful warrior in his own right,” the one who had first toasted them said diplomatically. “Qing Jing Peak is second in the Cang Qiong hierarchy, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” Shen Qingqiu confirmed.

“How did you meet?” a teenager who must have been one of the clan’s disciples asked, looking rather starry-eyed at Liu Qingge. She wasn’t alone in that. Many of the younger generation around the hall appeared to have quite a serious case of hero-worship toward their Great Master Liu, and even those of Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge’s generation looked at him with obvious respect and fascination.

Thinking about it, with his great martial prowess, towering reputation and many achievements, not to mention his peerless looks, Liu Qingge was probably the pride of his clan.
A favored young master, treated as an idol... no wonder he turned out so standoffish and incapable of normal social interaction.

“They were disciples in the same sect, who would even remember that stuff?” a boy scoffed at the prior question. “What kind of battles did you fight together?”

Because obviously, they must have fought together very grandly, to end up cultivation partners.

“Have you beaten lots of demons together? Who beat more?”

“Did you ever rescue each other?”

The questions came pouring in.

“We met at the Twelve Peaks Sword-Testing Tournament,” Liu Qingge answered everything methodically — and rather dryly for a man supposedly in love. “We’ve fought many demons and monsters together, starting with when were succeeding disciples to our peaks. I didn’t count, but once he said he took down 11 to my 10. Saving each other...” His brows furrowed. “...Must have happened even before—”

The Q&A continued, but Shen Qingqiu stopped listening.

This was all interesting new backstory, the history of how the Liu-Shen relationship went! So it was quite strange that he couldn’t feel excited about it at all.

Shen Qingqiu had been planning to let Liu Qingge field his clan’s questions from the start, partly as payback for leaving him to answer Liu Qishuang back at Cang Qiong’s gate, and partly precisely because he didn’t know the answers at all.

So everything was going according to plan.

Except, now that it was happening...
He wanted to say, ‘We met at the Lingxi Caves. He was having a qi deviation, and I saved him, although I wasn’t sure it would work. He was making such a terrifying face back then! Then afterwards, he saved me when I got poisoned. It’s been a year since then, so we’ve been on a number of hunts together. I won’t deny that our Master Liu takes down more monsters, but I do pull my weight. We make a good combination!’

Naturally, he wouldn’t say any of that.

Picking up a dumpling, Shen Qingqiu turned to the man next to him.

“Say ‘ah’—” he directed Liu Qingge.

And stuffed a dumpling straight into his mouth, when he opened it to ask why.

Liu Qingge choked.

“Here, eat more, Shidi,” Shen Qingqiu directed firmly, piling food into Liu Qingge’s bowl. “You worked hard in the trial grounds, you need to recover your strength.”

When Liu Qingge managed to swallow the dumpling, seemingly without chewing, Shen Qingqiu deftly shoved another one into his mouth. Liu Qingge’s face turned purple... probably with rage, but possibly with asphyxiation. Eh. He was a cultivator, he’d survive.

Around the hall, the excited questions had been replaced by noises of others choking as well and a whole lot of giggling. Flustered whispers rose instead, for all the good that did. The only reason Shen Qingqiu couldn’t make out exactly what they were saying was because they were all whispering at the same time.

Seeing Liu Qingge actually chewing this time, eyes narrowed furiously, Shen Qingqiu held off on the next dumpling, although he held it up in a way that was perhaps too threatening for a loving cultivation partner.

...On the other hand, who even knew with these battle freaks.
Instead, he leaned in and whispered, “Keep going and tell them we hated each other next! Then
they’ll worry all over again!”

Unlike these amateur children, Shen Qingqiu made sure to keep his voice too low even for other
cultivators to make out his words. The fresh wave of embarrassed giggling that swelled up as he
leaned in helped provide cover.

“I can eat by myself,” Liu Qingge hissed back.

“This is how couples act,” Shen Qingqiu told him.

According to novels written by virgins who’ve never held a girl’s hand before, anyway.

“So say ah—”

However, Shen Qingqiu had underestimated the difference in their hand speed. Striking first, Liu
Qingge stuffed an entire roll into his mouth. Shen Qingqiu choked, just barely having time to flip
open his fan to cover this inelegant display.

Looking quite pleased with himself, Liu Qingge turned away.

Shen Qingqiu spent a moment or two on indignation, bordering on fury — This fellow! Really! —
but then he could only give up. There was no winning against their Master Liu, after all. When he
finally cleared his mouth and breathed out in relief, he couldn’t help smiling wryly. The
conversation had long since diverted to talk of recent battles, the younger generation bragging, the
older ones offering advice and also bragging about their own past glories.

The young man who had toasted them caught Shen Qingqiu’s eyes and smiled. “So the fan was for
you, Master Shen?” he asked. “Do you use a fan in battle as well?”

Even for the calmest Liu clan member, it was all about battle, Shen Qingqiu sighed. “I can, but
only to bludgeon. Quite inelegant,” he admitted.

“One of our uncles, he uses a dual wielding style — a sword and a metal fan,” the cousin started to
tell him, hitting on an easy topic of conversation. “It’s really quite something. It’s also a good tool for elemental skills, particularly wind, fire or water…”

~.~.~

Once the meal was over and the dishes cleared away, they naturally moved on to exhibitions of battle skill. Sword arts, for the most part, but also an impressive variety of fire-type elemental arrays which several branches of the clan apparently specialized in. They had made their way outside for more room to move, and the flashes of flame, in shapes like blooming flowers or birds with spread wings or roaring dragons, glowed against the night sky.

Liu Qingge had been pulled away by some of his relatives, and Shen Qingqiu found himself drifting to the edges of the gathering, feeling a little lost now that he was alone. Unlike Luo Binghe, he wasn’t circled out to perform in an attempt to trip him up, nor did he feel any particular need to volunteer an exhibition on his own. So all that remained was... just waiting.

To his surprise someone approached him where he had been idling the time away by the nearest grove of trees.

It was Liu Qishuang, her expression calm and perhaps pensieve as she looked over her clan’s festivities.

“Madam Liu,” Shen Qingqiu greeted her, nodding cordially even as he felt some twist of anticipation or maybe dread.

This was it, the moment of truth! Where, hopefully, she would accept him and this entire ‘secret route’ would finally end.

Or maybe he’d get rejected and beat up for daring to look at the Liu (elder) princess with covetous eyes. That was also a possibility, since Shen Qingqiu was not the protagonist with his charisma halo.

“Master Shen,” she replied easily enough. Of course, it couldn’t be that easy, and in the way he was coming to expect if not entirely become used to, she went straight for the throat. “Do you,” Liu Qishuang asked, in a steady, casual tone, “like Qingge?”
“Madam Liu, that kind of question—!” he protested, his fan fluttering rapidly. “Are you suggesting I’m leading him on?”

“What a guilty mind you have,” Liu Qishuang drew out ominously, but her attempts at menace quickly gave way to a faint smile. “No, I don’t think that,” she admitted. “I can see that you two are close, and I’m glad for that. I told him I wouldn’t meddle anymore, but... Even if he is already an adult and a great warrior in his own right, he is still also my Mingyu. That’s why I must say this to you.”

‘Mingyu’... Was that Liu Qingge’s name before becoming peak lord? It must have been the same ‘Ming’ as his sister and that one cousin of theirs who knew how to keep his head, Liu Mingchuan.

This point, Shen Qingqiu noted distantly, most of his attention on Liu Qishuang, who had turned to look at him gravely. She had to tilt her head back, and it was strange to see plainly that she was shorter than him, since the entire time, it had felt like he was looking up at her.

“I’ve never seen him show this much interest in another person,” Liu Qishuang told him. “Not in any of our family, not in a comrade, an enemy or a rival. Whatever relationship you have, it’s important to him. So that’s why... please treat him with care.”

This... was kind of embarrassing. No, it was very embarrassing.

More than anything, Shen Qingqiu wanted to look away, and his eyes slid to the side before dashing back to Liu Qishuang — because he couldn’t ignore this kind of heartfelt request either. This was, after all, a mother’s genuine love.

It wasn’t desperate or begging. She wasn’t looking for a promise, like the vow she had demanded from Luo Binghe to protect Liu Mingyan. It was just as she said, something she needed to tell him for her own peace of mind.

Liu Mingyan, Liu Qishuang... they had both asked Shen Qingqiu, even without knowing that it was because of him, because of Shen Yuan’s interference, that Liu Qingge was still alive at all.

Thinking of it, they must have mourned for him very much, in the original timeline.
It was one good thing that had surely come of his presence, and he wasn’t sure what kind of warm weight settled in his chest at the thought.

“I will,” Shen Qingqiu said quietly but firmly.

Liu Qishuang smiled and didn’t say anything more.

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It was only after they returned to their suite that the two of them realized an issue that had been staring them into the face all along.

There was only one bed.

~.~.~
Notes: Everyone seemed to think that this chapter would start with bed sharing. Unfortunately, I don’t think they would logically do that, as things stand. SQQ took the bed, and LQG meditated in a corner all night.

This is probably not immediately obvious, but I’m posting with a backlog. I’m actually writing chapter 12 right now, an arc ahead.

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Chapter 7: Arc 2 - A Helping Hand, A Beautiful Face

It was only after they returned to Cang Qiong — and endured a round of teasing about the red ‘wedding clothes’ they had been given by the Liu clan — that Shen Qingqiu remembered to follow up on something that had been bothering him for a while.

Gathering his mental strength, he knocked on the System’s door.

‘So is this secret route business over or what?’ he tried to convey.

And, importantly, was he getting any points out of it?

The System... fuzzed. Like the kind of old television he’d only seen on TV. There was no other way to describe it, and it filled Shen Qingqiu with a creeping sense of dread, somewhat different than the usual dread he felt toward the System as a whole. What was he going to do if this thing came down with a bug? Was there a customer support chat he could access? Could he run a search on fantasy Baidu?

Eventually, there was a reply.

[Secret Route is still in progress.]
But the mission to receive Liu Qishuang’s approval had succeeded, hadn’t it? (Was he getting points or not?)

Belatedly prompted, the System agreed, [Congratulations! For successfully gaining Liu Qishuang’s approval of your relationship, you have earned *beep* points!]

...How many points?

There was a static-y sound, then a long silence.

[Please stand by while plot deviations are being calculated. Thank you for your patience.]

Standby for long? What exactly is being calculated?

There was something like a mental click and the distinct sensation of the System disconnecting.

Well. Alright then.

Even if he failed this secret route, the cost was only 200 points, and checking his balance, he could afford that. Why worry about this kind of bugged, obviously beta side quest?

And, doing as he did best, Shen Qingqiu put the matter firmly out of his mind.

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It was important to focus on the positives (not the negatives, like the endless jokes from the other peak lords, or the Bai Zhan’s increasing grudge), and there was one positive that had come out of the whole thing.

That was Liu Mingyan.
Even after everything was resolved, and Shen Qingqiu made sure everyone was clear about his and Liu Qingge’s state of non-involvement, she continued to drop by Qing Jing to train with Luo Binghe. Originally, his cultivation and certainly his swordwork had been weaker than hers, and since it was just sparring with nothing on the line, the protagonist halo had failed to kick in. But it wasn’t long before Luo Binghe started closing the gap.

She seemed to be far better at teaching him swordforms than Shen Qingqiu. There wasn’t any stumbling in sight the times Shen Qingqiu sat in on their training sessions.

....It prickled a little at his pride, to be honest.

But the important part was that Luo Binghe was laying the groundwork for one of his most prominent romances!

Their relationship had a completely different tone, certainly, compared to their book alliance against... well, Shen Qingqiu himself, but it wasn’t a bad tone by any means. It was surprisingly forthright and honest, and they shared a similar, matched passion that drove them to the same level of diligence.

In fact, if Shen Qingqiu allowed himself to fantasize a little, wouldn’t it be wonderful if the two of them could become a couple even before the Immortal Alliance Conference and the Endless Abyss arc? If he had someone waiting for him to return, perhaps Luo Binghe wouldn’t get involved with so many shady demon sisters with very heavy tastes. Even if you can regrow limbs, getting bloodied up so much is really not so good...

And also, perhaps he’d be a little less murder- and revenge-happy, which would be great for his scum villain master.

Turning the thought over in his mind, Shen Qingqiu glanced surreptitiously at his disciple, as Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan brought the day’s sparring to a close. Binghe was already almost 16, wasn’t he? More than old enough to become conscious of the fairer sex, and yet his gaze politely never lingered on Liu Mingyan’s developing curves — or on any other girl.

As a teacher, perhaps it was time for him to nudge things along.

“Shizun, do you have any pointers for this disciple?” Luo Binghe asked, his expression lighting up and softening as he turned eagerly to Shen Qingqiu.
He really was growing quite handsome, especially slightly dishevelled and flushed like this. Shen Qingqiu smiled and waved him over, giving him a pat on the head.

Naturally, he had no pointers. He might have been able to perform some swordplay by relying on the skills of the original goods, but he was no expert. “You’ve improved,” he said instead. “Many thanks to Liu-shizi for helping Binghe.”

“No need,” Liu Mingyan said simply, in a way that was so similar to her brother that Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help smiling.

“Take a break, you’ve earned it,” he told both of them, gesturing to the seats next to him in the shaded, cool pavilion overlooking the small training area.

Beaming, Luo Binghe dropped down as close to him as possible. Shen Qingqiu tsked with mock consternation at the heat rising off him, but nonetheless obligingly fanned him a little. Over the months, Liu Mingyan had become accustomed enough with them to let her usually perfect posture slump a little and tugged at the edge of her veil to send a light breeze at her sweat-covered neck. The waving motion of the cloth showed a tantalizing hint of her chin and the corner of her jaw, making Shen Qingqiu stare.

Just a little more—!

Without noticing, he began to lean over as the veil crept up — and paused, hanging just short of revealing anything.

Shen Qingqiu abruptly came back to his senses and straightened up, just as Liu Mingyan let her veil drop back into place. Her shoulders shook minutely, with suppressed laughter. She ignored the narrow-eyed, exasperated look Luo Binghe shot her.

Clearing his throat, Shen Qingqiu pointedly ignored the entire event. Who knew the best heroine had that kind of humor? The her after her brother’s death had spared no time for anything but vengeance, and even after, she had remained quite taciturn and withdrawn. Luo Binghe had been the only one able to draw a strong reaction, despite Sha Hualing’s best efforts, and even then it had been only rarely, only a passionate outburst in times of danger.

“Shen-shibo, Luo-shixiong,” Liu Mingyan spoke up after the two disciples had rested in silence for
a while, “Master had approved this matter, so I need to let you know as well — I will not be able to attend our trainings together for some time. I will be away from Cang Qiong, maybe for a few days, maybe for a couple weeks.”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyebrows rose, automatically going through his mental list of canon events, but nothing even slightly matched up. These three years between Sha Hualing’s invasion and the conference had been almost entirely skimmed over, after all.

His lips twitched with interest, but also with some concern.

“Did something happen?” Luo Binghe asked before he could. There was a surprising furrow between his brows, his expression serious and focused. “Your family?”

“Nothing like that,” Liu Mingyan said, shaking her head. “It’s not my family. But rather... Do you remember Duanmu Yao, my brother’s fiancee?”

Who could forget?

“Since she is currently in seclusion, her family has been pushing her younger sister to train more with their Tian Xing sword. She’s even been assigned a hunt,” Liu Mingyan went on. “But Yin-jie is... not self-confident. She’s afraid of going alone, so she came to ask me to accompany her, and I agreed.”

Oh! This was another of Luo Binghe’s future wives! Shen Qingqiu perked up with interesting — internally.

It sounded like this timid little sister’s plot had returned to its proper flow, with her sister in seclusion and the family sword in her hands.

This event might have taken place in canon too, if it came from Duanmu Yao’s seclusion... But no. In the original timeline, Liu Mingyan would have been in mourning, just like Duanmu Yao. Shen Qingqiu didn’t think young sister Yin would have approached her then.

He glanced at the current Liu Mingyan, a twinge of something strange in his chest.
“It’s kind of you to help her,” he said.

Liu Mingyan’s eyebrows angled down slightly, conveying a faint sense of dissatisfaction. “It’s not kindness,” she muttered. “I’m doing this for myself... I want to get stronger.”

Even though she didn’t need to seek revenge?

Luo Binghe, at least, seemed to understand and nodded in acknowledgement. “See you when you get back,” he offered.

Going out on a hunt was a good way of advancing, certainly. It was a rare experience for disciples their age and cultivation level. But more importantly, this was an event with two of Luo Binghe’s future wives! That, more than anything, determined Shen Qingqiu’s decision.

Closing his fan, he smiled slightly. “Liu-shizi, how about taking Binghe along?” he suggested. “He’ll be useful, I’m sure. Consider it a favor to your martial uncle.”

Both of them turned to stare at Shen Qingqiu.

“Shizun...” Luo Binghe reacted first, but he appeared uncertain of what he actually wanted to say. His tone started out plaintive and petulant, only to trail off. Chewing on his lip, he ducked his head.

“No need, I would be happy to have him along, if Shen-shibo allows it,” Liu Mingyan said, more calmly. She shot Luo Binghe a look Shen Qingqiu couldn’t quite read. “It’s the least I can do, in any case.” Her eyebrows twitched slightly, as if she was trying to stifle a smile that no one could see anyway. “After all, we’re practically family.”

Luo Binghe glared. Shen Qingqiu sighed.

The jokes were never going to stop.

Whether it was Qi Qingqi smirking and snickering when Liu Qingge brought him the carcass of another rare monster to identify, or Mu Qingfang asking in a very (fake) professional tone about his recent experiences in dual cultivation, or Shang Qinghua staring at both of them in pure shock
once he returned and heard the whole story, or even Yue Qingyuan awkwardly patting him on the shoulder and saying how glad he would be to see Shen Qingqiu with a partner — there was always someone who had to remind him of the affair.

Which had not been a real affair, that was the entire point.

Now, even his co-conspirator betrayed him like this!

Feeling vaguely disheartened, Shen Qingqiu turned up his nose and waved her away.

“Yin-jie and I will be leaving tomorrow morning. We’ll be waiting for you at the sect gate, Luo-shixiong,” Liu Mingyan said and, bowing, departed.

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That evening, Shen Qingqiu took the opportunity to have a very important conversation with the future stallion harem master.

“Binghe,” he said carefully, “what do you think of Liu Mingyan?”

“Liu-shimei? In what sense?”

“Just in general.”

Luo Binghe was silent for a few moments, staring down at his calligraphy practice thoughtfully. “Her cultivation is quite strong, and she’s very skilled with the sword,” he offered finally. “She’s very smart too. She knows a lot of unexpected things. She’s a calm person, and easy to rely on. It feels like she’ll listen to you no matter what and not judge.” He frowned. “This disciple doesn’t know what Shizun is looking for...”

Smiling, Shen Qingqiu noted, “She’s like her brother in many ways.”

Strong and reliable, and able to keep a cool head when it counted. He hadn’t thought of it that way,
but Liu Qingge was also someone quite steady in his own way. And it really was quite easy to get carried away complaining to him...

Luo Binghe was watching him again. “What does Shizun think of Liu-shishu?” he asked, turning the question back on Shen Qingqiu.

“Well, he’s...” They were getting off topic. Quickly clearing his throat, Shen Qingqiu waved the subject away. “That’s not important right now. This teacher has heard that Liu-shizi is a world-shaking beauty. What does Binghe think?”

For some reason, Luo Binghe was frowning. ...Jealous of someone else talking about his future wife? No, wait, given the original goods’ improper interest in young women, this probably didn’t sound too good coming from Shen Qingqiu.

But before he could make some desperate course corrections, Luo Binghe repressed his darkening mood. “This disciple hasn’t seen her face either,” he said neutrally. “But I imagine it’s similar to Liu-shishu and Madam Liu. Both are very beautiful people.”

“That’s true, that’s true,” Shen Qingqiu agreed. He had long since accepted that Liu Qingge’s appearance was completely opposite what he’d expected of the War God, but it was impressive in another way — he was probably the only man beautiful enough to rival the protagonist himself.

...They were getting off topic again.

“But is Binghe interested to see? You two are getting along well, if you ask her, perhaps Liu Mingyan will show you,” Shen Qingqiu suggested, his tone lilting with teasing intent. “Or is there someone else who has captured Binghe’s interest?”

Luo Binghe made a choked sound, his cheeks flushing fetchingly.

...Oh. Oh!

“There is!” Shen Qingqiu exclaimed in surprise and so much interest that he forgot most of his usual cool facade. Sidling up to his disciple, he nudged him excitedly. “Which girl caught Binghe’s eye? You can tell this master!”
It didn’t seem to Liu Mingyan, to Shen Qingqiu’s disappointment. Was it Ning Yingying? Did Luo Binghe even have any interactions with other sisters yet?

Luo Binghe coughed heavily into his sleeve, turning his head away from his master and hiding his face. A little impatient, but also a little worried at such a strong reaction, Shen Qingqiu patted his back in what he hoped was a reassuring manner.

“No matter who it is, I will support you,” he promised.

He waited until his coughing had subsided, but even then Luo Binghe refused to face him again. Was he that shy about discussing such a thing with his master?

Shen Qingqiu considered pressing more, but in the end he relented.

“It’s alright, you don’t have to tell me,” he assured Luo Binghe, with a sigh in his heart. “But if you ever want advice, this master will be happy to help. Take this opportunity to get closer to her, and enjoy your youth together.”

Finally, after a long silence, Luo Binghe nodded slightly. “Does... Does Shizun have someone who caught his eye?” he asked, again turning the question back on him.

“This teacher does not,” Shen Qingqiu answered honestly, though he couldn’t help squirming slightly at having this topic applied to himself.

Luo Binghe peeked at him over his shoulder, his profile unreadable. “Does Shizun want someone? A cultivation partner?”

...Did he? Shen Qingqiu wasn’t sure.

Perhaps in the abstract sense, with more curiosity than genuine longing. He had been a single dog both his lives, so he had no basis for comparison. He couldn’t even imagine what having a partner would be like.
But they were getting off topic again! This conversation was about Luo Binghe’s future as a harem master, after all.

So Shen Qingqiu smiled and tried not to sound too much like an eager used car salesman. “Having a cultivation partner is a wonderful thing,” he said, at first with completely fake enthusiasm but getting more into it as he spoke. “Someone you can always rely on, who will support you no matter what and whom will share your burdens. Someone always by your side, who will wait for you if you’re ever apart... If Binghe found a cultivation partner, this master would feel assured.”

However, Luo Binghe’s expression only grew more and more troubled. He had turned to Shen Qingqiu, finally, but the way he leaned closer felt different than his usual stickiness. His hands hovered uncertainly near his lap, opening and closing, reaching out only to pull back.

“I—! This disciple will support Shizun and share his burdens! I will always be by Shizun’s side!” Luo Binghe insisted, peering up at Shen Qingqiu with fierce, pleading determination.

It seemed like he had misunderstood something. It wasn’t that Shen Qingqiu had been revealing his worries in a roundabout way... but it was still a sweet sentiment, and he stroked the boy’s hair with an indulgent smile.

“You should focus on pursuing your own happiness,” he said. “Don’t waste your youth worrying about this old man. Perhaps I will also find someone to place in my heart!”

Unlikely, when Shen Qingqiu had the far more pressing concern of not dying, but he smiled and tapped his fan lightly against Luo Binghe’s forehead.

Still, despite Shen Qingqiu’s best efforts to comfort him, his student’s expression remained distressed and even tinged with rebelliousness. It looked like there was something else Luo Binghe wanted to say, but in the end, he remained silent and sullen, until they parted for the night.

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Mirror of Desire

**Notes:** Once again, more of the names are stolen. The cousin had his family name changed, but originally comes from Luo Mingchuan, the ML of Villain’s White Lotus Halo. Duxian-Er comes from the pseudonym of the MC in Demon Wang’s Golden Favorite Fei. The translator’s notes explained that Du= poison, Xian=fairy, Er= term of endearment. I changed the format to watch what we seem to be using for demons.

~.~.~

Chapter 8: Mirror of Desire

Unlike her outgoing and generally confident older sister, Duanmu Yin was a timid girl who seemed afraid of even being near Luo Binghe without Liu Mingyan physically between them. Was his bad mood that obvious? Luo Binghe had thought he was hiding it well enough, but then, he had still made a point of leaving the bamboo house before Shen Qingqiu woke.

He glanced at Liu Mingyan, silently asking for her perspective. She only sighed quietly and gave a minute shrug. Duanmu Yin was just like that. It was no surprise the girl hadn’t wanted to go alone, even though her mission was a relatively simple one.

“The Duanmu family recently uncovered the entrance to a previously unknown secret realm,” Liu Mingyan explained once they were on the road. “After their initial investigation, it doesn’t seems like there are any treasure or noteworthy monsters. But we are to check it over more thoroughly, just in case.”

Busy work, more or less, with no priority at all. It was simply an excuse to send Duanmu Yin, the second young miss of the family, out of the family compound and have her gain some experience.

However, since they gave her the family’s treasured sword, it wasn’t as if they were trying to get rid of her. The danger must have been genuinely minor.

Luo Binghe considered all of this silently, but did not comment on it. Instead, he put on an apologetic expression. He didn’t need to say anything, Liu Mingyan understood immediately. “Luo-shixiong, are you familiar with secret realms?” she asked.
“Unfortunately not,” Luo Binghe admitted.

After the Skinner incident... no, after his qi deviation, Shen Qingqiu had made every effort to provide Luo Binghe with the most complete education a cultivator could wish for. But even with Luo Binghe’s innate intelligence, it would take some time for him catch up on not only the years of studies he had missed at Qing Jing, but even the basic foundation that the ‘scholarly’ young masters and young misses who made up the main body of disciples had boasted even before joining Cang Qiong.

Even among disciples, Liu Mingyan was well-read, so it was no surprise that she knew things he had never heard of. It was also a little frustrating, but the matter of fact way she accepted it made it easier for him accept as well.

Liu Mingyan nodded and explained, “You know that the world consists of the human realm and the demon realm. But they are not different lands next to each other. Rather, they are different dimensions that sometimes come into contact and overlap along the borderlands.”

This part, even common people had some knowledge of. It was also, incidentally, one of the things Elder Dream Demon had explained — ranted about, really — when Luo Binghe let on his lack of understanding regarding ‘the great demon race.’

“Secret realms are fragments of dimensions that are part of neither one,” Liu Mingyan went on. “No one knows how they are created, if it was intentional or a natural occurrence. Inside there are often ancient monsters and lost treasures from ages past. Some of them are completely different from our world! The sky is always crimson, or rivers flow uphill. Or the gravity will change suddenly, so you’re walking up the side of a cliff... Sometimes there are even lands floating in the sky!”

Her usually calm voice took on a gradually stronger tone of excitement as she spoke.

Noticing Luo Binghe’s amused smile, she cut herself and awkwardly cleared her throat.

“In any case,” she said quickly, “we’ll need to be vigilant once inside. This secret realm is supposed to be low level, but they can hide unexpected dangers.”

“I understand. I’ll do my best not to slow you down,” Luo Binghe said. He smiled and tried include Duanmu Yin in it as well, but she only squeaked when their eyes met by chance and quickly
ducked behind Liu Mingyan. Deciding not to react to that, Luo Binghe looked back to Liu Mingyan and added instead, “And which novel had a lot about them?”

Liu Mingyan glared. But her ire lasted only for a few moments before her shoulders slumped in defeat. “Ancient Labyrinth of Primordial Cultivation,” she admitted, muttering.

“Is it good?” Luo Binghe inquired politely.

“Pretty good. The worldbuilding is very solid, and the portrayal of secret realms is accurate. I checked,” Liu Mingyan said. She stared fixedly at the back of her horse’s head, her tone grudging. “The first seventeen volumes, at least. The last arc is something of a mess.”

He’d have to tell Shizun then.

‘Shizun...’

Luo Binghe thought he didn’t let any of his suddenly worsening mood show on his face, but Liu Mingyan still darted him a glance as if she could see right through him. She nudged her horse closer to his, until they were riding side by side and a good distance away from the third member of their party, who kept her head carefully lowered, as if trying to disappear.

“What happened?” Liu Mingyan asked directly.

It was tempting to tell her that it was nothing or just refuse to answer. Liu Mingyan wouldn’t be offended, he knew.

But there was a persistent itch in his chest that had only gotten worse with time, and Luo Binghe found himself considering how to put his worries into words.

Would it help? He didn’t even know.

As grateful as he was for Ning Yingying’s kindness toward him, the idea of confiding in her was not even worth consideration. Even though their ages were supposed to be close, Luo Binghe couldn’t help seeing her as a child. It felt like their different experiences created an unbridgeable
gap, and the things he thought about would be impossible to even explain. And the only other person close to him was... Shen Qingqiu himself.

Well, there was also Elder Dream Demon, but...

Remembering the old demon’s unasked for advice only made Luo Binghe’s stomach clench more.

But Liu Mingyan — Luo Binghe had told the truth when he said she felt like a reliable person that was easy to speak to. Her manner was so calm and composed, as if nothing, no matter what he said, could shake her.

“I...” he said slowly, almost without meaning to, “I wonder what I would do if Shizun fell in love with someone.”

...Ah. Luo Binghe closed his eyes in consternation as soon as the words were out.

It was both too much and too little.

Liu Mingyan’s dark eyes were as deep and placid as the middle of a mountain lake, as she studied him silently. Coming to some conclusion, she finally looked away and took a moment to measure her reply.

“Don’t assume the worst about yourself,” she said.

Letting out a sharp breath almost like a laugh, Luo Binghe shook his head.

She saw right through him.

Since the evening before, Luo Binghe had been thinking about something he hadn’t really considered. He had always thought of Shen Qingqiu’s possible romantic prospects as a matter of how he measured against the potential competition. Compared to the sort of people who would dare to pursue Qing Jing’s peak lord, he was too young, too weak, too lacking in every area related to his background or standing.
To close that gap, to come to tower over all others that might try to stake a claim, was what Luo Binghe struggled to do. He would do it one day, he was certain, but what if that day came too late?

Well, the answer was simple — all those great prospects, all those potential suitors, he would drive them off. Even if he was weaker, hadn’t it been the old Shen Qingqiu himself who had shown how useful the methods of the weak could be? Until he became a great and righteous cultivator worthy of his master, Luo Binghe still had lowly methods to achieve his goals.

But.

But was if it...

What if it was Shen Qingqiu’s own wish? What if it meant going against his master’s will?

What if it was Shen Qingqiu who fell in love? What if he was the one who sought that match?

What would Luo Binghe do then?

He really didn’t know.

His heart trembled. Swallowing heavily he glanced at Liu Mingyan. She looked back calmly, giving no ground on her answer.

‘Don’t assume the worst about yourself,’ huh?

Still, Luo Binghe could only hope he would never have to find out.

~.~.~

Unexpectedly, Shen Qingqiu found himself at loose ends.
It wasn’t as if he and his favorite disciple were never apart, really. But the fact remained that Luo Binghe had never been away from Shen Qingqiu for this long before, not since first moving in. The bamboo house felt empty without him. It left Shen Qingqiu with a complicated feeling.

Before too much longer, Luo Binghe would obtain a sword at Wan Jian Peak and be able to take missions independently, without supervision or special circumstances. He would be away from Qing Jing more and more often. And then, someday, he would disappear into the Endless Abyss for five years. After that, he would never return to the sect except as an enemy, something Shen Qingqiu hoped to ensure did not need to occur at all.

These peaceful days of master and disciple tied at the hip would be coming to an end. This was just the first taste of it.

Shen Qingqiu sighed.

He really needed to start working on tapering off Luo Binghe’s stickiness, in preparation.

Trying to distract himself from this weird separation anxiety — What was the point of constantly wondering how Luo Binghe was doing? He was the protagonist, he couldn’t die, and he had two of his wives with him. It would be fine! — Shen Qingqiu had been sipping a lukewarm, rather subpar cup of tea when something chimed in his mind.

Something he knew very well, of course, no matter how much he preferred to forget about the thing in question.

His first instinct would have been to assume that the System was issuing some new objective or update about Luo Binghe’s first mission (comparatively) alone. However, that was not the case.

What followed instead was a cascade of notifications, stacking on top of each other so quickly that the Google Translate voice talked over itself to announce them.

[For unlocking Secret Route, B points +100]
[For raising favorability with Liu Mingyan, B points +50]
[For raising favorability with Liu Qingge, B points +70]
The notifications blurred together until he couldn’t make them out.

This was... actually really good?

Look at those points!

But just as Shen Qingqiu felt his heart leap with joy, the System began a second round.

[-20 Coolness points]
[-50 Coolness points]
[-10 Coolness points]
[-70 Coolness points]
[-25—
[-50—

As always, the fluctuations in Coolness points went completely unexplained.

Carefully setting his tea cup back on the table, Shen Qingqiu steepled his hands and rested his forehead against them. Internally, he screamed. What kind of bug was the System having? First it failed to calculate points at all, now it dumped out this massive backlog, but it was a huge mix of gaining and losing?

And then, because it was a trolling piece of junk, the System added a final announcement.

[Congratulations on clearing the first mission of the Secret Route! Please continue your hard work in the next mission]
It wasn’t over...

[Objective: Dramatically rescue Liu Qingge]

...

What? WHAT?!


But no matter how much he pounded against the System’s door, no explanation was forthcoming.

As far as Shen Qingqiu knew, Liu Qingge was out somewhere again, as usual. He had probably left no word of where he was going or for how long, as usual. Even racking his brain for anything that might have stood out in his recent behavior, Shen Qingqiu came up empty. They had met for meridian cleaning and done a hunt together, as usual, but that was all.

Just as Shen Qingqiu was ready to run off to Bai Zhan or even Qiong Ding and start banging on literal doors, a voice came from just outside his bamboo hut’s door.

“Shizun? There’s a visitor here for you.”

It was Ming Fan.

But more importantly, it was clearly a plot hook!

Even bugged and making up nonsense, the System didn’t fail him completely!

He patted his chest over his heart, feeling a bit silly getting worked up about nothing — of course there would be a way to progress the mission, what was he thinking — and quickly smoothed down his slightly dishevelled hair and robes. Once he was sure his appearance was in order, Shen
Qingqiu called out, “Come in.”

The person Ming Fan showed into the bamboo hut was one of the Liu cousins, making Shen Qingqiu breath a quiet sigh of relief. It really is a plot hook then.

“Liu Mingchuan, it’s been a while,” he greeted, nodding to Ming Fan in dismissal and gesturing this guest into his home. “I was not expecting guests, so please pardon my lack of hospitality.”

Liu Mingchuan’s eyebrows rose. He probably hadn’t expected Shen Qingqiu to remember his name. Though they had talked for a while at the banquet in Huo Hong Valley, he hadn’t introduced himself, and there had been a fairly large number of various Liu relatives assembled. They had understandably started to blur after a while.

Shen Qingqiu was not about to explain that the novel had made a point of highlighting his uncharacteristic for a Liu mild demeanor and focus on spiritual skills instead of swordplay, and that this extra attention in the descriptions had made Shen Yuan wonder for a long time if he was supposed to be some kind of romantic rival, only for Liu Mingchuan do nothing of note at all in the entire arc about meeting Liu Mingyan’s family. Maybe he had been intended that way, and Airplane Toward the Sky just dropped that plot thread too. There was no way to know now. At the time, Shen Yuan had spent a while raging at the pointless word count and character squandered.

“No, no, it’s my fault for intruding on Elder Shen so suddenly,” Liu Mingchuan said quickly and diplomatically. He cupped his hands and ducked his head very politely, but he didn’t waste any more time beating around the bush — truly a member of the Liu clan, in the end. “I will not trouble Elder Shen for long. In fact, I’m looking for Cousin Qingge. Does Elder Shen have any information about his whereabouts?”

“I do not,” Shen Qingqiu admitted. He was also eager to move this event along. “Is there a specific reason you are looking for Liu-shidi? Liu Mingyan is also currently away, so perhaps I can help you instead...?”

“Yes, I am aware,” Liu Mingchuan admitted absently — he must have gone to see Liu Mingyan first. His usually calm expression showed a deep internal debate as he looked away.

Well, in that case Shen Qingqiu would just have to help him decide. Tapping his fan against his shoulder, he spoke slowly and firmly as he looked at Liu Mingchuan with determined, “Please be honest — is Liu-shidi in trouble?”
Some realization quickly passed across the Liu cousin’s face, and his lips twitched in an almost sheepish way before his expression smoothed out again in seriousness.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But... I’m afraid he might be.”

Shen Qingqiu nodded. “Tell me everything,” he ordered.

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The plot went like this:

A while back, Liu Qingge had asked his family for any information they had about a certain demonic cultivator. She was the slippery sort who was nearly more rumor than substance, so there had been a number of unsubstantiated leads. So, since then, Liu Qingge had been steadily working through them.

With his skills, it generally didn’t take him more than a few days to sort out any single lead, at which point he always returned to his clan to receive the next one.

...Shen Qingqiu could vaguely see where this story was going.

“He hasn’t come back after heading out to investigate the last lead,” he guessed, his lips thinning unhappily.

“He hasn’t,” Liu Mingchuan confirmed. “It’s been over a week. I realize it sounds like I’m fussing pointlessly, but...”

“Better to fuss than to worry too late,” Shen Qingqiu said firmly. He might have taken a more hands-off approach normally, but at this point he knew that Liu Qingge did, in fact, need rescuing. “I will help you look for him. Which lead was he following?”

He was already mentally calculating what he would need to do before leaving. Ming Fan could handle his duties, he decided. They would fly there, they were both high enough in their cultivation. But it would be a good idea to bring some additional talismans, some pills, anything
else? He couldn’t count on easy mode or any knowledge of the novel events this time...

“It was at the caves at Ming River, south of here,” Liu Mingchuan said, a somewhat odd expression on his face as he politely didn’t watch Shen Qingqiu’s preparations too closely. “We weren’t sure, but it was possible that the person spotted at the hot springs there was indeed Duxian-Er.”

Shen Qingqiu paused. “He was looking for Duxian-Er? The poison expert? Why?”

He received another odd look. “He didn’t tell me,” Liu Mingchuan said diplomatically. “So I’d like to avoid making unfounded claims.”

...He definitely knew.

Furrowing his brows, Shen Qingqiu tapped the end of his fan against his chin and mentally reviewed everything he knew about this character, Duxian-Er, but he still couldn’t guess why Liu Qingge might be interested in her in particular. In the end, he dismissed that train of thought with a shake of his head.

The important part was that her Water Moon Mirror really might trip up even Bai Zhan’s War God. The plot was coming together.

“Nevermind,” he decided. “Let’s go.” But catching another glimpse of Liu Mingchuan’s expression on their way out, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help endure it anymore and asked directly, “What is it?”

Liu Mingchuan cleared this throat, looking sheepish again. “It’s nothing,” he said. “I should have realized it would be like that. The two of you... are partners after all.”

Fortunately, he didn’t see Shen Qingqiu’s stone-like expression in that moment.

He was grateful for the points the Secret Route provided and it was nice, in a way, seeing more of Liu Qingge, really.

But why did it have to pick that particular running joke...?
Notes: I see no one appreciated a chapter full of LBH angst. Well, I won’t argue that this story’s quality is quite poor, but I’m in too deep to stop and I’m definitely not rewriting, so full speed ahead I guess...

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Chapter 9: A Kiss that is not a Kiss

The Ming River was neither big nor small, winding its way past a mountain and down a valley. There were several small towns along its length, and it was in one of them that some odd rumors came about.

If you go to the natural hot spring by the caves, you might see the person you love, bathing there, the rumors said.

If you go into the caves, you might see a fairy in white, graceful and slender.

But at the same time, people began to disappear at the hotspring and in the caves nearby.

Duxian-Er was the pseudonym of a demonic cultivator who specialized in poisons. She wore a mask, leading some to guess she had damaged her face with her own poisons.

In fact, beneath her mask was... another mask.

This was her most dangerous weapon as well — the Water Moon Mirror, a magic item that gave her the appearance of whoever the other person desired the most. She used this ability to — what else — kiss her opponents and draw out their life energy in this fashion.

For reasons not entirely explained, Luo Binghe had seen through the Water Moon Mirror and glimpsed her real face. Saying some sweet words about how her real face was far more stunning than any illusion, he seduced her and turned her own draining technique against her, rendering her powerless and pliant and papapa, etc, etc.
There had been some hints that she was part-demon like Luo Binghe, but then the next heroine of the week had arrived, and it was time for the old goods to be dropped like a sack of moldy rice, along with all plot threads related to her.

She hadn’t been a particularly notable character, but she appeared somewhat regularly to either help poison some enemy or help treat some little sister, or sometimes both during the harem intrigue sections. Generally, her skills were redundant or unnecessary if Luo Binghe himself was around.

So what could Liu Qingge want from her? To train against a poison user? To challenge himself against her Water Moon Mirror?

Come to think of it, what would someone as battle-obsessed as Liu Qingge even see in the Water Moon Mirror?

Would he, like Luo Binghe, see her real face — by the logic of ‘wanting’ his opponent the most? So then, would things proceed like in the novel? Had Liu Qingge been gone so long because he and her were, were...?

No, no, no. Shen Qingqiu quickly shook his head.

This was Liu Qingge!

And, more importantly, stealing the protagonist’s wife (one of them) was absolutely out of the question!

Given their level of cultivation, the trip was not a long one, and soon Liu Mingchuan was guiding them both down into the valley, toward a persistent fogbank that clung to the mountainside even so late in the day. It must have been from the hot springs, Shen Qingqiu realized.

Indeed, the air grew hot and muggy as they plunged into the cloud of mist, before it opened up onto a small hilltop terrace. The springs in question were clear and placid, steam wafting off of them. A green blanket of grass and sparse trees surrounded them. It looked peaceful and pleasant.
It was also empty. Shen Qingqiu could see that even before they touched down on the damp grass.

“Let’s check the caves next,” he said, scanning the empty pools one more time, then turning and striding toward the nearest cave entrance. Liu Mingchuan followed wordlessly.

However, just after they passed the first fork, he stopped. When Shen Qingqiu glanced back at him questioningly, Liu Mingchuan said, “Elder Shen, did you feel that? It was faint, but we’ve stepped into an array. A labyrinth one, I think.”

Shen Qingqiu might have felt something a moment before, but it had been such a small sensation that he hadn’t paid it any mind. Certainly, he couldn’t have identified it so precisely.

This temporary party member’s skills were higher than expected.

This also proved they were in the right place. A normal cave wouldn’t have an array on it, and Duxian-Er would have taken it down when she left.

“How can you break it?” he asked.

Liu Mingchuan shook his head. “Not from here. But perhaps we can reach the center and dispel it from there.” He looked around slowly, at something in the distance, past the walls. “This array won’t allow us to leave, but going forward should be possible.”

When Shen Qingqiu stepped aside and gestured for him to lead the way, Liu Mingchuan made a seal with one hand, handlelessly drawing his sword. It hovered in front of him, parallel to the ground and turned slowly. It was... humming was the closest description for it, as if tuning itself. Shen Qingqiu still couldn’t quite tell the difference, but at one point, it must have reacted to something, enough for Liu Mingchuan to send it turning back the opposite direction until it settled on a specific direction, like the needle of a compass.

“That way,” he said.

With his sword as a guide, he took point.
They travelled like this for a while, until they came to a larger cavern with several tunnels branching off. The direction that the sword pointed, but the two cultivators exchanged a look.

They both noticed it this time — a faint scent of fragrant grasses, like incense.

It came from a completely different direction.

Shen Qingqiu almost wished the System had provided a countdown to mission failure, because it certainly felt like a timed mission. But hitting at the System’s door provided no additional information, and he could only guess at the level peril Liu Qingge was facing in the meantime.

“Let’s split up,” Shen Qingqiu decided. “Will you be alright?”

After all, no matter how level headed or skilled, Liu Mingchuan was closer in age to Liu Mingyan than Liu Qingge and technically still a disciple.

This disciple nodded calmly. “Good luck, Elder Shen. Please find Cousin Qingge,” he said.

Bidding his temporary party member goodbye even sooner than expected, Shen Qingqiu followed the flowery scent through the winding tunnels. It quickly grew thicker, until it was almost overpowering. To begin with, the cavern had been hot and muggy from the nearby hot springs, and combined with the strong incense in the air, Shen Qingqiu’s head was starting to pound, immortal constitution or not.

...Ah, this incense probably had some special property, didn’t it?

There was nothing for it now. Focusing on circulating his qi to hopefully stave off the effect, Shen Qingqiu hurried onward.

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He had long since lost track of how long it had been and how many turns he had taken when he arrived at a part of the caverns that was... lived in, for lack of a better term. Though sparse, there were several pieces of furniture scattered around the sloping stone floor — a few screens, a table
and a chest with the implements for preparing medicine, an incense stand, hanging gauze curtains around what must have been a bed...

A sturdy chair, standing separate from everything.

And, tied to it, a slumped figure.

“Liu-shidi!” Shen Qingqiu exclaimed, rushing to his side without thinking.

Liu Qingge was unconscious, his head hanging completely slack against his chest. He had been drained almost to his limit, but it seemed Duxian-Er had been prologing her ‘meal’ by leaving him alive and allowing to recover just enough to feed her again. It was rare for her to catch such a powerful cultivator, after all.

The ropes tying his arms to the chair’s arm rests weren’t even Immortal Binding Cables, which meant that even if he woke up, he wouldn’t have been able to break free. Cursing mentally, Shen Qingqiu spitefully ripped them apart even as he checked Liu Qingge’s pulse and, closing a hand around his wrist, began to transfer qi.

“Liu-shidi! Liu-shidi, can you hear me?” he called out again. Curling his free hand around Liu Qingge’s neck, his tilted his head back and scanned his face.

What Duxian-Er drained was some poorly explained form of life energy, not qi itself, but restoring his qi should have been enough to improve Liu Qingge condition. And indeed, his breathing was already beginning to deepen and a displeased frown formed on his previously too blank face.

Shen Qingqiu breathed a sigh of relief. With the first step in the mission thus resolved, he could feel free to start complaining mentally.

Because this situation was clearly backwards, entirely wrong!

What kind of shady means had the System used to drag Liu Qingge along with this dubious plot? He was Bai Zhan’s War God! He had no desire for anyone except to beat them up! And a cultivator of his level wouldn’t fall easily to poison, so how did Wife #245 manage to nab him? Nonsense! Pure nonsense!
They would never speak of this situation again, once they were done with it, Shen Qingqiu decided right there and then. There was no reason for Liu Qingge’s reputation to suffer just because of this stupid new direction of the plot.

Liu Qingge groaned quietly, already coming to. His eyes slitted open and stared at the man leaning over him, still not entirely focused.

Being stared at like that, Shen Qingqiu realized just how close they were. But before he could pull back, Liu Qingge gritted his teeth and glared blearily.

“You!” he barked in the kind of tone Shen Qingqiu hadn’t heard directed at him since that first meeting in the Lingxi Caves. “Get... off—!”

“Shidi, please calm down. It’s me, Shixiong is only trying to help,” Shen Qingqiu hushed him. With Liu Qingge’s current state, even his thrashing felt like little more than irritated patting against Shen Qingqiu’s chest and sides. Steadily, he continued to transfer qi.

Inside, he felt a bit irritated. He hadn’t realized the memory of the original goods, Shen Jiu, was still so persistent in Liu Qingge’s heart.

It made sense, of course. How many years back did their history stretch? Even if Liu Qingge was like his mother, focusing on the present and not a person’s past, it wasn’t as if he would just forget it either.

It was only natural.

But even so... The corner of Shen Qingqiu’s mouth twitched downward.

Whether or not Liu Qingge understood what he was saying remained unclear, as the burst of energy faded and the man slumped over again. His life was not in danger, and all he needed was time for his qi to circulate, so letting go of his hand, Shen Qingqiu pushed off the chair and straightened.

He was about to pull Liu Qingge onto his back when the faint sound of approaching footsteps reached him.
Given their unfamiliarity with each other, he couldn’t tell if it was Liu Mingchuan doubling back to meet him, whether because the array was down or because he had run into trouble. However, Shen Qingqiu doubted it. Those steps were too unhurried.

There was no choice. Arranging Liu Qingge’s body on the chair in the same position he found him in, Shen Qingqiu concealed himself behind one of the screens and waited, hand on Xiu Ya.

Since Luo Binghe had bypassed it entirely, Water Moon Mirror was not explained in any particular detail within Proud Immortal Demon Way. It was a mask with the ability to ‘bewitch the heart by showing the one who was most desired,’ so Shen Qingqiu had imagined it to be something like a human skin mask that could change between faces.

Thus, knowing to expect seeing someone who had no business being there, Shen Qingqiu didn’t feel too concerned with this particular trick.

If anything, he felt a little curious about who the Water Moon Mirror would show him.

Someone he would want to kiss, given Duxian-Er’s methods. So...

Just not an actress from the dubious porn he’d watched back in his original world. Please, anything but that.

Or Qi Qingqi. She’d sense it somehow and kill him the next time they met.

Actually, any of his coworkers would be very awkward. They were all such beautiful people, too.

...Maybe he didn’t want to know after all.

Preoccupied with his internal debate, Shen Qingqiu almost missed when a white-clad, elegant figure glided into the cave, each step graceful and measured and somehow incredibly alluring. He could see now how the rumors about the beauty in the caves started. In the first glimpse of Duxian-Er, he noted distantly that she was a slender, tall woman—
Then, the white figure blurred like mist in the morning sun, and became... different.

The Water Moon Mirror had activated, and Shen Qingqiu had underestimated it completely.

The person he was looking at was Liu Qingge.

Even though he knew that this was impossible, all doubt was completely suppressed in his heart. He had seen the real Liu Qingge just moments before, this couldn’t be him! But it was. He ‘knew’ without a doubt that it was.

Wrong. But it was true. Wrong! But it was real.

Struggling with himself frantically and futilely, unable to look away, Shen Qingqiu took a step back. The folding screen swayed and clattered to the ground as he bumped into it, but Shen Qingqiu didn’t, couldn’t notice.

Why was it Liu Qingge at all? The small part of him that could still think protested. But... why wouldn’t it be?

That person turned and looked at him.

Liu Qingge smiled, faint but unmistakable, the same simple curve of the lips that had left Shen Qingqiu flustered in surprise back when they first agreed to keep up the ruse and end his engagement. This man... really was just too beautiful.

Whether he was frowning, or glaring, or keeping the same blank look, or smiling like this, he really was just too stunning.

Shen Qingqiu had thought he’d adjusted to it, more or less, but sometimes he couldn’t help being reminded of how attractive Liu Qingge was. Seeing him always, without fail made Shen Qingqiu’s mood brighten. When Liu Qingge approached, what could he do except smile back and reach out?

Wrong! This was completely wrong? What was he thinking? What was he doing? Wrong, wrong, wong! Completely wrong!
Those stubborn thoughts were drowned out completely. His heart was already long bewitched. After all, he didn’t need to worry if this person was here.

“Shidi...” Shen Qingqiu muttered helplessly as a rested on his neck and pulled him... in? down?

The person in front of him chuckled, some amusement tugging at the corner of their lips, and closed the remaining distance between them.

Shen Qingqiu’s head swam, and his eyes slipped shut. In the back of his mind, just as distant as his logic and self-awareness, a cold, unnatural voice chimed in.

[For triggering the fake kiss event, +20 points]

~.~.~

Liu Qingge had been drifting in and out of consciousness for a long time. He didn’t know how long, which frustrated and infuriated him equally through the haze in his mind, but it must have been days — not that there was any sense of time passing in the cave and its unclear glowing lights.

When he came to and saw that face again, he knew it was not a good thing, even if that knowing part of him was always drowned out by the ensnaring magic of the mask.

Except that this time, his body responded — protesting and struggling, no matter how feebly. His thoughts were too sluggish to understand what that must have meant, and then he blacked out again, a comforting warmth circling through his meridians.

A sharp clatter jerked him back to consciousness, and this time his mind was almost clear.

The ropes he had been vaguely aware of were gone. His entire body felt weak and loose in a way he hadn’t been pushed to in years, but that handicap only sharpened his focus. There was movement to the side, and Liu Qingge subtly tilted his head until he could see the hems of overlapping white and pale green robes.
Two people, close together, but not struggling.

Not that it meant anything. No, it meant something he hated. He recognized the embroidery on that green hem. His vision started to waver a little, and Liu Qingge quickly closed his eyes.

Silently, he slipped out of the chair. He didn’t know where Cheng Luan was, and he couldn’t risk trying to summon it. He’d have to fight barehanded. Gathering qi in his palm, he kept his eyes on the shadows across the smooth stone floor.

And struck.

Duxian-Er was an experienced demonic cultivator, and she managed to evade his attack. But in her surprise, she let go of Shen Qingqiu, who dropped to the ground bonelessly. However, his breathing was sharp and labored, almost panicked, so he must been still conscious. Keeping his head down, Liu Qingge put himself between him and the enemy.

It wasn’t his first time fighting without the benefit of sight. He couldn’t claim that it didn’t impede him entirely, but it was not entirely debilitating either, and without sight, Water Moon Mirror could not activate.

Duxian-Er laughed. Her own voice was light and bell-like. “Why didn’t you look? It would have been a one of a kind show!”

With a swipe of his hand, Liu Qingge knocked aside the needles she had thrown at him, under the cover of her voice. Poisoned, no doubt. He didn’t bother to reply. His reaction time was slow, his muscles were still loose and shaky, and his qi was weaker than he could remember. But he could fight, and fight he would.

“You two are quite the pair,” she went on, circling. “it’s not often I catch a matched set. Although, judging by your taste... Did I steal the first before you even had a chance to try it out?”

Her footsteps had been even and measured, until they weren’t — disappearing completely without a hint to her movements.

Liu Qingge instinctively threw himself aside. He could feel something whip past, almost entirely silent. What kind of weapon was she using? A long cloth, he judged. Depending on her cultivation,
the weight behind it could very well break bones. But it was still a cloth, and when his hand snapped out back where he had been standing the moment before, he was able to grab hold of it.

Trying to pull her to him was unlikely to work, but Liu Qingge only needed to judge the direction of the other end. He struck again, his qi detonating with enough force to send Duxian-Er’s slight body flying. He had hit an arm, Liu Qingge thought, his mouth tilting down in displeasure. An arm was not a battle-ending injury.

But now that she was injured and more aware of his abilities, Duxian-Er was no longer interested in playing around. The sound of her movements was completely done, and his second, follow up attack hit nothing.

“Liu-shidi!” Shen Qingqiu’s voice rang out suddenly.

It was a warning and a signal all at once.

Xiu Ya sang it shot through the air. There was the indescribable sound of a blade piercing flesh, and Duxian-Er’s wet cough as she choked on blood. It must have pierced her chest, but with her level of cultivation it was quite possibly not fatal.

But most importantly, Liu Qingge could still hear Xiu Ya. It was vibrating with a clear, metallic sound that couldn’t be missed.

The corner of Liu Qingge’s lips twitched up, even as he closed the distance and lashed out with one hand.

Before he had aimed toward the center of his opponent’s mass, wanting the highest chance of hitting. But based on Xiu Ya’s position, he could guess where her head was, and that was where he aimed now. Duxian-Er gasped and frantically tried to back away, but it was too late and her injuries slowed her.

There was a sense of impact under his palm, and the sound of something shattering. Duxian-Er wailed.

“Liu-shidi, get back!” Shen Qingqiu called out, and Liu Qingge obeyed instantly.
Just in case, he lifted one sleeve to cover his nose and mouth. This was a poison expert, after all. But even as he stretched his senses, he couldn’t pick up her presence. She had disappeared in the meanwhile.

“She’s gone,” Shen Qingqiu confirmed. “It’s alright to look, you broke the Water Moon Mirror.”

Straightening, Liu Qingge opened his eyes and blinked quickly to adjust to the light again. Xiu Ya lay on the ground, bloodstained. Nearby were clear shards of something like glass or ice, a pool of water spreading rapidly around them. There was no sign of their opponents.

It was surprising that she would have managed to dislodge Xiu Ya. Had Shen Qingqiu purposefully pulled it out, afraid that she’d escape with it?

...What was he even doing here?

“Shidi?” Shen Qingqiu called out, coming closer.

Liu Qingge turned — and froze, the things he had been not thinking about in favor of the battle all suddenly coming back to him.

Although he had collapsed at first, not too much of Shen Qingqiu’s energy had been drained, and he had already more or less recovered. However, his appearance was somewhat dishevelled. In particular, his lips were red, and he absently wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand.

Naturally, after all that woman had done... that to him as well.

She had done the same to Liu Qingge, though the memories were largely blurred by his weakened state. In itself, he wouldn’t have cared, writing it off as the perverse ways of demonic cultivators.

But...

The face she had used was the one right in front of him. The voice she had used was the one
speaking to him.

Why? What kind of degenerate trick—?!

“Liu-shidi?” Shen Qingqiu called out again. He had reached out to place a hand on Liu Qingge’s shoulder, only for him to jerk away.

His face was burning. “It was just a trick! It didn’t mean anything!” Liu Qingge insisted sharply.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyebrows twitched, although it was impossible to tell what he was thinking as his expression was even flatter than usual. That was a sign he was hiding something, but Liu Qingge was too agitated to think through it.

Logically, Shen Qingqiu had no way of knowing who Liu Qingge had seen in that cursed mask, the Water Moon Mirror. However, his reaction only made Liu Qingge more worked up.

“It was just nonsense!” he insisted again.

“Yes, I think so too!” Shen Qingqiu agreed suddenly. Pulling out his fan, he spread it in front of his face and closed his eyes. “It was just nonsense, clearly. With that kind of mental effect, any pretty face would do, so it probably just picks at random. There’s no meaning to it.”

“No meaning,” Liu Qingge echoed, his lips pressing tightly as he nodded.

They faced each other in increasingly tense silence for several long moments — and then, simultaneously turned away.

Simultaneously, they vowed in their hearts to forget all about this incident. It was just nonsense, nonsense! Unfortunately, that promise would be rather hard to keep.

~.~.~
Near the entrance to the secret realm, there was a large stone slab. Something had been carved into its smooth face, but most of the writing had long since been rendered indecipherable. The party of three could only make out two words — ‘violet’ and ‘heaven.’

“I suppose we should call this Violet Heaven Secret Realm,” Liu Mingyan noted.

It was fitting, if nothing else. The sky overhead was indeed violet, sliding into something closer to pink or indigo in places. There was no sun, but light came from somewhere overhead, with no change in brightness or direction. The air was thick with a stagnant energy, the nature of which was difficult to determine.

“If there’s a sign like this, does that mean this place was created purposefully by someone?” Luo Binghe asked.

“It’s more likely from other visitors like us, long ago,” Liu Mingyan said. “There are no known methods to manipulate dimensional space on this scale, not among humans or demons.” She sighed, a little wistful. “But it’s amazing to imagine someone creating secret realms, isn’t it?”

Luo Binghe nodded. The power to actually reshape the world to your will, or even create a new world entirely... ‘amazing’ was not a strong enough word.

Aside from its strange sky, this secret realm was not particularly different from the outside world. There were groves of trees dotted across the gently sloping landscape, circling toward a large, still lake down in the center. In the distance, there was the hazy shape of mountains. He wondered if they were real or just a mirage.

But before he could ask, Liu Mingyan turned the conversation toward their real purpose. “Yin-jie,” she called out, turning to the girl Luo Binghe had almost forgotten about, “you should take the lead. This is your mission.”

Duanmu Yin squeaked, hugging her family’s sword to her chest and shaking her head faintly, as if too afraid to protest with any more vehemence.
Luo Binghe had seen her older sister, Duanmu Yao, only once and his memory of her was overshadowed by Shen Qingqiu’s (fake) revelation, but even he could tell that the difference between their characters was like night and day. This kind of person... was even harder to work with. At least when it came to a spoiled and forceful young miss like the older sister, Luo Binghe had a lot of experience enduring silently and submissively. But coaxing a wilting flower...

He glanced a little helplessly at Liu Mingyan.

Shen Qingqiu had said to try and get along with Duanmu Yin, so Luo Binghe had to at least make the effort.

Liu Mingyan shot him an unimpressed look in return. “Yin-jie, it’s alright, we’ll be right here with you,” she said gently to the girl. “We just need to try exploring for a while, see if we find anything. Pick a direction, and let’s head out.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll protect you, Maiden Duanmu,” Luo Binghe added with a smile.

Duanmu Yin darted a wide-eyed look at him, her cheeks going red before she ducked her head. Timidly, she gave the smallest nod possible.

For some reason, Liu Mingyan looked even more unimpressed. That was unfair, he was doing his best.

“...lake...?” Duanmu Yin suggested, at barely more than a whisper.

“That’s a good idea,” Liu Mingyan agreed placidly.

Nodding again, just a hair more deeply now, Duanmu Yin cautiously began to lead the way. Despite her personality, it was clear that she had been trained well. Her balance and movements were all controlled, and once she focused on keeping track of her surroundings, her soft, round face settled into a placid mien, her eyes sharp. Even the sword she had been hugging desperately settled into her hand with the ease of long practice.

Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan followed closely, but neither of them had the same sharp vigilance as
Duanmu Yin. The sloping grassy fields around the lake were clearly empty, and there was no sign of anything hiding in the small groves either. Being too tense would only slow your reactions later.

There were no enemies, no monsters. There wasn't much of anything.

“This is all low grade spirit grass,” Luo Binghe noted, watching the way the grass stalks shimmered faintly as they made their way through. “The air is full of spiritual energy, so there should be some higher grade herbs here too.”

As they approached the lake, he finally noticed something out of the ordinary. Exchanging a look with Liu Mingyan, it was obvious she had noticed it too.

Luo Binghe nodded his head toward one of the strange formations around the lake — they looked like small overgrown, grassy hills from a distance, but up close, their shape was not right for any natural scenery. Liu Mingyan thought for a moment, then shook her head.

This was an exercise meant for Duanmu Yin, not them. If they said anything, she would just follow them without question, which defeated the entire point.

Luo Binghe stifled a sigh.

Eventually, they made it to the edge of the water. It was clear and terribly inviting — even without a sun overhead, the secret realm felt hot as summer midday and unexpectedly muggy, and even with their cultivation, the three of them were starting to feel sweaty. The lake surface was perfectly calm and still, without a single breeze to disrupt it, and as violet as the empty sky overhead.

Glancing around a little lost, Duanmu Yin turned to check Liu Mingyan’s reaction.

“Where next?” Liu Mingyan asked calmly.

Other girl nibbled on her lip for a few moments. “...Test?” she suggested, her hands clutching at her sword again.

“That’s a good point. There might be something in the lake,” Liu Mingyan agreed. “It seems to be
Luo Binghe sighed yet again in his heart. While abstractly interesting, this was a waste of time. He almost wished he had stayed back at Qing Jing with his shizun. Had Shen Qingqiu been arranging his own meals? Had he eaten what the kitchens served? Had Ming Fan cooked? Did he brew his own tea, or go without? He just barely managed to keep from sighing out loud.

Shizun had doubtlessly been to many secret realms. Had he seen one like this? Luo Binghe would naturally tell him about it when they finally returned, but the story was barely even worth mentioning, the way things were going.

Could he brew some lavender tea to go along with it? Saying, ‘The sky and the lake were the same color as in your cup’... Or maybe some violet jelly...

While he daydreamed, Duanmu Yin had drawn her Tian Xing sword and lowered the tip toward the water. Her expression was almost comically focused as she lightly tapped the lake surface with the very point of her blade and tensed, waiting for a reaction.

Ripples spread outward, making the lake tremble lightly before it calmed again.

There was no other reaction.

Duanmu Yin stepped back, pouting a little, and sheathed her sword again. She looked at Liu Mingyan, who shrugged. “Let’s keep looking,” she suggested.

Nodding, some of her unease receding now that it was obvious nothing would happen here, Duanmu Yin turned and started to make her way along the shore. When Luo Binghe didn’t move to follow, Liu Mingyan was about to elbow him, only to catch sight of the strange expression on his face as he stared up at the sky.

“What is it?” she asked quietly.

“...Nothing. I must have imagined it,” Luo Binghe answered, shaking his head.
For the most part, the land surrounding the lake was flat and featureless, only broken up by clumps of trees and small slopes. Luo Binghe was not particularly familiar with geological features, but he supposed it looked as if the lake had been larger in the past and, as it gradually shrank, the revealed land became grassy fields instead. He supposed it was not surprising, if so. There weren’t any rivers flowing into the lake, in any case, and he wasn’t sure whether there would such a thing as rain in this unnatural environment.

However, the smooth slopes were broken up in a few places by what looked like rows of small hills, each one slightly taller than a person. Up close, they were a little too sharply formed, lacking the smoothness of the surrounding landscape despite being also covered in the same spirit grasses. Luo Binghe had thought they might be the remains of walls, left behind by whoever had constructed the signs at the entrance, though he couldn’t imagine why they would have been leading into the water.

As he and Liu Mingyan pulled some of the grass off one, he could see that wasn’t the case.

“Is this... metal?” Luo Binghe said dubiously, running his hand over the somewhat damp, gritty surface beneath the vegetation.

“I think it might be,” Liu Mingyan agreed. “But this shape...”

The shape was uneven along the length of the hill chain, generally wider than it was tall, but sometimes broken up by larger, taller humps. Lightly, Luo Binghe jumped onto the top of the strange wall and looked down its span.

Following a quiet discussion he couldn’t make out, Liu Mingyan and Duanmu Yin headed toward the nearest of those large humps. But as something occurred, to him, Luo Binghe turned and jogged along the top of the wall in the opposite direction, toward the lake’s edge.

After all, there wouldn’t be grass growing under the water.

Luo Binghe had noted before that the lake was almost impossibly clear. There had been no trace of even algae in it. The old saying must have been true, that water too pure will have no fish. And, as he expected, the ‘wall’ continued down into the water, without the crust of dirt and spirit grass. His eyes narrowed as he peered down, trying to understand what he was seeing.
Behind him, there was a sudden, startled yelp.

He spun around, his eyes focusing immediately on the two girls further away. They had been investigating the odd cluster of shapes, and the one to yell had been Duanmu Yin. Both of them appeared to have jumped away from something, hands on their swords in a tense posture.

“What happened?” Luo Binghe called out as he quickly ran over.

However, Liu Mingyan’s voice was unruffled as she responded. “It’s nothing, just didn’t expect it. There’s a face... These things are clay statues of some kind.”

They had been cleaning the overgrown cover of dirt from one of the odd humps, only to uncover the somewhat caved in remains of a giant face. One eye and part of the jaw were long since broken, only adding to the eerie shock of seeing it suddenly. It was no surprise Duanmu Yin had been startled.

Luo Binghe’s eyes narrowed.

“I think... it might be better if we go,” he said. At Liu Mingyan’s questioning look, he shook his head. “They’re chains. There’s giant chains leading into the lake, and these things must have been pulling them.” He didn’t know anything about methods to animate clay statues, but he could easily imagine they existed.

“Then the sign we saw... A warning?” Liu Mingyan guessed.

“I don’t know what might be here, but I don’t think it’s something we can handle,” Luo Binghe said.

“Ah... um,” Duanmu Yin unexpectedly made a sound that carried the tone of disagreement. She bit her lip and ducked her head when the other two turned toward her, butpersistently forced the words out. “This... mission. Just giving up...”

She had been given this assignment, and she didn’t want to give up so easily.
It was true that there might be something in the lake. It might be something powerful. But it might also be nothing at all.

Luo Binghe hadn’t expected this kind of stubbornness from her. And...

He could understand. Wasn’t this a rare opportunity for them to gain some experience? If they ran at the first sign of trouble, how would they ever grow strong? How would he ever become someone Shen Qingqiu would consider as an equal?

Shizun, who always said not to risk their lives pointlessly, would not approve. But...

“I suppose... it must have been like this for a long time,” he allowed. “Looking around longer should be...”

“No,” Liu Mingyan said suddenly. “You’re right, we should leave now.”

She was looking at the lake behind him, her brow furrowed and eyes sharp. When Luo Binghe turned to look as well, he frowned. There was mist on the lake. But that didn’t make sense.

The perfectly still surface was undulating, and so was the sky. It was the strange effect he had noticed before, when Duanmu Yin touched it lightly. In this place, for some reason, the sky was a reflection of the water, instead of the other way around.

It wasn’t mist, it was steam, Luo Binghe understood in a sudden flash of intuition.

There were chains where something had been dragged into the lake, something that made the lake violet. Something that let off so much spiritual energy, just by proximity, that it filled the air. Something that made the entire secret realm hot and muggy like a mid-summer day.

What would you throw into the water, to stifle it? —Fire.

The lake that had been growing smaller and smaller, which they had disturbed, was heating up and
quickly heading toward boiling.

...It was already boiling, thick columns of steam clouding the air.

“Run,” Luo Binghe decided shortly. And, without wasting another moment, both he and Liu Mingyan did just that.

Although Liu Mingyan grabbed Duanmu Yin’s arm and dragged her along, the other girl quickly fell in step with them. “What... what is it?” she wondered as they raced along toward the faded stone sign and the exit of the secret realm.

Luo Binghe had absolutely no idea. But he also understood — they were young disciples with weak cultivation that hadn’t even passed the Qi Refining stage. They had no business taking these kinds of risks.

Unfortunately, that was no longer up to them.

The thing deep inside the lake exploded with power, sending a shockwave of water and pressure sweeping across the previously tranquil landscape. It buffered the three disciples, nearly knocking them off their feet. Then, the ground heaved, roiling and cracking apart, and they couldn’t keep their feet any longer.

Luo Binghe’s vision darkened momentarily as his head banged against the dirt, but he hung on to consciousness with dogged determination, despite the sudden spike of piercing pain.

The spots dancing in front of his eyes were still clearing when Liu Mingyan hauled him up and dragged him along. They had walked far from the entrance to the secret realm, back when they first arrived, and there was still entirely too far to go in returning. Violet flames were leaping up from the cracks opening up across the landscape, while a huge pillar of flame and steam was rising up from where the lake had been. The air was thick and wavering with the heat.

The pillar in the center pulsed, and a massive wave of flames erupted outward across the empty lakebed and the shores.

There was nowhere to run.
Luo Binghe barely had time to raise his head, when Duanmu Yin darted past him and Liu Mingyan, the Tian Xing sword gleaming in her hand. Even in the hands of a beginner like her, it was a legendary weapon, and it sang as she swung it down. The flames parted against the blade, leaving a small untouched island around the three of them, before closing again. Everything around them was a burning hellscape.

“Yin-jie!” Liu Mingyan called out worriedly, as the other girl struggled to hold the sword — and its protective barrier — up against the seemingly endless tide of flames.

She glanced around frantically.

Could they retreat while holding the barrier? But it was still so far to the entrance, and Duanmu Yin was barely able to keep her footing, much less attempt to move.

Luo Binghe realized that too. But unlike Liu Mingyan, he still had one card left to play.

This thing had been sleeping here, and it was now stirring. But it hadn’t appeared, and it hadn’t even made a sound. Was it possible... that it was still sleeping? Or could he at least send it back to sleep?

It was a long shot and a gamble, but they were out of options.

“Just hold it a little longer!” he called out suddenly, to Duanmu Yin. She couldn’t spare the concentration to look back at him, sweat rolling down her face and her arms trembling, but she nodded sharply, something in her stance growing stronger.

Luo Binghe closed his eyes.

The plunge into unconsciousness was jarring, and he would pay for it later, but he didn’t have time to waste on being careful. With the senses he was only just barely starting to get the hang of, he could feel Liu Mingyan’s and Duanmu Yin’s bright, very awake minds nearby — and the heavy, giant something a little further out.

“You really got yourself into a damn mess, you brat,” Elder Dream Demon’s unhappy voice dragged across Luo Binghe’s consciousness from somewhere out in the colorless, shapeless void.
“I can’t believe you managed to run into the ancient phoenix. What kind of luck do you have?”

An ancient phoenix?

“Can I—?”

“With your skills? Not a change,” the Dream Demon said sourly, already knowing what he wanted. “And I don’t have the power.” He paused, but even he knew there wasn’t time to drag out playing with Luo Binghe, and he conceded quickly, “But if you follow what I do, it might be possible — just maybe. You better show me the proper respect after this!”

“Many thanks to the elder,” Luo Binghe replied without his usual bargaining.

He had been training under Elder Dream Demon for almost a year, so the process of copying of what the demon did was something he was very familiar with. They had worked together to create dreamscape, or expand his area of influence, or lock onto specific targets, so combining their efforts came easily as well.

That was good, because there was no room for adjustment.

The so-called ancient phoenix was not a demon, Luo Binghe understood even before he first brushed against its mind. It was a living thing of an entirely different nature, formed out of primordial elemental power. It could not even be entirely described as being conscious, only a disaster given a core of something like instinct.

It had been trapped within this small realm for a very long time, its very presence slowly whittling away the cool water and chains restraining it. Now, with their arrival, it had finally begun to stir in earnest.

It had no dreams to manipulate, but Luo Binghe wouldn’t have dared to try anyway. All he needed was to buy enough time for them to escape, and for that, a far simpler, basic skill would hopefully suffice — the ability to force a target into a deep sleep they could not wake from. It was a small thing, almost too petty to mention, but naturally a dream weaver would need to be able to do such.

Since neither of them had shaped the dream-void, Luo Binghe had no body. When he reached out, it was with his mind and his power only, tentatively approaching the pulsing core of heat that was
the ancient phoenix. The image of a cracking egg appeared to him, with pure fire within.

Following the mental push from Dream Demon, he closed his ‘hands’ around it and swept over the cracks.

It ‘burned’ in an indescribable way.

But even so, Luo Binghe didn’t falter. He had no intention of letting himself or the others die here. This one opening, he would seize with all he had.

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When Luo Binghe slumped over bonelessly, Liu Mingyan couldn’t spare it much thought. He had hit his head, and it must have caught up with him. She had already been hauling him along, so she only tightened her grip on his body and desperately tried to think.

Duanmu Yin was reaching her limit, and it wouldn’t be long before they were engulfed in the terrifying flames that had covered everything. For Liu Mingyan’s own skills... there was nothing of use. Among the things she was carrying... there was also nothing strong enough.

Could she transfer qi to Duanmu Yin and have her use that to strengthen the Tian Xing’s shielding effect? But would that be enough? Duanmu Yin wasn’t weak, her cultivation was actually a level above Liu Mingyan’s since she was older, but she had been pushed back from the start.

This situation was...

...suddenly changing?

The flow of overwhelming power around them abruptly faltered. The sea of flames wavered and thinned. A little more, and they might be able to make it through if they ran. Liu Mingyan’s eyes narrowed, calculating. A little more, and—

“Yin-jie!” she called out. “Now! Run!”
Grabbing Luo Binghe’s body, Liu Mingyan intended to pull it over her shoulder and follow her own command. But unexpectedly, she felt something that made her hesitate for a split second. Her brows furrowed — before she shoved the thoughts away and took off at a dead sprint in the direction she thought to be the exit of the secret realm.

The flames hadn’t faded completely, despite thinning. With her free hand, Liu Mingyan made a hand seal, commanding her nameless sword out of its sheath. It shot out ahead of her, parting the fire momentarily — just enough for her pass through. Duanmu Yin brought up behind her, her own hand in a seal as well, maintaining the weakening barrier of the Tian Xing at their back.

It wasn’t quite enough. The thing in the center pulsed again, weaker than before, but still enough to send them off their feet and disintegrate sections of their robes. Liu Mingyan could feel burns searing across her skin. Distantly, she noted that she had definitely sensed it this time. Luo Binghe’s qi circulation fluctuated just before that thing reacted.

But they were close enough now. The thing in the center of the lake waned again, and the two girls scrambled to their feet, doggedly continuing on.

The entrance to the secret realm was not a gate or a transportation array. Naturally, since this place was not meant to ever be found. It was simply a tear in space, unnoticeable to the eye.

Rushing past the stone marker, even more damaged now, they burst out into the human realm with a dizzying abruptness.

“Yin-jie, seal the entrance with Tian Xing!” Liu Mingyan called out, immediately sliding to a stop and spinning around.

Duanmu Yin was already moving to do just that. Spinning Tian Xing around, she drove it into the ground, right at the edge of the wavering air that marked the distortion. Clapping her hands together, she poured her qi into the sword to shape its innate sealing properties to at least temporarily close the rift.

Even with Tian Xing simplifying the process, the drain was not small. Having already fought with all her might to protect their small group, Duanmu Yin could barely remain standing. She swayed, and only the hand that rested suddenly against her back kept her upright. From that hand, strong, cool qi flowed into her body, supporting her. It was Liu Mingyan, lending her aid despite her own wounds and exhaustion.
The air in front of them undulated alarmingly, but after one final flash of light from the Tian Xing sword, the mirage settled and smoothed away, leaving only the small, misty valley of the outside world. The silent, cool air was a shock compared to the fiery calamity only moments earlier.

With a sharp exhale, Liu Mingyan and Duanmu Yin collapsed to the dusty, slightly damp ground.

“...made it...” Duanmu Yin breathed, her entire body drooping with exhaustion and relief. Next to her, Liu Mingyan nodded tiredly — she had transferred almost all of her qi to the other girl, and the sudden drain caught up to her now.

However, at the same time, her thoughts that had originally been focused on just surviving began to clear, and her gaze drifted over to where she had dropped Luo Binghe’s body. As she had half expected, he was already stirring.

Rubbing his head with a pained wince, Luo Binghe sat up gingerly. Their eyes met.

He hadn’t had time to put on any particular expression yet, but he could instinctively read the strangeness in her gaze, and his face became unreadable.

“Report it?” Duanmu Yin suggested, glancing nervously at Liu Mingyan, who focused again on the more pressing matter.

“Yes, we should,” she agreed. “We’ll have to leave Tian Xing here and rush back. I have some talismans, so we can set up a concealment barrier... Let’s go to Huo Hong Valley, it’s closer, and my family can dispatch someone or send word out.”

They didn’t waste time climbing to their feet. When Liu Mingyan moved to support Luo Binghe, who wavered somewhat unsteadily, still holding his aching head, he looked at her for a long moment, as if there was something he very much wanted to say. But in the end, he remained silent.

That was fine. They would talk later, Liu Mingyan had already decided.

There were many things she needed to ask him, about this demonic cultivation of his.
Chapter 11: Together

Despite forcing himself into battle with Duxian-Er and holding his own long enough for her to be driven off, Liu Qingge was actually in rather poor condition after being held prisoner and having his energy drained for several days on end. It wasn’t long after the fight had ended that he collapsed without warning, even his stubbornness reaching its limit.

Shen Qingqiu had carried him out of the caves, despite feeling rather lightheaded himself, from both transferring qi to Liu Qingge and... the other matter. It wasn’t as if he had a choice. The cousin, Liu Mingchuan, would suddenly start edging away and making up excuses any time Shen Qingqiu tried to suggest they switch.

What ‘Cousin Qingge will surely feel more comfortable with Elder Shen?’ What ‘there’s no need to worry if he’s in your care?’ What ‘you look very good together?’

What did that last one even have to do with the situation?!

In any case, this was already embarrassing enough. If Shen Qingqiu flew back to Cang Qiong with Liu Qingge unconscious in his arms, they would both die of humiliation.

So he made the executive decision to detour to Huo Hong Valley and recuperate there instead.

Not to say that this wasn’t embarrassing. But everyone there still thought that Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge were happy, joyous, loving, mutually depending cultivation partners, so this kind of scene just added to their collective delusion and was even taken as something fully expected. That kind of thing was wrong from the start, so it was easier for Shen Qingqiu to ignore it.
Liu Qishuang had already returned to secluded cultivation, after settling matters with the Duanmu family — and since her son was long an adult and a peak lord of the stronger sect in his own right, who had chosen to cultivate with a partner of equal rank, the ex-fiancée’s family didn’t bother making too much of a fuss. At the matriarch’s cultivation level, she was unlikely to return for years. However, there were plenty of other relatives to fuss, and fuss they did.

It was almost a relief for Shen Qingqiu when he was unintentionally pushed out onto the sidelines by all the cousins, uncles, aunts, elders and various other Liu clan members running around Liu Qingge in a worried panic.

Because now that the immediate danger and aftermath had passed, Shen Qingqiu found himself... thinking.

Of... things.

Every single time he saw Liu Qingge’s far too beautiful face.

It was definitely that face’s fault! Nothing else at all!

Objectively speaking, Liu Qingge was very attractive. Not even just his face — he was tall and strong, with a proud bearing but a loyal, steady manner. His voice sounded very nice too, when he wasn’t biting off two-word barbs, and he had stopped that very soon after Ling Xi Caves. He even smelled nice. So objectively, he was very attractive. Shen Qingqiu supposed that, between everything, Liu Qingge really would add up to being the most attractive person in the setting. It wasn’t even that surprising.

It wasn’t surprising at all that the Water Moon Mirror would use his form, right?

It was no big deal. It was just... a malicious prank! It definitely didn’t mean anything.

But still. When he looked at Liu Qingge’s face for more than a glance, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help remembering—

Absently, he pressed two fingers to his lips.
As should have been expected, Duxian-Er was a very good kisser.

...Realizing what he was doing, Shen Qingqiu felt a shiver go down his spine. What was this? Why was he acting like a blushing virgin who had their first kiss stolen? Even if it was technically the case, he was a man and definitely not concerned about such things! It didn’t matter at all!

His hand clenched furiously around his folded fan, until the wood creaked pitifully.

During these very important mental calculations, Shen Qingqiu had been walking in tight, tense circles around a corner of the grounds. No one had disturbed him. Instead, he received a disgusting volume of sympathetic looks from clansmembers who took this to be the posture of a partner overcome with worry. Completely unnecessary worry — all Liu Qingge needed was to stay in bed and rest for maybe a week at most, and then to cultivate non-violently for maybe another week. This was admittedly a fairly tall order for him...

In any case, it was a relief when the sounds of another disturbance came from somewhere around the main road up to the clan residence. With an almost desperate interest that exceeded even his usual nosiness, Shen Qingqiu homed in on the sudden activity at the main gate.

But the distant air of a spectator he had affected was cast away when he caught sight of Cang Qiong’s disciple uniforms — and the faces of the boy and girl wearing those uniforms.

“Binghe! Liu-shizhi!” Shen Qingqiu called out, shouldering his way past the crowd hurriedly.

“Shizun!” Luo Binghe’s tense, serious expression brightened as he caught sight of his master, but only for a moment, before something unreadable passed over his face, and he unexpectedly glanced at Liu Mingyan. She didn’t seem to notice, only greeting Shen Qingqiu politely.

“Are you alright? What happened?” the peak lord asked, already scanning the disciples.

They were injured, their robes dirty and burned, with matching reddening blisters on their bare skin. Duanmu Yin was missing her family’s weapon, he noted immediately.

“There is a situation,” Liu Mingyan said and, in quick, short terms, explained what they had found.
Shen Qingqiu listened with a frown. No wonder the atmosphere at the gate was like this. Usually, the Liu clan members and the dash of red they favored in their outfits, gathered together in any number, created an atmosphere like a festival, full of luck and cheer. But now, rushing about, they felt more like emergency workers reacting to some crisis.

And it had been a crisis.

“The ancient phoenix, Zixie?” he repeated with an unhappy expression. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

“...Yes, we were very lucky,” Liu Mingyan agreed. “With—”

“You’ve heard of it, Shizun?” Luo Binghe interrupted her, stepping closer to Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t notice any oddness in his behavior, more preoccupied with his own slip up. “Just in passing,” he said quickly.

After all, how could he explain that this primordial monster had appeared as part of some unremarkable villain’s special ritual to gain heaven-rending power? It, along with the three other great beasts used, had naturally been defeated and absorbed by the protagonist.

“In any case,” he went on, “all of you did very well. I’m very proud.” His own disciple he patted on the head, but he made sure to offer warm smiles to the girls as well. Squeaking, Duanmu Yin ducked her head with a red blush.

Glancing at Luo Binghe, Liu Mingyan didn’t comment. Instead, she asked, “By why is Shen-shibo in Huo Hong Valley?”

Her eyebrows furrowed as she caught Shen Qingqiu’s hesitation and the faint twist in his expression. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing serious,” Shen Qingqiu rushed to assure her. “It’s just that your brother ran into some trouble, so he’s resting here. Once everything is settled, why don’t you go see him?”

Things were not going to be settled for a long while, not in the greater picture, but their role was already almost over. The elders had been informed, messengers had been dispatched even before Shen Qingqiu arrived. In short order, a team was organized to guard and monitor the entrance to the secret realm and Tian Xing’s seal. The three disciples were led away to tend to their injuries.
and instructed to rest. Although Duanmu Yin would likely need to head back to remove the barrier later, once a more permanent solution was decided upon, Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan could be considered to have finished their part.

Liu Mingyan barely waited to be dismissed before hurrying to where her brother had been confined to a bed.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t follow, not wanting to intrude on the siblings’ reunion.

Instead, he had planned to catch up with Luo Binghe — How had things gone with his two future wives? What did he think of Duanmu Yin? — and maybe reassure himself a little. Logically, he knew that Luo Binghe couldn’t have been killed and the girls probably had some measure of immunity as part of the future harem, but even so... There was something churning a little uneasily in his stomach as he imagined the scenes Liu Mingyan had so steadily reported on.

But when Shen Qingqiu turned to Luo Binghe with an open, enquiring expression, he was surprised to find his disciple’s attention fixed firmly on Liu Mingyan’s retreating figure.

It was rare for Luo Binghe not to make his master the center of his focus when they were in the same room, and being ‘ignored’ like this left Shen Qingqiu with a slightly strange feeling, as if he’d take a step down a staircase only to find the next stair missing.

This child... was growing up, wasn’t he?

How unexpectedly melancholy.

Smiling a little wryly, Shen Qingqiu patted his disciple’s hair. Luo Binghe’s head snapped up, and he stared at him questioningly. “It’s nothing, it’s nothing. This master is just glad you’re safe,” Shen Qingqiu said.

The corner of Luo Binghe’s mouth twitched upwards as if in a smile, only for him to frown and look away. “Ah, Shizun... please excuse this disciple. I’m going to rest early,” Luo Binghe said, stepping back. Again, his gaze slid the way Liu Mingyan had gone.

He really was growing up. What a sudden change... Normally, he would have been sticking to Shen Qingqiu especially vigorously after such a long separation. But now he was only thinking about a
Right. This was probably a good sign. This life or death adventure had brought Luo Binghe closer together with his best wife!

Shen Qingqiu smiled indulgently. “Go, go,” he said, waving his folded fan at the boy. Go forth, protagonist!

There would be time for teasing later, and tease he would, he decided.

But... he couldn’t help feeling a little lonely. Who knew he’d become an empty nester so early in life?

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Shen Qingqiu was right that Luo Binghe’s thoughts were firmly on Liu Mingyan. However, his guess as to the reason was completely wrong.

She had noticed something. This, Luo Binghe was completely certain of. Although Liu Mingyan had a certain reserved nature that made her occasionally difficult to read, her reactions had been off by just enough for him to tell. But how much had she noticed? What had she guessed?

And, most importantly, what was she planning to do?

It wasn’t the worst case scenario, Luo Binghe told himself firmly. Liu Mingyan hadn’t said anything yet. But that was precisely why he needed to talk to her as soon as possible.

Despite his determination, lingering outside the door of Liu Qingge’s room left Luo Binghe with a deeply awkward feeling. He could hear the siblings speaking quietly inside, although he couldn’t the words without straining his senses — and he didn’t want to do that, even with the possibility of Liu Mingyan taking the opportunity to tell her brother whatever she suspected. There was always something like this when he saw the Liu family interacting. Part of it was simply a sense of strangeness. After all, where had he ever been exposed to loving family relations?
But part of it...

Was probably jealousy.

Liu Mingyan’s steadiness and silent, resolute confidence was something Luo Binghe admired greatly about her. But he couldn’t wondering sometimes — was this what you became like when you didn’t have to doubt, when you always knew that your family would support you?

He had received love in his life. His mother had loved him unconditionally.

However, she had been able to do very little for Luo Binghe, and he had been able to do even less in turn. She had died without even being able to eat a single warm meal, cold and exhausted from being used by those with wealth and power. Luo Binghe had gone his entire childhood unsure where his next meal would come from, always with the looming threat that someone, anyone would take offense to his very existence and extinguish his small, weak life for barely more than a passing thought.

That kind of enduring, all-enthusing knowledge of your own meaninglessness was different than the danger of a hunt going wrong or a demon attack.

The only thing more crushing was the knowledge that no one would have cared even if he died.

Even now, this past year at Qing Jing when Shizun had provided for him and protected him at every turn, Luo Binghe couldn’t stop himself from doubting and fearing. Somehow, he had managed to earn his Shizun’s regard. But if he had earned it, he could lose it as well. It could even be stolen away.

All the time, in the very bottom of his heart... he was so afraid.

He was afraid now too, of what Liu Mingyan was thinking and what she might do.

If she felt anything of the same, Liu Mingyan didn’t show it. When she finally emerged from Liu Qingge’s room, closing the doors gently and silently behind her, and caught sight of Luo Binghe standing there, her eyebrows only moved faintly. She nodded to him and headed out of the courtyard.
Luo Binghe had considered and reconsidered what to say to her, but Liu Mingyan spoke first, once they had reached a small pavilion out in the gardens. Even the small signs of her expression were had to read in the gathering evening shadows.

“Luo-shixiong,” she said clearly, “why are you practicing demonic cultivation?”

She asked it very calmly and without any particular intonation. Nonetheless, Luo Binghe flinched violently.

“That... Liu-shimei, you’re mistaken!” he immediately tried to make a denial.

“I’m not,” Liu Mingyan said firmly. “I was holding your body at that time, so I felt the way your qi was flowing. I know you were using a technique, and I know it was not something standard. To repress a massive power like that, and for you to hide it afterwards, it could not have been orthodox.” She cast her eyes away, huffing lightly. “No need to even ask if your master is aware...”

The innocent, troubled by unfair accusations look Luo Binghe had been trying to assemble slowly smoothed away, and his stance subtly shifted as his mindset moved from obfuscation to confrontation. Rather than nervousness, it was a detached coolness that spread through his thoughts as he prepared himself.

“...What are you going to do?” he asked, in an unreadable, placid tone.

Whether he realized it or not, he had began to exude a sense of menace and threat.

Liu Mingyan’s expression didn’t change. “That depends,” she said. “Why are you practicing demonic cultivation?”

The two of them stared at each other, neither willing to back down. The silence stretched on, seemingly endless and far colder than the evening chill.

...Thinking about it logically, Liu Mingyan must have more or less guessed his reasons. Out of everyone, Luo Binghe thought that she perhaps understood him best. And even the fact that she was asking him, instead of reporting him immediately, if not trying to strike him down herself, was
already a concession.

Quietly, Luo Binghe sighed. Answering wouldn’t hurt, in any case.

“You already know,” he said. “It’s because I need to become stronger.”

“That desperately?” Liu Mingyan asked, faintly accusing.

“We would have died without it.”

At that, she tilted her head in acknowledgement, no matter how grudgingly. “And what do you plan to do, when you become strong?” she asked.

“Protect Shizun and Qing Jing Peak,” Luo Binghe replied without hesitation.

Liu Mingyan nodded. Then, she sighed. “I don’t plan to do anything,” she said, finally answering his question in turn. “But you need to be careful. Demonic cultivation is forbidden for a reason. And few will be understanding. You will be lucky to only be expelled from the sect.”

Opening his mouth as if to protest, Luo Binghe paused and closed it again. This was more or less the outcome he had wanted, but... he had expected to coax Liu Mingyan into it. He had thought he would need to argue and plead to convince her. Like this, with this kind of nearly perfunctory conversation, it was obvious he hadn’t ‘convinced’ her, but rather Liu Mingyan had intended to keep her silence from the start. She had simply gone through the motions to confirm the decision she had already made.

...She really trusted in him that much, in that he had a good reason, that she understood that reason already, that he would be able to remain firm on what mattered.

Unexpectedly, Luo Binghe felt his neck and his ears heat up.

Liu Mingyan’s eyebrows lowered in a way that was chiding as she shot him a look. But her expression softened as she looked out at the eternally autumn-red trees. Down the garden paths, the lanterns were beginning to be lit, their warm orange light making the leaves look like flames, true
“Well, in the end, it is your choice, so I won’t interfere. But... I do understand,” she said quietly. “I want to become strong too. I want to be strong enough to support my family and our sect. I just wonder if it’s even possible for my strength to become great enough to matter.”

“Huh? That’s...” Luo Binghe glanced at her, uncertain.

“My brother, my mother, they’re both rare geniuses. My clan is full of those who stand at the pinnacle of human cultivation,” Liu Mingyan said. “Our sect too is the strongest under heaven. I know I’m not weak. But compared to that, am I strong enough to ever do anything for them? If they needed help, how strong would I need to be to offer it? Will I ever become that strong? How many decades will it take?”

She sighed again. “I do understand wanting to close that gap, wanting to rush,” she said. “If it was just my own choice... But it’s not that simple. I want to support my family and our sect, but most of all, I don’t want to weight them down. Have you considered that?”

Luo Binghe started slightly as she turned to look at him. “Considered what?” he asked, swallowing as his mouth suddenly turned dry.

“If it becomes known that you’re practicing demonic cultivation, it won’t be just you that will be affected,” Liu Mingyan said. “Everyone will wonder what Shen-shibo knew. Did he teach you? Did he agree with it? At best, he’ll be seen as too incompetent to monitor his disciples properly. Even all of Cang Qiong might suffer a blow to its reputation.”

Both of them knew that Yue Qingyuan wouldn’t severely punish Shen Qingqiu, even if the consensus fell toward the more negative end of the possible interpretations for his involvement in his student’s forbidden practices. However, even just the thought of his master’s name being dragged through the mud sent a chill down Luo Binghe’s spine.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t considered it. This was only a reminder — an unwelcome one.

And Luo Binghe, in the end, had only this one person he cared about. For Liu Mingyan, there was an entire clan who would defend and support her passionately.
The paths they chose would not be theirs alone to walk.

Having those that supported you was a wonderful thing. But it could be a terrible thing too.

“I’ll remember that,” Luo Binghe said quietly.

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Unwilling to risk interrupting the beginnings of Luo Binghe’s harem master journey and at loose ends otherwise, Shen Qingqiu drifted back to the room where Liu Qingge was resting.

...It was not, in fact, “Liu Qingge’s room.”

It was their room. As in, shared between the two of them.

After all, why would a pair of happily cultivating together cultivation partners need two rooms? Or so went the thinking of the Liu clan. The suite was even the exact same one they had used before, after completing Liu Qishuang’s trial.

In the same vein, why would a pair of happily frolicking cultivation partners need two beds?

Last time, Shen Qingqiu had taken the bed, and Liu Qingge had simply sat and meditated all night. This time, the situation was reversed, since the recuperating patient would obviously take priority.

Liu Qingge had drifted off again soon after his sister departed. He had been taking every chance to sleep. After being repeatedly harassed about the need to rest in order to recover, he had apparently decided to rest as much as possible to recover as quickly as possible — and escape back to his usual ways. Even in his sleep, he was frowning in annoyance.

It made Shen Qingqiu smile a little as he quietly puttered around their shared suite, preparing to settle for the night since the sky outside had already started to grow dark.

A cultivator of his level didn’t normally require sleep, only some meditation. Between the lack of
bed and the imminent neck and back pain from using the couch instead, Shen Qingqiu had sensibly chosen to spend his nights meditating — in a chair by the bed, just in case. ...It was just that, sometimes, he happened to doze off during his mediation, resulting in a sore neck. It was still better than both a sore neck and a sore back though.

He must have dozed off again without noticing. A hand closing around his wrist jerked him back into wakefulness. Peering blearily down at the offending appendage, Shen Qingqiu followed it over to an equally bleary face.

“What are you doing? Go to bed,” Liu Qingge ordered, though he looked no more awake and aware than Shen Qingqiu felt.

“I can’t, you’re in it,” Shen Qingqiu pointed out, his voice thick with both displeasure and sleep-induced confusion.

Liu Qingge scoffed, as if he thought Shen Qingqiu was being difficult on purpose. And, with surprising strength, yanked Shen Qingqiu toward himself.

Belly flopping gracelessly onto the mattress, Shen Qingqiu just barely managed to avoid crashing into Liu Qingge, who moved away back across the bed’s center and toward the other side. It was, honestly, an overly massive piece of furniture, more than large enough to accommodate two adults. Even when Shen Qingqiu shifted and turned to glare, marginally more awake, at his new bedmate, the two of them fit easily side by side.

“Go to sleep,” Liu Qingge repeated, already closing his eyes.

...

...He really wanted to refuse. They were two adult men, not children to be sharing a bed, and—

They were two adult men. What was there to get worked up over?

He was tired of having a sore neck.
Sighing, Shen Qingqiu dropped down onto the sadly hard pillow.

He had only just closed his eyes when an annoying sound blared in his head.

[For rescuing Liu Qingge, B points +100]
[For triggering the sharing a bed event, +20 points]

Stuff your points where the sun doesn’t shine! Or better, at least hold the announcements until the sun is shining!

And of course, as if to punish his negative thoughts because he could easily imagine it being petty like that, the System followed up with another notification.

[-50 Coolness points!]

Urgh.

Wiggling into the blankets, Shen Qingqiu decided he didn’t care. He closed his eyes again resolutely and let himself drift off to the quiet, even sounds of Liu Qingge’s breathing next to him.

~.~.~

Standing silently outside the doors to his master’s and Liu Qingge’s shared rooms, Luo Binghe stared down at the floor with a strange, blank expression.

He had only wanted to check on Shen Qingqiu before heading to bed himself, his thoughts still unsettled long after his conversation with Liu Mingyan. He didn’t expect to see... to see...

So it was like that after all?

Suddenly, he smiled grimly. It was just like he’d thought. He really didn’t know what to do at all.
Chapter 12: Arc 3 - An Unexpected Feeling

Shen Qingqiu wondered if maybe he just wasn’t cut out to be a teacher.

For the most part, he had thought it was doing alright in winging it. It was also hard to do worse than the original goods, so as long as he didn’t accidentally traumatize some poor impressionable child, it was fight, right? Naturally, there had been some isolated issues, like his inability to teach Luo Binghe combat forms — especially in comparison to Liu Mingyan’s quick and easy success at the same — but the overall balance hadn’t been bad.

But this one problem... he really didn’t know what to do about it.

The problem in question was Bai Zhan Peak, and the way fighting their disciples left his own disciples bruised and bloodied up at least twice a week now.

The enmity between their peaks went back far, but it had gotten particularly bad during the three months when Cang Qiong at large had believed Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge to be involved. That was fine, Shen Qingqiu understood that. He was just grateful for Liu Mingyan’s help keeping things under control back then.

Afterwards, he had made sure to clear up the situation. So based on that, Shen Qingqiu had assumed that things would settle down to the usual rate of a skirmish every few weeks, when Liu Qingge was not around and his hooligans became too idle.

Except that didn’t happen.

Instead, it got worse.

And no one would tell him why.

Looking over the bruised, bloodied and still very defiant children clumped across Qing Jing’s formerly serene courtyard, Shen Qingqiu could only close his eyes and pray for patience.
With a sharp sigh, he shook his head. The children quivered slightly, but when he looked at them again, he could see that they still refused to repent.

“Explain to me why you were fighting them,” Shen Qingqiu said, with all the calm he could muster. “After I told you so many time to run away from unnecessary fights.”

He directed this particularly toward Ming Fan, the de facto leader of the younger students, and Luo Binghe, his favorite disciple. Both of them looked down with surprisingly similar expressions — and without a drop of guilt. None of his disciples looked properly cowed, Shen Qingqiu could see as he swept his gaze over the courtyard and the children gathered in it. Not even little Ning Yingying, though she was at least less bloody and battered than the rest — those Bai Zhan hooligans really were weak to sweet girls.

Calculating the interpersonal dynamics quickly, Shen Qingqiu chose a target.

“Luo Binghe!” he called out sharply.

The boy in question jumped, the strangely brooding look on his face smoothing out as he turned all his attention to his master. “...Yes,” he said responded a hair too slowly, “this disciple accepts Shizun’s punishment.”

And provides no explanation, Shen Qingqiu noted sourly. As expected!

“And do you have anything to add, Ming Fan?” he asked, turning to the next target. Purposefully, he slapped his closed fan against his palm, his expression frigid.

This was the perfect chance for Ming Fan to rat out Luo Binghe, like usual. Luo Binghe had since developed more of a temper, and he’d bite back. And when the started arguing, Shen Qingqiu would get some clues about what was actually going on. It was a good plan, he thought, mentally patting himself on the back.

That was the plan.

This is what actually happened:
“No, Shizun,” Ming Fan echoed his junior marial brother resentfully, ducking his head. “This disciple accepts Shizun’s punishment.”

Shen Qingqiu had to fight down an irritable twitch in the corner of his eye. Why were they getting along now of all times?

Fortunately, there was one student who did not disappoint his expectations. Wringing her hands, Ning Yingying glanced between the boys and Shen Qingqiu’s increasingly frosty expression. She bit her lip nervously — and couldn’t endure it anymore. “Shizun!” she protested. “Please don’t blame them! How could we let those... those sticky boys things like that about you?!”

‘Stinky boys’...

The others hissed at her to be quiet, but Ning Yingying just glared back at them tearfully, looking extremely wronged.

“And what are they saying this time?” Shen Qingqiu wondered with a sigh.

It could have been any number of things, after all. For those three months, the favored discussions were about whether Shen Qingqiu had seduced LQG through underhanded means, blackmailed him, brainwashed him, or fed him some shady love potion.

Before that, and now that they were back to norm, Shen Qingqiu assumed, there was still the usual talk about his ignoble fighting methods, his sketchy past deeds, his brothel visits, his general meanness... all fine things inherited from the original goods.

“They said it should have been obvious that those things about Liu-shishu’s engagement were lies,” Ning Yingying reported, her voice rising in agitation, “because Shizun could have never caught Liu-shishu’s eye for real!”

Shen Qingqiu paused and frowned slightly.

....Well, yes. Because it was impossible to ‘catch Liu-shishu’s eye.’ The man had no interest in anything except fighting.
But...

He felt a little annoyed somehow. It wasn’t like failing to catch Liu Qingge’s eye was somehow Shen Qingqiu’s personal failing. No one else could have succeeded either.

“Liu-shishu would be *lucky* if Shizun ever became his cultivation partner!” Ming Fan could no longer contain his ire either. His utterly misdirected ire. “Anyone would be honored to be chosen by Shizun! How dare they imply Shizun is... not good enough?!”

“That’s right!”

“Liu-shishu should be honored!”

As if a dam had been broken, the other disciples chorused with the same nonsense protests.

Shen Qingqiu felt a headache pounding behind his eyes.

He had wanted them to tell him why they kept fighting. He vaguely regretted it now. Maybe he would have been better off not knowing.

“That’s...” He shook his head again, at a loss for words. For some reason, he couldn’t seem to dig up any patience with this topic, and a frown wouldn’t stop pulling down at the corner of his lips. He shifted his focus. “Go to An Ding Peak. You will use your free time after lessons to help them with anything they ask, for the next... week.”

There were groans of disgust and injustice.

“Go now,” Shen Qingqiu ordered.

Let’s just ignore the nonsense they were all spouting, he decided. A few rounds of menial labor would cool their heads, and they could all just forget about... about Liu Qingge’s and his nonexistent romantic involvement.
Because An Ding Peak disciples were looked down upon by everyone and generally treated more like servants than fellow cultivators, they were naturally deeply bitter toward the rest of the sect — and they gleefully took the opportunity Shen Qingqiu’s punishments presented them with.

Logically, students from the scholarly Qing Jing Peak would have been most useful in managing inventory records or paperwork, especially Ming Fan and Luo Binghe, who had at various points handled much of Shen Qingqiu’s administrative duties as peak lord. That aside, they were all fairly strong cultivators, who could serve well as escorts or even just carrying heavy things.

But that wouldn’t be humiliating enough.

Instead, the chores Qing Jing’s erring disciples were assigned ended up being uniformly the worst of the worst. The dirtiest, most frustrating jobs.

Precisely as Shen Qingqiu planned, of course. Borrowing another’s hand to deal out proper punishment was a tried and true tactic!

The strip of cloth he’d tied over his nose and mouth didn’t stop Ming Fan from choking on the overpowering fumes of the manure he and several others had been tasked with shoveling. His eyes watered constantly, and he didn’t even have the breath to complain about how this sort of work was below him, how his Ming family would get revenge. Being fellow young masters and young misses, pampered even if they weren’t first born, the other Qing Jing disciples working away around the sect’s stables were in a similar state.

Except Luo Binghe, of course. His expression never wavered much from the bland indifference he tended to adopt when his mind wandered, even though he routinely managed to do more work than the rest combined.

Observing them in secret, Shen Qingqiu sighed in his heart.

In addition to the overall problems with his children’s growing unreasonableness, Luo Binghe had been... distant recently. His behavior verged on cold even by other disciples’ standards, avoiding looking at Shen Qingqiu, always distracted, answering only belatedly and distractedly. By Luo Binghe’s own sticky standards, he was practically radiating negative emotion.
Was he entering a rebellious teenager phase?

Should Shen Qingqiu just let him deal with it on his own terms?

He wasn’t prepared for this! He hadn’t even played those princess maker games, much less interacted with real children!

Inside, Ming Fan’s slightly muffled and nasally voice called out sharply, “What do you think you’re doing? Get back to work! I know you’re not tired yet, don’t fake it!”

“Ming-shixiong...” someone drew out piteously. “It’s gross!”

Ming Fan was undeterred, and even with his face covered, his scolding posture — hands on hips, shoulders drawn back — clearly conveyed his scowl. “Is this all our Qing Jing Peak is capable of? Is this the limit of your dedication to Shizun? We agreed to accept the punishment, didn’t we?”

Cowed under his glare, the other disciples shuffled back to work, though only with great and obvious reluctance. For his part, Luo Binghe didn’t pay them any mind from start to finish, mechanically continuing with clearing his half of the stables, his mind obviously elsewhere.

“It’s those idiots’ fault,” someone grumbled all the same, even as they resumed work. “How dare they say Shizun doesn’t deserve their precious War God’s regard?”

There was a round of agreeing noises from the others.

“But we did fight, and it’s against the rules, so Shizun has no choice but to punish us,” Ning Yingying piped up. “We just have bear with it.”

...No, Shen Qingqiu had punished them because he wanted them to stop letting themselves get dragged into fights. He still couldn’t believe even sweet, gentle Ning Yingying was joining in on this.
“Hmph. So why aren’t those mountain bandits getting punished too?” someone else complained. “They get to run around however they please just because their master’s too lax on them!”

He really was, Shen Qingqiu agreed mentally. Clearly this tendency to acting out was a sign of lacking parental guidance!

“But if Shifu asks Liu-shishu to punish them, they’ll just make more trouble for us... It’s always like that. They always make even more of a fuss right after Shifu visits Bai Zhan.”

Eh? Did they really?

One of the disciples snorted. “That’s even assuming Bai Zhan’s peak lord would listen to Shifu. Those guys are like that because he’s the same. I heard he never obeys anyone. He’s always running off from Cang Qiong and his duties, and he looks like he’ll cut you up if you even talk to him.”

“I think he would listen,” Ning Yingying piped up. “He and Shizun are close. He comes by often, too.”

“He’s here more than at his own peak. Isn’t that why they’re always so mad?”

...Was that the reason? The Bai Zhan hooligans really were jealous and acting out for attention?

Liu Qingge, show your disciples more care!

But before Shen Qingqiu could mentally remonstrate the Bai Zhan peak lord any further, the conversation inside the stables took a different, alarming turn.

“Do you think...” one disciple ventured, only to trail off. The silence that followed was ladened with meaning.

“They *said* it was just a cover to get Liu-shishu out of his engagement,” someone else pointed out, huffing as if this was an argument that had been repeated too many times — with this poor soul being on the losing side far too often.
“But,” Ning Yingying said with a stubborn note, “I think it wouldn’t be bad. If Shizun and Liu-shishu really did become... cultivation partners.”

...Wait.

What?!

“Those battle freaks really would die,” someone snorted.

“Good, I hope they choke!”

There was a smattering of chattering and laughter. Weren’t they treating this ridiculous idea too casually? No one seemed even slightly surprised at Ning Yingying’s suggestion, as if... as if they had all considered it before. Well, in a way they must have, back when they thought it was a real thing, but surely they had been relieved to find out it wasn’t true? Why were they still taking it seriously?

...Who let them discuss their master’s love life like this!

“If it’s Liu-shishu, I suppose... it’s acceptable,” Ming Fan allowed, his tone clearly only half-willing and as if making a great concession. “He is strong, and has a good appearance, and a good reputation and family... Acceptable.”

Even Ming Fan was playing along with this. As if the entire idea wasn’t preposterous.

This was Liu Qingge they were talking about. The man himself had made it clear he didn’t want a relationship.

Also, if Liu Qingge was only ‘acceptable,’ what kind of standards was Ming Fan using? Liu Qingge was very nearly an ideal partner. If you took the time to get him to warm up to you, he was
completely ideal, really. How was he just an ‘acceptable?’ Who would be a ‘good’ then?

Judging by their chuckling, the other disciples thought the same, at least. Ming Fan harrumphed loudly and pointedly, as if to say, ‘Am I wrong?’ ...No one actually contradicted him.

“He and Shizun get along well,” Ning Yingying offered encouragingly. “Shizun always looks happy when Liu-shishu comes by!” N-no? He didn’t! Well, maybe just because Liu Qingge was quite amusing when he became flustered, so teasing him was fun... It was nothing like they were implying! “And he even gave Shizun a short-haired monster!”

Ming Fan harrumphed again. “Short-haired monsters are not an appropriate gift!”

“But he gives Shifu fans too, right?”

“Those are just the ones Shizun lost. He’s just returning them, that doesn’t count.”

“That’s kind of romantic too...”

Listening to them, Shen Qingqiu felt an overwhelming sense of agitation. Despite being hidden and thus unseen by anyone anyway, he snapped open his fan and hid behind it. These brats! He was going to double their punishment for this! How dare they talk about their teachers in this kind of fashion! ...Nevermind that Shen Yuan remembered his own classmates discussing this kind of thing and far worse as well. Even if it was normal adolescent behavior, this was still—!

Really, they had no sense at all. Him and Liu Qingge...

Him and Liu Qingge...

The fan he had been waving so quickly that it was almost a blur, sending his hair fluttering in the wind, finally slowed. Thoughtlessly, Shen Qingqiu reached up to press two fingers against his lips.

[-5 Coolness points]
The piercing, ear-bleeding sound of a shovel scraping against the stone floor split the air and made everyone in the vicinity wince.

“...You need a break?” Ming Fan asked in the sudden silence, something under the gruff tone of his voice.

“Um... No, it’s alright, Shixiong.” Luo Binghe replied after a moment.

So it had been him... Had he gotten distracted again? What was up with that child recently?

Distantly, Shen Qingqiu was aware that the “coolness” points had something to do with Luo Binghe’s overall feelings. So the recent announcements out of the blue, like the one just now, were another sign of his strange, unhappy mood. The huge dump of negatives before, during the fake relationship fiasco, must have been a child’s jealousy toward a potential ‘step-parent’ of sorts, but what was the reason for this now?

Ming Fan snorted, clearly not believing Luo Binghe. “Take a break,” he ordered. Quieter, he grumbled, “You’re making the rest of look bad...”

It was an effort not to roll his eyes, but also not to smile too much. How cute — his disciples were getting along.

Luo Binghe didn’t respond verbally. He might not have responded at all, with how often he had ended up drifting away in his own thoughts recently. His footsteps headed outside.

After a moment of consideration, Shen Qingqiu followed him.

Maybe Luo Binghe was the type to talk to himself when he was alone. At this point, his master was feeling a bit desperate.

The stables Qing Jing’s offenders had been set to slave away in were only one building out of several, and the ones beyond that were still in normal use. An Ding people and animals bustled about, all working away industriously. There was no rest for the most cannon fodder of peaks. Several more wagons, either with supplies or from trading, had recently arrived, creating a center of activity.
Luo Binghe didn’t pay them much attention, heading over to a bucket of clean water and cupping some to splash onto his face. Rubbing the excess over the back of his neck and through his hair, he lightly slapped his cheeks and shook his head. But even as he shook his hands to dry them, his gaze grew distant and distracted again, and he heaved a heavy sigh.

The corner of Shen Qingqiu’s mouth twitched. The protagonist... really seemed to be going through a hard time!

As his master, it was naturally his duty to help. And yet, he was at a complete loss. It had started after that mission with Liu Mingyan and Duanmu Yin, hadn’t it? Was it possibly... lovesickness?

“...Shen-shixiong?”

Focused completely as he had been on his disciple, Shen Qingqiu was taken completely off guard when someone called out to him. Snapping around, he quickly held up his fan and tried to look as if he entirely belonged behind one of the buildings at An Ding’s stables.

The one looking at him with a politely bland, unquestioning expression was An Ding’s own peak lord, Shang Qinghua.

Shen Qingqiu still felt distinctly like he was being judged. “Yes?” he said coolly.

He had thought he kept his face unreadable and lofty as befitting an immortal, but Shang Qinghua flinched and quickly held up his hands as if to ward off a blow. “N-nothing, nothing! I didn’t see anything!” he promised, shaking his head frantically.

“What exactly did you see then?!’ Shen Qingqiu thought, narrowing his eyes.

Shang Qinghua looked on the verge of tears and also as if he feared being murdered right there, behind the stables at his own peak.

It made Shen Qingqiu feel like... well, the original goods. An actual, honest to goodness scum villain, menacing some poor soul just with his villainous presence. And that, for some reason, dragged up another flash of irritation.
This kind of reaction, it had to be because of the original goods. Shen Yuan had never scared a person in his entire life, and he had done nothing since transmigrating to foster that kind of reputation either. Just like the Bai Zhan disciples who insisted he couldn’t possibly have anything other than a bitter hatred with their master, just like everyone sending him to Wan Jian and testing him for possession...

He had stolen Shen Qingqiu’s body and life, so he had no right to complain about inheriting the bad along with this second chance. But somehow, it really was... irritating.

Forcing down his annoyance, he commented as pleasantly as he could manage, “It’s been a while, Shang-shidi. Welcome back to Cang Qiong. How was your trip?”

“Oh, uh... It was pretty good. Those melon seeds are selling really well,” Shang Qinghua answered automatically, glancing at Shen Qingqiu and then glancing away just as quickly. If anything, this pleasant approach was only making him more nervous, as he suspected some underhanded trick in play. “It sounds like I’ve... missed a lot...?”

He had been gone for something close to half a year this time, if Shen Qingqiu was counting it right. Given that time frame, aside from traveling around buying the goods Cang Qiong needed and addressing some other logistical matters, he suspected that Shang Qinghua had also done some work for his actual master, Mobei-Jun, or perhaps even gone to the demon realm. But it wasn’t time to bring up that plot twist, so Shen Qingqiu remained silent on the matter.

“Nothing too major,” he said mildly.

“Oh,” Shang Qinghua repeated. His expression became a little odd. “But I heard... you and Liu Qingge...”

Naturally, since returning, he had been catching up on the juicy gossip.

“No, it was just a small misunderstanding,” Shen Qingqiu said.

Shang Qinghua actually breathed a sigh of relief. “Of course! Right, that had to be it!” he agreed quickly. “You and him, there’s no way! It’s impossible! It’d make more sense if you two killed each other, than if— uh. Um.”
Catching sight of the expression on Shen Qingqiu’s face — he wasn’t trying to make an expression, really — Shang Qinghua trailed off and swallowed heavily.

He was completely right, of course. It was impossible. It was ridiculous.

...Shen Qingqiu was getting tired of hearing that.

“Um. Shen-shixiong? Peak Lord Shen?” Shang Qinghua tried, in an increasingly small voice. He jumped when Shen Qingqiu only turned around and strode off. When the other man’s figure finally disappeared from sight, Shang Qinghua breathed a sigh of relief and muttered, unheard by anyone, “Too OOC. Just too OOC...”

~.~.~

No matter what chores or punishments Shen Qingqiu doled out, the fights continued unabated. It got to the point that Qian Cao Peak wanted to know why Qing Jing Peak had suddenly gone over their allotted stock of salves and medicine.

Shen Qingqiu decided enough was enough.

While he was annoyed with his own students for not listening to him and just running from these pointless squabbles, it wasn’t like they were wrong. Those Bai Zhan hooligans were clearly getting out of hand. What right did they have to comment on their master’s romance prospects and on another peak lord in the first place?

So the next time Liu Qingge returned to Cang Qiong, Shen Qingqiu marched calmly and very menacingly to his peak, his cold glare sending several Bai Zhan ruffians scattering, pale-faced, as they suddenly remembered just who they had been making trouble for.

The words “I don’t understand” still gave some of them nightmares.

“Liu-shidi, you need to do something about your disciples. This can’t go on,” Shen Qingqiu declared in his firmest tone.
He was fully prepared for Liu Qingge to tell him that it was his disciples that needed to learn to fight back properly, as he had done before, and the look the other man sent him implied very much that. But instead of saying so, Liu Qingge paused and huffed.

“And?” he asked shortly. “What do you want me to do?”

This easy acquiescence took Shen Qingqiu aback, and he dithered for a few moments, waving his fan vaguely. “That... Take them on a trip, have them work off some of that youthful energy,” he suggested, finally gathering his thoughts.

Give them a few rounds of good beatings and forced march, he meant. Since getting beat up just once through Shen Qingqiu’s previous revenge plan was apparently not enough. See if they still have the will to pick fights after an entire trip with human terminator Liu Qingge.

“Fine,” Liu Qingge agreed, leaving Shen Qingqiu momentarily floundering again. “What about yours?”

“Yes, what about mine?” Shen Qingqiu wondered.

“They fought too,” his junior brother reminded him. “They should come.”

“Come with your lot, on a trip?”

They’d die. They were pampered brats from wealthy, powerful families. Shen Qingqiu imagined it had taken them much suffering to adjust to living without servants at the sect, and at least they still had An Ding to fall back on. Taking a few knocks from Bai Zhan’s drive-by raids was not the same as roughing it with the War God out in the wild.

...But they had solidly refused to mend their ways under lesser punishments, Shen Qingqiu remembered, his eyes narrowing. If they were going to disobey their teacher like that, what choice did he have except to resort to harsher methods?

Don’t blame him for being cruel, children. You brought this upon yourselves!
Chapter 13: Field Trip (of Getting Along)

When Shen Qingqiu announced their upcoming... field trip, there was stunned, horrified silence.

“Shizun... If you want us to die, please at least grant us a clean death!” Ming Fan begged, speaking for all of them. Behind him, someone stifled a sob.

Inwardly rolling his eyes at their dramatics, Shen Qingqiu said, “No.”

How bad could it be? It wasn’t like he’d let Liu Qingge beat them.

...It was bad.

Shen Qingqiu felt increasingly gloomy and ready to start his own dramatics when he realized just what kind of conditions he’d consigned himself to — because he did want his children to come back alive, which meant he needed to go with them.

“Are you certain we can’t take a carriage, Shidi? And stay at an inn for the night?” he asked, not entirely able to keep the plaintive note out of his voice.

“They won’t ‘work off their energy’ like that,” Liu Qingge said, unimpressed. Pausing, he added as if making a concession, “We can ride.”

Yes, riding. Riding horses. A skill which Shen Qingqiu had theoretically inherited from the original goods, but had not encountered an opportunity to practice... He could only pray he wouldn’t break his neck or, worse, fall flat on his face and humiliate himself.

And that was just the beginning.
Unlike Shen Qingqiu’s lot, the Bai Zhan disciples didn’t seem to initially understand that they were being punished. If anything, receiving this kind of personal, prolonged attention from their largely absent master was something they saw as a great boon. The chance to bully the Qing Jing ‘flower vases’ some more must have also started out as exciting.

To their credit, they were definitely better equipped to camping out in the wilderness and hunting their own food than Shen Qingqiu’s students. But that was only because Qing Jing’s young masters and young misses were completely unprepared.

Oh, yes. That second part was definitely a thing — everyone had to hunt their own food because Liu Qingge believed in living off the land.

Shen Qingqiu was happy to practice inedia. By choice, not by necessity.

Admittedly, the image of Liu Qingge and his peerlessly beautiful face and white robes and graceful bearing of an immortal coming back with some bloody monster carcass in hand, skinning it and cutting it up, charring it over a fire and eating it straight off the stick, all without changing expression... was so mismatched it became impossible to look away from.

How did he managed to make even that look good...?

When Liu Qingge offered him a skewer of meat, Shen Qingqiu stared at it for a long moment, then accepted with an inward sigh.

“Shizun, I can make something for you,” Luo Binghe spoke up, catching sight of this. Unlike the rest of Qing Jing’s group, he had no trouble catching a few rabbits and was already working on preparing them skillfully.

Liu Qingge glanced at him with a frown.

“Everyone feeds themselves. Stop cooking for them,” he ordered.

The other Qing Jing disciples, who had been watching their most junior brother with drool dripping from their mouths, turned to him with looks of horror. With desperate hope, they turned to Shen
Qingqiu next — only to be betrayed.

Children, did you forget you’re being punished? You’re definitely not going to get rewarded with Luo Binghe’s heavenly cuisine!

“Binghe, do as Liu-shidi says,” Shen Qingqiu ordered. He softened slightly, unwilling to entirely lose this opportunity to increase the protagonist’s favorability rating at their peak. “You can show them how to do it, but don’t cook for them.”

Someone burst into tears.

Luo Binghe, who had turned to look at Liu Qingge with a strange, too blank expression, finally smiled in acknowledgement, looking a little more like himself — even if he seemed to avoid Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. “This disciple understands, Shizun,” he said agreeably. He gestured to the others. “If my shixiong and shijie are willing, I would be happy to share my small skills with them.”

‘Small skills’...

Even if they would have preferred to make him do the work for them entirely, the other Qing Jing disciples understood that getting directions was at least better than being left completely to their own devices. So with only some scattered grumbling, they gathered around Luo Binghe and set about following his directions.

Before too long, a very pleasant combination of scents began to drift over. The Bai Zhan brats who had been gloating over their supposed superiority began to look somewhat envious instead. They might have known the basics of hunting — not so much foraging — and grilling over a fire, but that was the extent of their skills. None of it compared to the products of even just Luo Binghe’s oversight.

Shen Qingqiu was envious too, but somehow it felt like he would be compromising his dignity as a teacher if he requested Binghe’s food after he so firmly denied it to his students.

Sighing again, he took a bite of whatever Lui Qingge had handed him.

He paused mid-chew.
...Why did it taste like squid? It had clearly been some furry thing!

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There was fighting over the leftovers.

At the beginning, the Bai Zhan disciples at least did their best to keep it covert. They were after all familiar with ambushing prey and misdirecting opponents. Unfortunately for them, those combat skills didn’t map one to one with... theft, and Qing Jing’s group were very much on their guard. Their packs and horses were never left completely unattended, their eyes were sharp and they refused to be baited away from their posts. Any attempts at sleight of hand were countered, leading to short, muted scuffles.

Shen Qingqiu let it go on because it was all the entertainment he could expect on the road.

Oh, someone got their fingers twisted rather brutally. They’d need to bandage those later. Who knew little Xi Xie could be that brutal? The somewhat scatterbrained Chu Cheng almost got distracted enough to lose his lunch leftovers, but fortunately Ming Fan pulled the horse equivalent of shouldering the would-be thieves aside. He was taking his job as the most senior disciple present quite seriously, good, good. For some reason, Ning Yingying alone remained untouched. Was it really just those Bai Zhan ruffians being weak to a sweet girl..?

Naturally, Shen Qingqiu didn’t gawk outwardly, but he didn’t fail to note a single play in the ongoing struggles. As a result, actually keeping his horse on course had fallen to Liu Qingge, who kept by his side with a neutral, disinterested expression.

At one point, he followed Shen Qingqiu’s surreptitious gaze toward the warring disciples and made a vague noise. “I’ll beat them up,” he offered, without any particularly feeling.

“No need, no need,” Shen Qingqiu assured him distractedly. His eyes glimmered with amusement as a quick, silent slap fight broke out between three of the children. “It’s... character building.”

Liu Qingge huffed, but didn’t disagree. He also believed in ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ and gaining experience through struggle — obviously, given his hands-off approach to managing his peak — but on the other hand, he probably didn’t see much value in the experience of trying to steal some ancient nerd’s lunch.
On the third, most important hand, he didn’t care that much either way.

“How is your body?” he asked instead.

“Hm?” Shen Qingqiu, who hadn’t been paying the conversation much mind, finally refocused on him. “My body? The poison isn’t acting up. You just cleaned my meridians before we left, it should be fine for a while.”

Not that regularly cleaning his meridians stopped Without a Cure from blocking his qi circulation at inopportune moments, but there was nothing to be done about that and no way to predict it.

“What about riding? Sleeping on the ground?” Liu Qingge persisted.

Shen Qingqiu stared at him in surprise, the hand holding his fan lowering slightly.

What brought this on?

Riding... did leave him a bit sore. Alright, a lot sore. But Shen Qingqiu was still a powerful cultivator, so as long as he circulated his qi, he could recover quickly and easily, to the point that it was mostly not a struggle to walk without limping. But as for sleeping on the ground, or rather meditating all night while sitting in whatever cave they happened to find...

Had Liu Qingge actually taken seriously his complaints back when they first met Liu Qishuang, about sitting on the ground?

That was just a joke! He had clearly been just needling him!

If it had been anyone else, in particular Qi Qingqi, he would have thought he was being mocked. But Liu Qingge would have mocked him openly, if he intended that. This had to be a genuine question.

Shen Qingqiu wasn’t sure how to feel about receiving this sudden concern. Clearing his throat, he
avoided Liu Qingge’s gaze.

“No issues so far,” he reported. And added, somewhat dryly, “There’s no need to worry, Liu-shidi. Shixiong can handle this much.”

He let some of his exasperation show in the look he slanted at Liu Qingge.

As if he only just realized what he’d been doing, Liu Qingge’s expression twitched, and he quickly looked away with a scowl.

What an awkward person. Chuckling inwardly, Shen Qingqiu turned his attention back to their little flock and the entertainment they provided — just in time to catch Luo Binghe coldly kick someone’s reaching arm without even glancing at them.

‘Nice one!’ he thought, hiding a smile.

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Since the entire thing was a bit spur of the moment, their little field trip had no particular destination or goal. Instead, they leisurely rode to the nearest worthwhile hunting ground and planned to make a few passes through it, until Liu Qingge was satisfied — or until Shen Qingqiu got fed up with roughing it, one of the other.

...More likely the latter, to be honest.

That hunting ground was simply an old forest, not overly notable or dangerous, but casually abundant in both low-grade spiritual herbs and low-level monsters. It was a popular training destination for Cang Qiong disciples in the Foundation Building early and mid stages, who had just earned their swords from Wan Jian Peak and could thus begin to travel on their own but still lacked the experience for risking real missions.

This put their current group of Qi Refining children at just slightly below the recommended level for this area. But fortunately, they had the advantage of numbers and also their OP masters with them.
So Liu Qingge didn’t hesitate to herd them out to hunt in groups, and Shen Qingqiu didn’t hesitate to wave them a cheery goodbye while remaining at their campsite.

The results were rather mixed.

“Starlight Grass, low-grade,” Shen Qingqiu judged as one group presented him their loot. “Violet Hidden Heart Leaf, low-grade. Fire weasels, low grade. It’s a good thing you didn’t run into too many of them. They had be troublesome in large packs. Did you get burned? Go wash it out and grind some of the Clear Water Grass growing in the stream for a poultice.”

“Yes, Shifu!” the Qing Jing disciples of this group sounded off.

They were about to tromp off to follow his directions when Liu Qingge, who had been at the other end of the clearing but apparently observing the exchange, made his way over. With no niceties or preamble, he nailed his own brats each across the head and meaningfully jerked his chin toward Shen Qingqiu.

The Bai Zhan disciples looked as if he had betrayed them. Liu Qingge narrowed his eyes.

“Yes... Peak Lord Shen,” one of them sounded through gritted teeth.

Liu Qingge hit him again.

“...Shen-shibo,” the disciple amended with great unwillingness.

Nodding regally and letting them finally hurry away, Shen Qingqiu struggled not to laugh. Liu Qingge, wasn’t that a bit hypocritical? The man still refused to call him ‘shixiong,’ but he’d force his hooligans to be polite and proper?

“Be firmer,” Liu Qingge ordered. “They won’t respect you otherwise.”

“My disciples respect me just fine without getting beaten up,” Shen Qingqiu pointed out, raising his eyebrows.
“That’s not how Bai Zhan does things.”

“Good thing I’m not from Bai Zhan.”

Liu Qingge blinked, looking at him intently, as if Shen Qingqiu’s casual rebuttal carried some deeper meaning. Just as abruptly, he nodded and agreed, “No, you’re not.” His brows furrowed as if he was considering something carefully. Then, he nodded again. “This is how Qing Jing should be. You... stay as you are.”

Opening his fan, Shen Qingqiu used it to hide the amused and also bemused curl of his lips. “Thanking Liu-shidi for the permission,” he drawled lightly. “Then, Shixiong will leave the firmness to Shidi.”

“Good,” Liu Qingge said. “I’ll take care of it.”

Shen Qingqiu looked away, fanning himself.

Since their group was fairly large, the children had been split into several parties, and someone was always coming and going from the campsite. So at first, Shen Qingqiu only casually glanced at the disciples that trudged back from the direction of the nearby brook — before his attention snapped to them in a double take.

Why were they all wet?

“Why are you all wet?” he demanded, displeased. And indeed, the children were completely soaked from head to toe, and muddy besides. One was wiping at a cut on his forehead. Another, at his bloody nose. Someone sniffled, as they exchanged dark, unhappy looks and shuffled their feet instead of answering. “Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu pressed, zeroing on his own brats. “And Ming Fan! You were supposed to be getting water!”

His boys glanced at each other. Neither looked even slightly sorry.

Shen Qingqiu sighed in his heart. Not this again...
“They pushed us in!” one of the Bai Zhan disciples burst out.

“Yeah! He tripped me!”

“When I tried to climb out, he kicked me in the face!”

“Just because we said— um...”

Whatever they said was clearly not fit to be repeated in front of two peak lords — one of who was almost certainly the subject of the ‘conversation.’ As if only just remembering who they were in the presence of, the Bai Zhan disciples fell silent and looked everywhere except at the adults.

Shen Qingqiu sighed to himself again, louder and longer. Outwardly, his lips thinned slightly.

But before he could even begin to address this mess, Liu Qingge stalked over to the dithering children instead — and began hitting them too over the head, one by one.

The Bai Zhan disciples squawked but didn’t protest. This was normal for them, and maybe muscle-brained battle-loving idiots like them could only understand this kind of communication. But it seemed that Liu Qingge had gotten somewhat carried away, and continued to hit even when he ran out of Bai Zhan disciples.

Luo Binghe endured silently, only staggering slightly under the impact, but Shen Qingqiu was not about to do so.

“Liu-shidi!” he protested sharply. “That one is mine!”

Liu Qingge, in the middle of pulling his arm back to hit Ming Fan, at the end of the the children’s rough line, paused and glanced back at Luo Binghe, as if just realizing who he was.

Looking between Luo Binghe, Shen Qingqiu and his own offending hand, Liu Qingge frowned. Then, inexplicably, he reached out again and... patted Luo Binghe on the head very awkwardly.
Was that supposed to make up for hitting him...?

Luo Binghe’s expression was exceptionally horrified, but the Bai Zhan peak disciples were not much better off.

“Shifu!” one of them complained, unable to endure. “Why?!”

Liu Qingge looked at him coldly. “Qing Jing,” he said, pointing at Luo Binghe. “Bai Zhan,” pointing at the one who had spoken. So clearly, the treatment would be different. Raising an eyebrow slightly, he asked mockingly, “Want to switch?”

The Bai Zhan hooligans shook their heads frantically, stammering denials.

“Binghe, Ming Fan,” Shen Qingqiu spoke up, deciding this was enough, “apologize.”

“Yes, Shizun,” Ming Fan intoned dully. Turning to the other disciples, he made a surprisingly proper salute and even half-bowed. The reason for this became clear when he spoke. “This disciple apologizes for acting in a way unbefitting of our Qing Jing Peak.”

Like that, he was apologizing to Shen Qingqiu instead of the other disciples.

It took a moment for Luo Binghe to copy him, as he had been still staring at Liu Qingge. When the children finally scurried away, mostly under Liu Qingge’s cold look, Luo Binghe could be seen quickly ruffling his hair, as if trying to dislodge something. Ming Fan patted him on the back in commiseration.

Shen Qingqiu let himself sigh out loud.

“They’re hopeless,” he muttered.

“They’ll get over it,” Liu Qingge judged, unimpressed.
Where he got this confidence from, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t begin to fathom. But it was nice, in a way. If Great Master Liu was so certain, then maybe there was no need to worry.

He really was a reliable sort.

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In fact, Liu Qingge had truly thought his disciples would have ‘gotten over it’ by now.

Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu, who had maintained a bitter enmity for decades, had after all become like this — fellow peak lords who could even take their disciples out to train together, who helped each other in all manner of situations, and who even owed each other their lives. If their relationship could eventually take this kind of turn, then these brats with their petty disputes would eventually settle down and learn to see each other as fellow members of Cang Qiong as well.

This was Liu Qingge’s reasoning.

However... he was also beginning to feel that things had dragged on too long.

Shen Qingqiu was right, it was far past time for Liu Qingge to do something about his lot.

He could broadly tell what had been going on, even if he was often away from Cang Qiong and didn’t pay attention to such things normally. Picking fights he didn’t care much about, but one had to wonder where they found the guts to mouth off about a peak lord, this repeatedly and this brazenly.

...No, he knew where.

It was from him.

For so many years, he had treated Shen Qingqiu with the utmost disdain, and relations between them had been so poor that there was no way his disciples had missed it. Picking up on it, they too began to treat Shen Qingqiu and Qing Jing with nothing but contempt. They were, in the end, simply children following behind the master they idolized.

It wasn’t that Liu Qingge thought he had been wrong. Shen Qingqiu back then had deserved every drop of his scorn. But Liu Qingge thought he might have begun to understand why the clan elders
praised that younger cousin of theirs for his ‘diplomatic’ nature and why that might be a benefit at times.

Some things, even if they were true, were perhaps not meant to be said so openly.

But regardless, Liu Qingge had changed, because Shen Qingqiu had changed. Everyone had understood it — the other peak lords who now treated Shen Qingqiu as a close comrade, his disciples at Qing Jing who tried to protect his reputation with such fervent adoration... It was only Bai Zhan who were stubbornly refusing.

As their master, he would help them along.

Even if this was the result of Shen Qingqiu’s previous nature, and even if it was perhaps thus more suitable for him to work to change it on his own, Liu Qingge felt inexplicably unwilling to let him continue shouldering that blame any longer.

Gathering his sorry lot that evening, after the day’s activities were done, Liu Qingge led them away from the campsite. Once satisfied with their relative privacy, he swept his sharp, cold glare over them, making the children fidget.

“Are you done?” he asked coolly.

His cutting tone made the disciples flinch, and the few smarter ones — or ones with better instincts — began to pale with panic as an inkling of his meaning seeped into their minds.

“...Shifu?” a disciple finally ventured.

“Are you done,” Liu Qingge repeated flatly, “making a mockery of Bai Zhan’s pride and purpose?”

Under such harsh words, the Bai Zhan disciples could only gape in shock.

“Shifu!” someone burst out finally, horrified and indignant. “We would never!”
Liu Qingge’s eyes narrowed, and the clamor of protests that had started to rise up immediately fell silent.

“Bai Zhan’s purpose is to lead in battle to protect Cang Qiong,” he said slowly and clearly, every word ringing with contempt. “Raising fists against fellow disciples, disrespecting a peak lord, it’s acting like enemies of Cang Qiong instead. You call yourself Bai Zhan like that?”

“Shifu!” the oldest disciple stepped forward, as if propelled by their collective feeling of being wronged. “They do the same thing! It’s all because of that man! Shifu, don’t you remember what he did—!”

“I don’t care,” Liu Qingge cut him off, irritation furrowing his features.

He didn’t care that Qing Jing’s disciples doubtlessly did their best to give as good as they got, both with their fists and in terms of insulting Liu Qingge. Nor did he care about what Shen Qingqiu had done. He was clearer on those things than these children could ever be.

“Shen Qingqiu is the lord of Qing Jing Peak,” he went on. “The second highest authority of Cang Qiong. You will treat him with respect. Or see what I do to you.” Turning away, he paused and added over his shoulder, “Don’t bother coming back until you’re ready to act properly.”

Without waiting to see their reactions, he headed back to the campsite.

Everyone except the pair on watch had already settled down for the night — or was at least pretending to have done so. Moving silently, Liu Qingge sat next to where Shen Qingqiu was meditating under a tree. ...Or at least pretending.

“Liu-shidi...” the other peak lord started, opening his eyes and glancing at Liu Qingge.

Liu Qingge stared ahead expressionlessly, as he dropped down cross-legged and folded his arms, moving Cheng Luan to rest against one shoulder. “You said to do something,” he pointed out, almost accusingly.

“Mm... Well. I did,” Shen Qingqiu conceded. He cleared his throat, as if there was something more he wanted to say, but nothing followed. Ducking his head, he instead tried to hide the smile tugging at the corners of his lips.
Seeing that, Liu Qingge felt pleased too.

Without saying anything further, both of them settled down to meditate.

It was some time later that most of his lot slunk back to the campsite, tails tucked between their legs. When they caught sight of Liu Qingge watching them silently from the shadows beneath a tree, they hurried to their bedrolls and diligently pretended to sleep.

Although it was difficult to tell in the darkness, several of them had been sporting impressive new bruises. There had been some internal disagreements about whether or not to obey.

He’d look for the others in the morning, Liu Qingge decided mentally.

Next to him, Shen Qingqiu made a faint sound. Then, shifting slightly, he began to tip over. Without thinking, Liu Qingge broke his own rigid posture to catch him, the other man’s head landing lightly on his shoulder.

...What kind of peak lord fell asleep while meditating? This person was really just...

“Mrgh... Binghe, another bowl...” Shen Qingqiu muttered under his breath. Twisting, he leaned against Liu Qingge’s side and rubbed his face on the fabric of his robes, like a content cat.

The hand Liu Qingge had rested against his back, holding him up, twitched and froze.

This... this man...

Completely ridiculous.

He wouldn’t even be able to draw Cheng Luan, like this.

But even so, Liu Qingge didn’t push him off.
Letting out a long, slow breath, he let himself relax and closed his eyes again. However, his meditation was very poor that night, as his attention constantly returned to the warm, occasionally shifting and murmuring weight at his side.

The sleep of several disciples was also quite poor, as they desperately tried to ignore one great master of their sect pressing intimately into another’s side without any regard for the properly distant and detached bearing of immortals.

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Shen Qingqiu wasn’t entirely sure what pulled him awake. There had been something, he was sure, otherwise he would have never roused in the pre-dawn gloom that still cloaked the campsite.

...It seemed he had dozed off by accident again.

While he was still squinting groggily and trying to gain his bearings, he was gently nudged upright, and Liu Qingge, who had been next to him, stood up.

“Liu-shidi?” he managed, enunciating carefully. “What is it?”

Liu Qingge didn’t answer, but he didn’t need to. As Shen Qingqiu blinked away the last vestiges of sleep, he noticed it as well — the noise of an approaching group. It had to be some of their students, but their footsteps were heavy and frantic, enough to jolt him immediately to his feet, gut twisting in worry.

Moments later, they burst into the clearing. It was the Bai Zhan disciples who hadn’t come back the night before, looking appropriately rumpled and dirty from spending the night in the forest, but also incredibly panicked.

The reason revealed itself as the group parted ranks — supported by two others was one disciple whose face had paled so much he was nearly blue, one of his arms swollen to easily twice its usual size. Around the campsite, the other children stirred awake and peered at the commotion with mixed curiosity and unease.
“What happened?” Shen Qingqiu demanded, rushing over to the group before they could even call out.

Several of them recoiled, glaring at him with obvious distrust. But others, the younger ones, were too scared to worry about Shen Qingqiu’s reputation. The fact that an adult and a master was in front of them was more important.

“I-he got bitten!” one of them explained in a rush. The boy was even younger than Luo Binghe, and clearly beside himself with worry. “There was a, a snake, and...”

“What did it look like?” Shen Qingqiu asked distractedly, already carefully taking the injured disciple’s pulse and checking swollen arm for the bite mark.

The young boy shook his head, unable to remember in detail. He glanced at the others for help, but all of them only exchanged unsure looks. They were still distrustful of him, Shen Qingqiu realized, and his expression darkened.

“Is this the time for that?” he snapped. “Tell me quickly!”

“It... it was black, with these gold spots!” one of the disciples blurted out, cringing at the dark looks he received from the others.

Shen Qingqiu ignored the byplay for now. “Black with gold spots,” he repeated, mentally flipping quickly through his knowledge of monsters and various animals. “About as thick as your arm, with purple eyes?” Seeing the somewhat startled expressions and the tentative nods, he sighed in relief. “That’s just a Royal Sage Snake. Don’t worry, just let him rest for a while.”

His heart had sped up with worry, and the sudden way that agitation passed left him feeling vaguely lightheaded.

It turned out that it was just a simple thing. Was this how kindergarten teachers felt when the toddlers stumbled and started crying, before figuring out it was barely a scratch?

Since there was no need to do anything, he drew back. When he noticed that no one had moved yet, Shen Qingqiu directed, “Just lay him down wherever his belongings are. Give him some water, too. That should be enough.”
The disciples didn’t obey.

“...That’s it?” one of them demanded. “You’re just going to leave him like that? You—!”

Well, it was an understandable reaction.

“There’s no need to worry,” Shen Qingqiu explained patiently. “The Royal Sage Snake’s poison isn’t lethal. It causes swelling, and nothing else. He’ll be fine within an hour.”

He received a wall of glares. It was entirely obvious that they didn’t believe him. “And if he doesn’t?” the same Bai Zhan boy asked stubbornly, his tone full of implication.

They really thought he would lie about what was wrong and let a disciple die in front of them. Given the temperament of the original goods, they weren’t entirely off the mark, despite the displeased grumbling of the Qing Jing disciples who had gathered around to watch this spectacle and the uneasy looks of the remaining Bai Zhan group mixed in with them.

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t think of anything that might convince them. No matter how certain he felt about his judgement, in the end it was only his word.

It was Liu Qingge who spoke up instead.

“He will,” Bai Zhan’s peak lord said firmly, brooking no argument.

“Shifu!”

Liu Qingge didn’t react to the betrayed looks he was receiving, but Shen Qingqiu’s lips twitched down unhappily. He felt a little guilty, looking at this scene of the master and the disciples in complete disharmony. When he’d asked Liu Qingge to ‘do something’ about his students, he hadn’t intended to cause this kind of conflict. It wasn’t as if they were wrong to suspect him, after all.
“We can give him a detoxification pill,” he proposed, breaking the stalemate. “This master is only assuming the nature of the snake based on the description. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“If you say that’s what it was, that’s what it was,” Liu Qingge huffed. “You know monsters and demons.”

That... mgh.

Shen Qingqiu had been about to insist, it was just a detoxification pill, what was that against a disciple’s wellbeing and peak harmony? But he completely lost his train of thought when he met Liu Qingge’s gaze.

There wasn’t any hint of hesitation or doubt or challenge. Liu Qingge genuinely believed that if Shen Qingqiu had said this boy would be fine, then he would be, and that this bustle and fuss was unnecessary. There was a stubborn set in his expression that made it clear he wasn’t willing to compromise on it either.

That really was...

Embarrassing. That was very embarrassing, so embarrassing that he could feel a telltale burning starting in his ears and cheeks. It wasn’t like Shen Qingqiu needed someone to stand up for him against a bunch of little brats.

His own disciples did not agree, however. “That’s right!” Ming Fan said sharply. “Shizun’s bestiary knowledge is unmatched!”

“Yes! And saying Shizun would treat a shidi’s life lightly isn’t right either!” Ning Yingying added, blindly trusting enough to bring up what Ming Fan wasn’t quite shameless enough to claim.

Children... it’s one detoxification pill...

But for some reason, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t seem to say it.

“There’s no need,” Luo Binghe spoke up unexpectedly. Or maybe the unexpected thing was that it
had taken him so long to say anything. Shen Qingqiu felt there was something strange about that... “The swelling is already going down.”

At his words, everyone glanced at the unfortunate victim.

It was not immediately obvious, since the poisoned disciple’s arm still looked terribly bloated, but as Shen Qingqiu looked closer, he could see that Luo Binghe was right. Some of the swelling had faded, and a bit of color was returning to the boy’s face.

Glaring pointedly at the recalcitrant children, Liu Qingge stepped forward to check his pulse. “Already improving,” he said, dropping the boy’s wrist. His frown deepened as he swept an unfriendly gaze over them all. “I told you not to bother coming back.”

Liu-shidi, this kind of child-rearing...

“Well, they’re here now,” Shen Qingqiu said, before Liu Qingge could try to send them back into the forest. “So let’s get them cleaned up. Put him down somewhere, so he can rest. And the rest of you, you’re all beat up too, wash up and treat any cuts you have. You look like you didn’t sleep at all, take it easy for today... And the rest of you, bring over some water, get a fire started!”

With varying degrees of enthusiasm, the disciples obeyed.

It was already more or less dawn, so there was no point in going back to sleep. Slowly, the campsite began to fill with the sounds of activity and chatter, as they went about chores and morning preparations.

....It was only dawn. Internally, Shen Qingqiu groaned. Why did he have to be awake at this kind of unreasonable time? At least his neck wasn’t too sore this time...

Wait. His eyes narrowed as he remembered something. Liu Qingge had been right next to him. Did the other man catch him sleeping instead of meditating? Was he going to poke fun and scoff again? Actually, wasn’t there something a little off about the situation he woke up in? He couldn’t remember clearly, but...

Shen Qingqiu’s thoughts were interrupted by someone approaching, haltingly and with clear unwillingness.
It was one of the older Bai Zhan disciples, the same one who had been so confrontational. Peering at him, Shen Qingqiu tried to remember if they had ever been introduced. The boy shuffled his feet and fervently avoided his eyes, looking incredibly uncomfortable.

“M...Master Shen,” he forced out, which wasn’t quite the proper ‘Shen-shibo,’ but was already doubtlessly an improvement. “This... this disciple acted rudely earlier. Asking Master Shen to punish appropriately.”

Shen Qingqiu stared at him in surprise, then shook his head. “No need, no need,” he sighed, waving his hand. “You were just worried about your shidi. But make sure you learn to control yourself better, even in tough situations. You need to keep a cool head.”

Out of habit with his own students, he reached out to pat the boy on the head, caught himself just in time, and awkwardly switched to pat him on the shoulder instead. Both of them sprang apart quickly and, by silent mutual agreement, hurried their separate ways, determined to pretend that exchange had never happened.

Unfortunately, this was not an option for Shen Qingqiu.

[Bai Zhan disciples’ feelings towards you have improved, +50 Points. Optional flag, approval of the sect, obtained, +30 points]

He hadn’t been doing this for points, but he wouldn’t turn them down either. Firmly, he ignored the second part.

Meanwhile, Liu Qingge who had been watching from the side nodded to himself.

Just as he thought, Shen Qingqiu was more than capable of resolving it in the end. That was the kind of person he had become now, and no one in Bai Zhan was so blind as to keep missing it when it was right in front of their eyes.

...Otherwise, he really wouldn’t have let them come back.

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Chapter 15: The Enemy is His Fiancée, round 2

The door of the bamboo hut slammed open with a loud clatter, making Shen Qingqiu sigh. He had heard the pounding footsteps heading up the path, so he had been able to put down his tea and assume a dignified appearance, but even so...

“Really, Ming Fan,” he sighed at the boy who had burst in so rudely. “This is highly—”

“Apologies to Shizun!” Ming Fan blurted out quickly, without even waiting for the reprimand to finish. “But that woman — she’s back!”

That woman? What woman?

Shen Qingqiu really had no idea and could only frown at his disciple.

Seeing his master’s uncomprehending, annoyed expression, Ming Fan flapped his hands in distress. “Duanmu Yao! She’s at Qiong Ding! And she’s looking for you, Shizun!”

Duanmu Yao!

The name struck like a thunderbolt. Liu Qingge’s ex-fiancée! Vaguely, Shen Qingqiu was aware that Liu Qingge must have rejected her, leading to her fleeing into secluded cultivation. Or else, with her forcefulness, she would have certainly insisted on being present when Liu Qishuang came to sort them out.

But now, she had returned — and it seemed she was looking to... take back her man? Slap Shen Qingqiu and accuse him of being a fiancée-stealing trollop? Not give her blessings, he could guess.

Shen Qingqiu sighed and stood. “Then this master will go and greet her properly,” he said. “Binghe...” Seeing the blank, rebellious look he received, he quickly changed his mind. “Ming Fan. Stay and mind the peak. Also, sweep the path — running and yelling like that is unbefitting of our Qing Jing.”
“Shizun! I-I don’t think you should go see her!” Ming Fan protested. “Sect Leader is talking to her, Liu Mingyan too. I don’t think her intentions are any good, so Shizun should... maybe Shizun would consider...”

“Running away?” Shen Qingqiu guessed dryly. “No. Binghe, come.”

Not that Shen Qingqiu expected this to involve Luo Binghe in any way, but better to bring him than to have him follow on his own. And Liu Mingyan would be there. It was a slim chance, but it was still a chance to build more relationship points all the same.

Crossing Rainbow Bridge, they arrived at the central peak. Duanmu Yao was easy to find, standing out in the open beneath Cang Qiong’s famous sign. Liu Mingyan and Yue Qingyuan were indeed both there as well, the former whispering something fiercely as she held onto Duanmu Yao’s sleeve.

“I don’t care!” Duanmu Yao exclaimed, just as they approached. “On what basis can you stop me from seeing him?”

“Yao-jie, please calm down,” Liu Mingyan insisted. “What will you do, even if you meet him? This was my brother’s decision, involving Shen-shibo is—”

“I don’t care!” Duanmu Yao insisted. “I said I want to...”

She trailed off as she finally noticed the very target of her ire approaching. Frankly, her sharp, burning glare made Shen Qingqiu seriously consider turning tail and quickly going back the way he had come. Shen Yuan knew exactly how far women in Proud Immortal Demon Way were willing to go to get rid of competition, and he was rightly terrified.

Young miss, this master hadn’t actually stolen your man! Please don’t look so murderous!

...He couldn’t tell her that.

To be perfectly honest, Shen Qingqiu was fairly certain that telling Liu Qingge’s mother and his clan that they weren’t really cultivation partners and never had been wouldn’t cause much trouble.
The engagement had been cancelled, and it probably would be reinstated. Trying to do that would only lose face for everyone involved, and he didn’t think Liu Qishuang would push for that either.

But telling this woman... What if she took it as an opening, on a personal level? After all, she had feelings for Liu Qingge, their engagement aside.

He still remembered how completely helpless and trapped Liu Qingge looked when faced with her, back that first time on Xian Shu Peak. The man wasn’t equipped to face with this kind of opponent on this kind of battlefield.

Shen Qingqiu wasn’t going to leave Liu Qingge to deal with her again. Just the thought of it drove a spike of irritation through him.

Besides, he wasn’t some poor harem sister fighting against 600 others for a scrap of the hardened protagonist’s attention. He could handle an IQ 40 love-struck girl and anything she tried to throw at him.

“I’m here,” Shen Qingqiu said, meeting Duanmu Yao’s glare with a mask of absolute calm.

“Good,” she bit out. “Fight me! Right here and now!”

...The Duanmu family were old allies of the Liu clan. Shen Qingqiu didn’t know what he had expected, really.

......Were they... dueling for Liu Qingge’s hand?!

Was that a thing they were doing?!

“Yao-jie!” Liu Mingyan protested. “You can’t! Shen-shibo—”

“I refuse,” Shen Qingqiu said. He levelled Duanmu Yao with a cold look. “To put it simply, you aren’t strong enough to be my opponent. If a peak lord of Cang Qiong fought a girl only just entering Core Formation, what would it look like? Perhaps you don’t care about your family’s reputation, but I am aware of my position within my sect.”
To say nothing of Liu Qingge’s... horrifying... role in all this.

Duanmu Yao scowled. “This isn’t about my family. They have nothing to do with this. I came here on my own,” she insisted. And, indeed, the sword she had drawn to point at Shen Qingqiu was not Tian Xing.

“You are still the heir of the Duanmu family. Everything you do reflects on them,” Shen Qingqiu said.

Even so, he couldn’t entirely remain unmoved by her pained, furious look. In the end, Duanmu Yao was a beautiful woman who had unintentionally gotten strung along and then lied to. A bit of guilt was inevitable.

Softening, he went on, “You realize, whether or not you defeat me wouldn’t change anything. This was Liu-shidi’s decision. Even if it’s painful, you still need to respect it. If you keep your heart open, I’m sure you’ll one day find—”

“Shut up!” Duanmu Yao snapped. “I already know nothing can change! But what am I supposed to do with this feeling?! The only thing I can do is take it out of your hide! So just stand there and let me beat you!”

...What language!

What obstinacy!

“That... I would prefer not to,” Shen Qingqiu said.

“I don’t care,” she repeated flatly.

And, without waiting for any further protests, she charged. Her sword glinted, shining with qi, and a wide slash parted the air. Shen Qingqiu jumped over it, sighing in his heart and resigning himself to playing the role of a villain throwing around his superior cultivation. He wasn’t guilty enough to stand still and just let her beat him up, after all.
Duanmu Yao followed him up, her blade flashing. Xiu Ya shifted in its sheath, ready to meet her.

But before Shen Qingqiu could draw his sword, another blade clashed against Duanmu Yao’s with a piercing sound. Two sword lights collide and dissipated, and as they landed again, Shen Qingqiu found himself staring at a familiar white-clad back.

“Liu-gege...?” Duanmu Yao murmured in shock, her eyes widening.

It was indeed Liu Qingge.

Shen Qingqiu hadn’t even known he was back at Cang Qiong. Or... had he heard about Duanmu Yao coming out of seclusion and rushed back?

“Enough,” Liu Qingge said, his piercing gaze fixed completely on his ex-fiancee. “He’s not the one you want.”

At his appearance, Duanmu Yao had looked stricken, but her stunned expression cracked when he spoke, and she let out a short, sharp laugh. “What do you know about what I want?! Liu-gege, you... you never cared about me at all!”

Liu Qingge didn’t deny it — couldn’t, really. Shifting so he could at least see his profile, Shen Qingqiu wondered what he was feeling. His expression didn’t give away anything, but it was softer than Shen Qingqiu might have expected. There was something like regret in his eyes.

“You want to fight? Then fight me,” he said, drawing Cheng Luan.

Naturally, it sounded like he was coming to Shen Qingqiu’s rescue, refusing to let his ‘cultivation partner’ suffer his scorned former fiancee’s wrath. That was precisely the way Duanmu Yao saw it, and her face twisted, growing only more pained and more furious.

“Fine!”
Her enraged exclamation was almost drowned out as she attacked in the same instance. Her sword struck Cheng Luan, the clashing spiritual energy behind the blow and the block becoming another blinding flash.

But something was wrong.

Inexplicably, Liu Qingge was pushed back — quite literally, as the force of the exchange made him slide back a ways, kicking up a cloud of dust.

“Liu-shidi!” Shen Qingqiu called out, his voice higher than he had intended.

He couldn’t help it! This was definitely wrong! No matter how you looked at it, Duanmu Yao should not have been able to so much as ruffle Liu Qingge’s hair, much less actually push him back. Shen Qingqiu had instinctively leaped away from the two, but he regretted it now, as he could not easily interfere.

Liu Qingge didn’t reply. He wasn’t wounded, thankfully, and he simply straightened his stance and raised his sword again, in the spare moment as Duanmu Yao also stared in surprise.

“You...” she muttered, her lips pursing. “What are you doing?”

But even without asking, she understood. In the first exchange, when defending Shen Qingqiu, Liu Qingge had met her attack with a perfectly equal amount of power, cancelling it out. But this time, he had defended with just a little less, allowing him to be pushed back.

Allowing...

Duanmu Yao’s expression twisted into a furious scowl. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

She changed again, and struck again. And again, Liu Qingge was flung backwards. Though he managed to remain on his feet, one of his sleeves had been sliced through, and even just the fact that he was taking these blows at all meant he wasn’t defending properly.

What do you think you’re doing? Shen Qingqiu wanted to demand that too.
“You said you want to beat someone. So beat me, until you feel better,” Liu Qingge said, again raising his sword and yet making no move to strike back. He really was determined to do nothing but accept her blows, despite having no need to do so.

...Forget Duanmu Yao, Shen Qingqiu suddenly wanted to give him a beating.

Or so Shen Qingqiu wanted to complain his heart, but the truth was, he understood. She said she wanted to beat up someone, so Liu Qingge was giving her what she’d asked for. This was, in a way, his apology and his way of taking responsibility.

“Feel better? You think I can feel better from something like this?” Duanmu Yao shouted, each word punctuated by the ringing of their colliding blades. “Do you think my feelings are something that light?! You’re always like this! You never took me seriously! Even if, even if you can’t return my feelings, couldn’t you at least... at least...”

Despite her furious expression, tears were gathering in her eyes.

The tip of her sword shook and lowered.

But for the first time, she didn’t back down even when driven to tears. Her mouth twitched, and she swung her sword in a wide arc. A half circle of glowing spiritual blades formed in the path of her sword and shot outward like beams. Liu Qingge deflected each one, shattering them against Cheng Luan, but the force he used was again just slightly too little, and the backlash left his robes tattered. Blood seeped from a few small wounds.

Duanmu Yao only gritted her teeth, tears streaming down her cheeks unheeded, and continued to attack. Wave after wave of sword gleams flashed across Qiong Ding.

“Liu Qingge! I really—” she exclaimed, in the midst of her assault, “—can’t stand you right now!”

Her words were unexpectedly petty. Her feelings were obviously much stronger than just that. But even now, even driven by passionate fury, she couldn’t bring herself to say she hated him.

But in the end, her cultivation was a stage or several below Liu Qingge’s. Her attacks were wild
and wasteful, ripping up the flagstones and the lanterns, and even the nearby vegetation. It was inevitable that she would begin to tire soon enough, while Liu Qingge straightened and faced her again no matter how many times she struck him. It was a strange scene, that the one taking damage would outlast the one attacking, but Liu Qingge had at least had the sense not to let himself be seriously injured.

And finally, Duanmu Yao came to a halting stop. Her shoulders shook as she reached up to wipe at her tears, sword hanging loosely in her other hand.

“...Is it enough?” Liu Qingge asked quietly, his own defensive stance easing. His expression was still unreadable and neither hard nor soft as he regarded her. “What else should I do?”

Duanmu Yao choked back a sob, shaking her head furiously and still hiding her face. “What’s the point of asking now?” she demanded, her voice muffled. “Why couldn’t you care earlier? What am I supposed to do now...?”

A rare pained and almost helpless look flashed across Liu Qingge’s face as he closed his eyes. Back then, Liu Qishuang had been right. In this moment when he needed to find the right words to say, he became starkly aware of his shortcomings in human interaction.

The only thing he could do was follow the instructions he had been given — Duanmu Yao’s demand to let her vent her anger... and his mother’s order to apologize to her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

It felt too short and far too simple.

Watching from the sidelines, Shen Qingqiu sighed in his heart. An apology really was the most useless thing, wasn’t it? It could never be enough.

“I really... can’t stand you right now,” Duanmu Yao repeated, through quiet, hitched sobs. “You... I really... don’t want to ever see you again...!”

Those were just spur of the moment words, but Liu Qingge nodded — and obediently turned to walk away. Duanmu Yao didn’t try to stop him, and with a last glance at her, Shen Qingqiu hurried after Liu Qingge. As the two of them headed down the steps from Qiong Ding, Liu Mingyan
moved to comfort her.

Liu Qingge made his way down the stairs neither quickly nor slowly, and it was easy to catch up to him. Falling into step with him, Shen Qingqiu glanced at him surreptitiously in an attempt to judge his expression. However, he couldn’t read anything in Liu Qingge’s profile.

But... he could guess that his shidi was not unmoved.

Even though it wasn’t his place, Shen Qingqiu found he wanted to say something.

‘Are you alright?’

‘It’s not your fault.’

‘You did your best.’

He couldn’t imagine Liu Qingge accepting any of those platitudes. Hiding his hands in his sleeves, Shen Qingqiu clenched them into fists unhappily. What was with this useless trouble-causing love interest role? What was he now, a beauty that brings calamity, then stands aside doing nothing while everyone fights?

But before he could force himself to say something — anything — Liu Qingge stopped abruptly.

Taken by surprise, it took Shen Qingqiu an extra moment to follow suit, and he turned to look up at Liu Qingge from a few steps down. Liu Qingge looked back at him, his expression pensieve.

“It’s good,” he said slowly but without doubt, “that we didn’t get married. It would have been much worse.”

“Ah... yes,” Shen Qingqiu agreed.

Liu Qingge smiled, faint but unmistakable. “Thank you.”
No need for thanks. It’s only natural for Shixiong to do this much. I’m glad it was resolved before it was too late. Don’t worry, someday she will realize that too. You did the right thing.

...Was what Shen Qingqiu should have probably said. But he ended up saying nothing at all. Opening his mouth and closing it again silently, he blinked and tried to get his thoughts in order — to think at all. However, for some reason, his mind remained stubbornly muddled, filled with a warm static.

Liu Qingge really did have a nice smile.

He had thought so before, seeing Liu Qingge smile when they first agreed on their ruse. But this time, that feeling was inescapable, filling up his chest until he could barely breathe and pushing out all logical thought. He felt a little like he was choking, unable to look away.

“...Mm,” Shen Qingqiu made a vague sound of agreement, fumbling too much to even open his fan. All he could do was lift up one sleeve and hide behind it as if pretending to cough.

Really, that face was just too beautiful. It was only natural...

It was only natural to feel like this.

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Returning home, Duanmu Yao ignored the pitying looks and gossiping whispers that followed her through her family’s manor.

Before, it might have annoyed her or saddened her or made her roll her eyes in exasperation, that absolutely everyone knew about her futile attempts to make something of her childhood love and her engagement, about the near scandal of her would-be fiance rejecting her, about the spectacle she’d made of herself in the aftermath.

But she could no longer work up any feeling in particular now. It seemed she had cried herself out at Cang Qiong. The trip back had been a numb blur, and so was the familiar path to her own courtyard.
The servants hovered uncertainly until she dismissed them, with worried expressions of varying genuineness. Her sister lurked by the entrance but didn’t manage to say anything. Her parents and all their relatives were probably keeping tabs.

Duanmu Yao didn’t want to deal with any of them, at least not for a while longer.

She was the heir of the Duanmu family, so naturally she would need to pull herself together, make her apologies for acting so ridiculously, continue to cultivate and manage the family’s affairs... but not yet.

It seemed she had only just closed her eyes, dropping into a chair in the parlor, when the sound of someone’s voice dragged her back into awareness.

“Eldest Miss? Eldest Miss, please excuse the disturbance,” a servant called out from outside the doors, “but there’s someone here to see you. She is very insistent.”

Duanmu Yao sighed, feeling tired and drained. “I do not feel well,” she called back, making up an excuse. “Send them away.”

Closing her eyes again, she started to relax again, her faint frown smoothing out into blank indifference. But the sound of a muffled commotion beyond the doors wouldn’t let her rest. She had just stood, turning to face the doorway, when the doors were unexpectedly flung open, and a woman she had never seen before rushed in, one of their servants at her heels.

“Miss Duanmu! I truly apologize for this, but I must speak with you!” the woman exclaimed, immediately dropping to kneel in front of Duanmu Yao, who stared down at her with an unclear expression.

Barging into her personal rooms like this was practically asking to be killed. She didn’t recognize this woman at all, though the sword at her waist marked her a cultivator, and her cultivation was not low, to force her way past one of their family’s servants. What made her so determined? ...Did it matter?

“What do you want?” Duanmu Yao asked tonelessly.
The woman’s expression brightened as she saw her chance. “You were looking for information about a man — I know him!” she spoke quickly.

Reaching into her sleeve, she pulled out one of the portraits of Shen Qingqiu that Duanmu Yao had ordered circulated. A man of his standing might use a pseudonym, she had reasoned at the time, so there might be some who would only recognize his face. She had been determined to dig up every dirty deed he had tried to hide, to prove to Liu Qingge and Liu Qishuang that trusting this man was a mistake.

That was before Liu Qingge made his stance clear.

To think he would actually get angry and defensive over someone. Liu-gege, who always kept apart from others, like a true immortal. He had never spared Duanmu Yao more attention than he had to, but she had just been like everyone else.

Shen Qingqiu... the difference in how Liu Qingge treated him was obvious.

No matter what evidence Duanmu Yao presented, she felt it wouldn’t have made a difference, not when Liu Qingge had already set his mind — and his heart.

She sighed and waved her hand dismissively.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Duanmu Yao said. “I’m no longer interested in anything to do with him. Unfortunately, you’ve made the trip for nothing. Please leave.”

She didn’t want to hear anything about Shen Qingqiu — or Liu Qingge.

“No! Please, young miss!” the woman burst out frantically. “You must listen, this man is— he’s a monster! Please, you must help me show the truth of who he is!”

Her voice was forceful and desperate, enough to make Duanmu Yao’s heart stir for a moment. This kind of frenzy was not ordinary. Just petty schemes or crimes would not prompt it. But then she remembered Liu Qingge’s glare back then — ‘What do you know about Shen Qingqiu?’ he’d said. ‘You don’t know anything about the person he is now.’ He had already made his choice, and hadn’t she embarrassed herself enough? How pathetic would it be to come crawling back again?
“Leave,” Duanmu Yao ordered, turning away. “If it’s such a desperate matter... go to Cang Qiong on your own and tell them your story. It no longer has anything to do with me.”

That wasn’t possible, of course. She knew the rumors about how much the sect leader favored Shen Qingqiu, and any large group would seek to cover up their members’ misdeeds to preserve their reputation, to begin with. Anyone who made a stir was liable to just disappear.

But Liu Qingge had made his choice, and if Duanmu Yao went any further in this, she would become his enemy.

And even more that than... she just didn’t care anymore.

Behind her, the woman pleaded, but the servant had already called for help and she was soon dragged away. Her cries faded into silence, and Duanmu Yao was alone again.

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Chapter 16: It's Love

Originally, Shen Qingqiu had been mostly willing to ignore the notifications about the strange, unexplained drop in Coolness points, which continued to pop up seemingly at random. Whether it was lovesickness or plain teenage angst, Luo Binghe seemed unwilling to share his troubles with his old master, so Shen Qingqiu felt there was nothing to be done except make himself available and otherwise let him work through it on his own.

However, the situation dragged on seemingly without end. And, most troublingly, the points were beginning to drop worryingly low.

If any point value fell below zero, Shen Yuan would be automatically ‘deported’ back to his own world. In other words, he would die. Those were the rules that the System had set out from the start.

So eyeing the sad remaining total of Luo Binghe’s Coolness points, Shen Qingqiu decided it was time for an intervention, whether his disciple wanted it or not.

Luo Binghe was smart. Taking one look at Shen Qingqiu sitting on the couch, two cups of steaming tea on the table in front of him, his expression carefully arranged to be as open and beckoning as possible — he immediately knew that something was up. His eyes slid toward the door, but his sense of propriety and respect for his master kept him in place.

“Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu called out, patting the couch next to him, “come have a seat.”

Judging by his expression, Luo Binghe would have preferred being sent to the woodshed again. Nonetheless, he visibly steeled himself and woodenly made his way over. His back was ramrod straight as he perched on the very edge of the couch seat, as if ready to flee at any moment.
It wasn’t like Shen Qingqiu liked it any better. A difficult emotional conversation? No, thanks! He would have also preferred the woodshed!

But Luo Binghe’s teenage moodiness was literally becoming a threat to his life, so he had no choice but to harden his heart.

“Recently…” Shen Qingqiu began, only to pause right out of the gate, “recently, this master noticed that Binghe has been... somewhat absentminded. Is there anything I can do to help? Don’t hold back, tell this master all about your troubles.”

He followed it up with an encouraging smile — only hoping it looked less fake than it felt. He sounded like a shady salesman again. In fact, he sounded maybe two hairs better than the sort of creepy man that told you, ‘I have candy in my van, just follow me.’ It was the opposite of trustworthy, and Luo Binghe was completely right to hesitate.

The boy’s lips pursed unhappily as he tried to bore a hole in the tabletop with his stare. For a moment, it almost looked like he would say something, but in the end, he remained silent.

Shen Qingqiu’s natural inclination would have been to leave it at that. He was nosy in the sense of enjoying a good show, but he wasn’t the type to push and dig around in someone else’s business.

Normally, that is. In this situation...

‘Forgive this teacher, Binghe,’ he thought with an internal sigh, ‘but I really don’t want to die!’

“Is it perhaps... love trouble?” Shen Qingqiu suggested, shimmying closer to Luo Binghe.

Luo Binghe stiffened.

—Ah-ha. Finally, there was progress.

“Before, it seemed like Binghe had someone who caught his eye,” Shen Qingqiu went on. “Is it about that person? Was there some kind of difficulty?” Was the protagonist rejected...? That didn’t sound possible, but maybe a temporary setback could still happen at this stage. “Even if there was,
don’t give up. I’m sure she will see what a wonderful young man Binghe is growing into and—”

“Shizun.” Unexpectedly, Luo Binghe cut him off. His expression had been growing more and more tense with every word, even though Shen Qingqiu couldn’t imagine why. “Shizun,” Luo Binghe repeated, finally turning to look at him, “do you have someone you love?”

...

“You said you didn’t, last time,” his disciple went on, still with that same intense, focused look, as if he was trying to peer straight into Shen Qingqiu’s soul— or his heart. “But is that still true? Is there really no one you have feelings for?”

“No one,” Shen Qingqiu confirmed automatically. His brows drew together as he stared at Luo Binghe in confusion. What was this about? Why did the topic turn to this?

But Luo Binghe seemed very set on it. Perhaps... it had something to do with his unhappiness, even if Shen Qingqiu couldn’t imagine how.

“This master has no romantic feelings toward anyone,” he repeated. “But, Binghe, why are you asking that?”

Something about his answer only made Luo Binghe more agitated. His fists clenched where they were pressed firmly into his lap, and he seemed to almost... glare at Shen Qingqiu. It was completely unexpected — and unsettling, because he had no idea what could have brought this on.

“Shizun!” Luo Binghe exclaimed, furious and frustrated. “Why are you trying to hide it?”

Hide what??

“About... about you and Liu Qingge! I know the truth already! Everyone can see it!”

Him and... Liu Qingge...?
Him? And Liu Qingge?!

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help it. Completely blinded sided, he spluttered gracelessly. “Wh... Binghe! What are you even...”

“Shizun, you and Liu Qingge really are cultivation partners, aren’t you?” Luo Binghe pressed.

“No!” Shen Qingqiu protested. “We’re not! That was just a ruse! We’ve never...”

But, with the worst possible timing, the memory of— of that, of the Water Moon Mirror surfaced in his mind. That kiss... It hadn’t even been a kiss! It was just a, a reverse CPR for life energy! It wasn’t even Liu Qingge!

And yet, it flashed through his mind, and Shen Qingqiu instinctively reached up to press his fingertips to his lips, as he had been subconsciously doing so often. Luo Binghe’s eyes narrowed.

Annoyed, Shen Qingqiu shoved the memory away. “We’ve never... been romantically involved, or anything of the sort!” he insisted, trying to ignore the weakness of his own — completely true! — denial. Seeing his disciple’s darkening expression, he hurried to assure him, “It’s true! I’m telling the truth, Binghe, why would I lie about that? Liu Qingge and I have never been in a relationship!”

A complex series of emotions passed over Luo Binghe’s face, all of them undecipherable. Shen Qingqiu felt entirely out of his depth, unable to even begin to guess what he was thinking.

“So then...” Luo Binghe said slowly, his expression softening in something almost like pained sympathy, but with a flash of sharpness hidden underneath, “Shizun’s feelings are one-sided?”

“My... feelings...? Binghe, I don’t have any feelings like that toward him,” Shen Qingqiu sighed.

This conversation had taken far too many strange turns. But at least it seemed like they were finally on their way to clearing up all these unreasonable misunderstandings. That was good; finally, his heart rate could go down to something more normal. Absently, he fished around for his fan and snapped it open, waving a gentle breeze onto his heated face.
Luo Binghe was watching him oddly.

“Is that really true?” he wondered, the corner of his mouth quirking. He went on before Shen Qingqiu could respond. “Shizun really doesn’t feel anything for Liu Qingge? Shizun doesn’t think he’s beautiful?”

Shen Qingqiu coughed a little. “That’s... obviously, Liu-shidi is very beautiful. No one can deny that.”

“Shizun doesn’t find him reliable? Doesn’t enjoy Liu-shidi always supporting him?” Luo Binghe pressed, each new point coming quickly. They were very specific, and Shen Qingqiu tried to figure out what he was referring to.

It was unexpectedly hard to focus, as his mind constantly drifted to what Luo Binghe was saying. Forming a response was... challenging.

“Well, he is... he’s very reliable,” Shen Qingqiu agreed helplessly. “And I... I appreciate his support...”

He did. He appreciated Liu Qingge’s awkward efforts to change his disciples’ attitudes and his firm stance during the matter with Duanmu Yao. He appreciated Liu Qingge’s solid belief in his changed nature, even if the man obviously couldn’t have known the truth behind it. He appreciated the times they had worked together on hunts, and even just Liu Qingge’s solid, steady presence at meetings or when they happened to run into each other.

But none of that had to do with a romantic relationship!

“Shizun doesn’t share his burdens with him? Doesn’t like being by his side? Doesn’t wait for him when he leaves the Cang Qiong?” Luo Binghe went on. His eyebrows were scrunched up in both disbelief and frustration, and there was a deeply unhappy twist to his lips.

“Wh-what burdens? What waiting? Enough with this nonsense!” Shen Qingqiu declared as firmly as he could manage, his fan waving furiously.

It was complete nonsense! Definitely nonsense!
What kind of, of love-lorn maiden image did this foolish boy have in his mind? His brain must have rotted in puberty! This—clearly the consequence of emerging from a brainless pheromone soaked rag like Proud Immortal Demon Way!

Luo Binghe ignored his protests. “Shizun doesn’t think Liu Qingge would make a good cultivation partner?”

“That’s irrelevant! Of course he would, but—” His own certainty in that caught Shen Qingqiu off guard, and he stumbled a little on his words. “—But that doesn’t mean I want him to be mine!”

...Just saying that kind of thing made him shudder and his throat clog.

How had the situation ended up like this?

As Luo Binghe just looked at him silently, Shen Qingqiu blinked quickly and only then realized he had been all but glaring at the boy. It was a surprise he’d remained so unmoved in the face of his master’s disapproval. For some reason, this nonsense conversation meant a lot to Luo Binghe.

Taking a deep breath, Shen Qingqiu tried to force some semblance of calm onto himself. “Binghe... You’re misunderstanding,” he said, a little helplessly. “It’s only natural that this master and Liu-shidi rely on each other and... support each other. We are fellow peak lords, after all. And it’s true that I... enjoy spending time with Liu-shidi and... look forward to his visits. But that’s only because we have a friendly relationship. It’s really nothing more than that.”

Even though everything he said was perfectly reasonable and even completely natural, Shen Qingqiu could feel heat creep up his neck. He swallowed heavily as he and Luo Binghe stared at each other.

“But, Shizun,” Luo Binghe said, “you don’t treat any of the other peak lords that way.”

“Of course I do,” Shen Qingqiu disagreed.

His disciple frowned. “You don’t. It’s not the same at all,” he insisted. “Shizun wouldn’t get involved with their families, or rush off to save them, or... let them be so close.”
How did he even know about the thing with Duxian-Er? The Liu clan were all gossips too, was that it?

Shen Qingqiu huffed. “Of course I would! I’d do the same for the other peak lords. Liu-shishu isn’t special.”

“Pretend to be their lover? Share a bed?” Luo Binghe bit out, glaring. His eyes darted down to the edge of Shen Qingqiu’s fan, where it hid the lower half of his face. “Kiss them?”

—He guessed it!! Why did the protagonist have to be so observant!

“That... that was... not what you’re thinking!” Shen Qingqiu spluttered. “None of those things were like you’re thinking!”

“So Shizun would do them with anyone?” Luo Binghe demanded, his expression darker and darker. “With Qi-shishu? With the sect leader?”

Shen Qingqiu’s mouth open and closed like a gaping fish.

Yes!

No!

He had no idea how to answer.

Would he have pretended to be Qi Qingqi’s lover to help her escape an unwanted engagement? Would he have allowed himself to just be pulled into sleeping in the same bed with Yue Qingyuan, if only for the convenience of it? ...Those things, he couldn’t even imagine them. It would have been simply too awkward, too uncomfortable, too mortifying. Compared to Liu Qingge...

There wasn’t really anyone else he felt as comfortable with, was there? Except maybe Luo Binghe himself.
But Luo Binghe was a child, a child that Shen Qingqiu was responsible for. While Liu Qingge was...

Was...

Seeing his master's hesitation, Luo Binghe finally looked away, but it wasn’t enough to hide the way his rigid expression crumbled into something miserable. “Shizun, you always keep your distance, even when you’re kind. That’s why I thought, when you become close to someone, it means... I thought it meant that... I was special...”

“You are!” Shen Qingqiu blurted out, unable to stand seeing such a dejected look from the boy. “Is that what you’ve been so upset about? You silly child, of course you’re special. You’re this master’s best disciple. My... my friendship with Liu-shishu could never change that!”

Lowering his fan, he leaned toward Luo Binghe and reached out to rub his back comfortingly. But his assurance seemed to have no effect — or even, the opposite effect. Luo Binghe tensed, his jaw clenching.

“Friendship...” he echoed scornfully. “Shizun, I wish you’d at least be honest with me. That way, maybe I could...”

He stood abruptly. And, before his master could stop him, rushed out of the bamboo house.

“Binghe!” Shen Qingqiu called after him, but Luo Binghe was already long gone.

That... that moody teenager!

Too stubborn! Too moody!

...What nonsense, really.

Sighing heavily, Shen Qingqiu slumped back across the couch and closed his eyes. Him and Liu
Qingge, it was just nonsense, absolutely impossible. They were just... just friends. And yet without thinking, his hand drifted up again. Realizing what he was doing, Shen Qingqiu covered his face instead and let out a drawn out, muffled scream.

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Chapter 17: It's Love II

Luo Binghe didn’t return to the bamboo house. Not that evening, and not the next morning either.

Instead, he dragged Ming Fan to the kitchens and all but shoved the breakfast tray into his hands. “For Shizun,” he explained, in short, clipped words.

Ming Fan accepted it only with a flat frown. “Why are you giving it to me?” he asked. “And why do you look like that? You’re a mess. Is this how a disciple of Qing Jing presents themselves?”

“You look like you slept in the woodshed again, A-Luo,” Ning Yingying, who had tagged along like usual, said in her overly blunt way.

That... was precisely what Luo Binghe had done, and his expression twitched slightly. “What? Why? What did you do?” Ming Fan demanded immediately. He winced as Ning Yingying stomped on his foot.

“Are you being punished?” she asked.

“No, it’s just...” Luo Binghe sighed. “Just, please take his breakfast to Shizun. It’s not good to keep him waiting, and the food will get cold.”

Ming Fan glared, easily guessing that he was being purposefully distracted. But he didn’t argue and, with a huff, hurried off to Shen Qingqiu’s bamboo hut. Watching him go, Luo Binghe pressed down the unease stirring in his gut. He wondered whether their master was angry with him. He had been so rude the night before, and stormed off on top of that, like some spoiled brat. He really had
been spoiled, hadn’t he?

He sighed again. Then, catching Ning Yingying’s worried glance, he tried to force a smile.

“Are you okay, A-Luo?” she asked, her pretty face scrunching up in concern. Her expression darkened as something occurred to her, and she chewed worriedly on her bottom lip. “Did... did Shizun start to go back to how he was? Is that why...?”

Luo Binghe paled. “No!” he burst out immediately. Just the thought of it was terrifying, and he could see the same fear momentarily reflected in Ning Yingying’s eyes, before both of them forcefully calmed themselves. “No,” he repeated, “it’s nothing like that. It’s my fault, I acted poorly. I just...”

He didn’t want to go back.

If he went back to the bamboo house and saw Shizun again, he didn’t think he could act normally. He didn’t know what he would do. It wasn’t as if he had intended to act like that and argue with Shen Qingqiu, it was just that he had genuinely been unable to control himself. And even worse, he didn’t know what he would feel.

Being stuck in the middle like this, uncertain of anything, was terrible.

Ming Fan returned not long after, still scowling. At least he did not bring the tray back with him. Shen Qingqiu hadn’t outright rejected what Luo Binghe prepared.

“I’ll have a place set up for you with everyone else,” Ming Fan said. “Don’t do something stupid like sleeping in the woodshed again. You’re a Qing Jing disciple, it’s unsightly.”

Luo Binghe kept his face carefully blank, but Ning Yingying looked at their senior brother with all the things he was feeling — after all, hadn’t Luo Binghe been forced to sleep in that very woodshed for years despite already being a Qing Jing disciple then? Ming Fan glared back.

“...It was unsightly,” he muttered, looking away.
That subtle change was probably as close as he could come to admitting a fault, not just in himself but also in their master. Or at least, the person Shen Qingqiu had been back then.

In short order, the entire disciple body of Qing Jing Peak became aware that something wasn’t right between Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu. There was much whispering and many unsubtle looks pressing against Luo Binghe’s back as he went through the day’s lessons with everyone. He didn’t care, as such, but he tried to mentally calculate the best response if any of them tried to take advantage of his ‘disfavored’ status and give him a beating like in the good old days.

Back then, he had silently endured it. But Luo Binghe was no longer a weak, meek child who couldn’t even imagine fighting back. If Bai Zhan’s lot had taught him anything, it was how to give back as good as he got, even when the odds were against him.

He really... had become quite spoiled.

The question was whether fighting back would create bigger problems. Shizun disapproved of fighting when another approach was possible. The last thing Luo Binghe wanted at the moment was to make more waves.

Fortunately, it ended up being a moot point. No one did more than gossip and gawk, and even that died down under Ming Fan’s authoritative glare.

Shizun didn’t come to oversee them that day.

It shouldn’t have been surprising. He didn’t come every day, far from it. But Luo Binghe couldn’t help wondering if Shen Qingqiu was avoiding him the same way Luo Binghe was avoiding him. Someone said that their master had gone to Bai Zhan, and Luo Binghe stifled a self-deprecating smile. Of course it was like that.

He slipped away as soon as lessons ended. Without thinking, he drifted to the place where he usually trained. Dropping onto the steps of the small pavilion, he stared across the empty stone plaza, expression blank and stiff.

That was how Liu Mingyan found him. He didn’t even realize someone had come until she stepped directly in front of him, the flowing skirt of her robes blocking his line of sight. Blinking as he was pulled out of his daze, he slowly raised his head to look at her.
“Ning-shijie told me something happened,” Liu Mingyan said, by way of an opening.

However, she didn’t press any further, only waiting for Luo Binghe’s reaction.

Ning Yingying had gone to Liu Mingyan to for help, maybe all the way to Xian Shu. He had worried her — naturally. Grimacing, Luo Binghe ran a hand over his face and stood abruptly. “Let’s go,” he said, brushing past Liu Mingyan and making his way toward the center of the courtyard.

“Are you sure?” Liu Mingyan asked, even as she placidly followed and took up a ready stance across from him.

No. He wasn’t sure about anything, and training like this was a waste of time, for his partner especially. But it wouldn’t be the first time Liu Mingyan saw him in an embarrassing, useless state. And this way, he wouldn’t have to think for a while.

Luo Binghe attacked, his strikes quick and exceptionally ruthless for a simple spar. Liu Mingyan’s eyebrows hitched slightly, but she deflected each attack smoothly, matching the spiritual energy he’d gathered with precision. However, she didn’t retaliate, even though his defense was surely full of openings. It reminded him suddenly of the scene between her brother and his fiancee, making Luo Binghe grit his teeth against a sharp flash of something cold and furious.

His next blow was even more reckless than before, filled with that heavy feeling.

It was too strong. If it had landed, Liu Mingyan would have been left coughing up blood at the very least. And unlike him, she was clear-headed enough to realize that trying to counter it would likely deal heavy backlash to him instead.

Instead, with a rapid mental calculation, she flung herself aside and struck him across the back sharply, sending him stumbling past.

Tripping over his own charge, Luo Binghe crashed to the ground. The qi he had gathered discharged into the ground, shattering the flagstones and leaving behind a wide, shallow crater. He winced as he levered himself up onto his hands and knees. He could feel several wounds stinging, his uniform torn and dirty. What a pathetic sight... His jaw clenched. And, shocking even himself, Luo Binghe drove his fist into the ground again.
The cracked flagstones were crushed to dust, but he didn’t stop. Drawing his arm back, he pounded the ground again and again.

“Damn it! Why?! Why!” he realized he was shouting with each hit. “Why!”

His shoulders heaved as he finally stopped, his hand torn bloody.

Liu Mingyan, who had stood aside silently, moved to crouch beside him and gently helped him sit up. Something about her careful manner, the way she didn’t even need to ask what was wrong and the lack of judgement despite facing such a pathetic sight made the tight, twisted up mess in his heart shudder and shift enough for him to finally speak.

“You were wrong,” Luo Binghe said, his breath hitching. “I didn’t assume the worst. It’s no good. I’m no good. I really... can’t accept it at all!”

His fists clenched, his arms jerking as if to lash out again. But what was there to strike against?

He didn’t know why Shen Qingqiu continued denying it, when the truth was obvious. His master was kind, but there was always a distance between him and other people. Like a true immortal, Luo Binghe had thought. So when he favored someone, it was obvious.

Who did he allow himself to complain to — who did he share his troubles and true feelings with? Who did he allow closer than the polite arms reach where everyone else remained — who did he willingly touch with a sudden openness? Who did he rush to protect, throwing his usual calculation to the wind — who made him lose his mind with worry?

It was so easy to tell.

His master’s heart had already decided. There was a person who was special to him — a person he had chosen. A person he looked at the way he didn’t look at Luo Binghe... even if it wasn’t reciprocated.

Luo Binghe hated it, and he had hated that part even more. Because when he thought about that, the fact that Shen Qingqiu loved someone but those feelings hadn’t been returned yet, Luo Binghe’s foolish, traitorous heart felt like there was still hope. It hadn’t been decided yet, some part of him thought. There was still a chance...
Except there wasn’t, not really.

His own feelings weren’t returned either, but that didn’t change them in the least. He didn’t think they would ever change, so how could he believe that his master’s heart was any less helplessly loyal? The outcome was already determined.

“I hate it,” Luo Binghe muttered, gritting his teeth. “I hate it! I want him to choose me!”

...He had never said it out loud before.

The view of his lap and his clenched hands blurred, and a warm wetness dripped down onto his dirty, scratched up fingers. His shoulders shook.

“I hate it, I hate it,” he repeated uselessly. “I want—!” His words were cut off by a sob. “Shizun! Shizun, Shizun...”

Liu Mingyan’s hand had been resting on his back, a little stiff and very helpless. But, unable to endure any longer, she leaned closer and wrapped her arms around him. It felt all wrong. Too slight, too light and tentative, with hands too small and a scent just a little too sweet. This was not the person who should have been holding him. This wasn’t the person he wanted.

But she was the one there, and she was... a friend. A good friend.

Luo Binghe’s forehead pressed to her shoulder as his body slumped against her. After a moment of hesitation, Liu Mingyan tentatively began to stroke his hair.

“I want... to be the one in his heart...” he lamented uselessly, muffled against the fabric of her robes.

For a long while, neither of them said anything else.

But as Luo Binghe’s shudders began to calm, Liu Mingyan finally spoke. “I know this isn’t what
you want, but... you are,” she said quietly. “Shen-shibo cares about you very much.”

She was right. It wasn’t what Luo Binghe. But she was also right, and he knew it. He was special to Shen Qingqiu. That was why he had let himself become so arrogant, thinking he could have more. That was why he had become so spoiled, unsatisfied with having what would have made his child self overflow with joy.

“I want him to choose me,” he complained, sounding petulant to his own ears, “over anyone else...”

Liu Mingyan sighed quietly, her breath brushing against his ear and neck, the movement of her chest and shoulders jostling him lightly.

“It doesn’t mean that your place in his heart is less, you know,” she said. “Sometimes, you can love people equally, so much that you couldn’t bear to give up any of them. If you asked my mother to choose between us, her children, how could she do that? And even if she did, she would regret it for the rest of her life, no matter what choice she made. I’m sure it’s the same for Shen-shibo. No one can match your place in his heart. The bond between you two will always remain. It’s just...”

It was just not the kind of bond he wished it to be.

And yet the thought of losing the bond they did have was terrifying. It was the most frightening thing.

Even if you did everything you could, it wasn’t a guarantee that the other person’s heart would be moved. Liu Qingge and his fiancee were proof of that. But if you continued to persist, over and over again, one day... you could end up hating the person you had loved so much.

Hating Shizun, being unable to stand even seeing him, that was something Luo Binghe feared above all else.

...Was there really no other choice? He had to accept it?

“But I wanted it to be me,” he repeated plaintively.
And yet it wasn’t. It wouldn’t be.

“It’ll be alright,” Liu Mingyan said quietly, running her hand over his back. They were just empty words, but it was all she could say. “It’ll be alright...”

Luo Binghe didn’t reply. Slowly, his hands grasped her robes and gripped tightly, clinging to her in return. Closing his eyes, he tried to believe her.

~.~.~
Shen Qingqiu still didn’t exactly understand Luo Binghe’s behavior, but he wasn’t entirely surprised when the boy didn’t come back to the bamboo house and even refused to see him to deliver the breakfast he had clearly made himself. Accepting it from Ming Fan instead, all Shen Qingqiu could do was try and make sure his favorite disciple didn’t do something ridiculous like sleeping out in the woods or, worse, the woodshed.

“Of course, Shizun. I’ll arrange it,” Ming Fan agreed easily. The look he surreptitiously shot his master was strangely tinged with something like relief.

But with that settled for the moment, there wasn’t anything left to distract Shen Qingqiu from his straying, confusing thoughts — which had already left him pacing the bamboo house restlessly all night.

He didn’t even understand his own agitation.

Maybe it was no surprise he couldn’t figure out Luo Binghe’s recent mood. He couldn’t even figure out himself.

Why was he so worked up about this? What was he even worked up about? He got annoyed when someone said he and Liu Qingge couldn’t possibly become a couple, he got annoyed when someone assumed they were already a couple, what kind of nonsense was this?

And most of all... why couldn’t he stop thinking about it? Why did his thoughts keep circling back to that completely ridiculous argument with Luo Binghe? It was nothing but a misunderstanding, so why...?

Shen Qingqiu realized he had been walking in tight circles around the tea table again. Pressing his lips together, he closed his eyes and cursed furiously in his mind.

Frankly, he was completely fed up with himself.
‘Great Master Liu, please get out of my head!’ Shen Qingqiu entreated mentally.

...Liu Qingge.

Lowering the hands that had been clutching at his head in frustration, Shen Qingqiu turned that thought — that name — over in his mind. Was all of this perhaps... because of Liu Qingge? Was there was something related to Liu Qingge that he had forgotten or overlooked? Something he needed to do? Or even just something connected to him?

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t think of anything, but that was how it went with forgetting things. It nagged at you but without any indication of what it was you were forgetting, just a formless oppressive feeling.

Yes, that was the only thing that made sense.

And if he was forgetting something related to Liu Qingge, something important, then maybe seeing Liu Qingge would help jog his memory.

It wasn’t as if he had a better plan.

Fortunately, Liu Qingge was still at Bai Zhan. Or, Shen Qingqiu thought he was, since the man hadn’t come to tell him he was leaving yet. ...When had Liu Qingge started doing that? Thinking about it now, based on his character, that felt off, but Shen Qingqiu hadn’t thought anything about it for the... months that it had been going on.

...Regardless. Liu Qingge was still at Bai Zhan.

He was even doing something that could perhaps charitably be called training his disciples. At the very least, he was holding back enough that it looked like a very hopeless dozen-on-one spar instead of an outright beating.

The disciples were far too preoccupied to notice Shen Qingqiu’s arrival, but Liu Qingge’s gaze darted to him for a moment.
He didn’t even glare. So why did Shen Qingqiu’s steps hitch when their eyes met? Good thing his expression remained completely calm, no matter how fast his heart started beating suddenly. What was that...? Absently, he patted his chest.

This was becoming beyond ridiculous. He definitely needed to figure out what he’d forgotten.

Having noticed Shen Qingqiu, Liu Qingge seemed to judge it time to end the... lesson, if it could be called that. But instead of just saying so, like a normal person, he put in marginally more effort, and in short order, the dozen or so disciples were on the ground, groaning in pain and in no state to continue. Liu Qingge, unruffled, moved toward Shen Qingqiu.

Since Shen Qingqiu was watching him approach, he saw the exact instance when Liu Qingge passed the point where anyone else would have stopped and greeted him. Instead, he kept going until he was standing right in front of Shen Qingqiu, so close either of them would barely need to raise his arm to brush against the other’s sleeve.

Close! Too close!

When Luo Binghe said that his master let Liu Qingge close, he meant it literally?!

Because the ease with which Liu Qingge approached him must have come from repeatedly doing this exact thing. This was... this was normal, and the only reason Shen Qingqiu noticed it was because he had been watching Liu Qingge so carefully. Even now, despite knowing consciously that it was strange, he didn’t feel like stepping away. There was just a growing sense of something like heat along the side of his body closest to Liu Qingge, as if the other man’s warmth or qi or something was seeping through his robes to his skin.

Liu Qingge didn’t say anything, only nodding in greeting and looking at Shen Qingqiu with a relaxed, open expression — waiting for him to speak up and take the lead.

Feeling increasingly unsettled by his re-examination of what must have been a completely normal interaction for them, Shen Qingqiu cleared his throat.

“Liu-shidi,” he greeted — and found himself stuck.

Why didn’t he think of an excuse on the way? Liu Qingge standing so close, while waiting
patiently for him to continue, was also incredibly distracting. Somehow managing not to fumble, Shen Qingqiu opened his fan and held it up between them.

“Shixiong came to... ask about a technique.”

Yes, that made sense. ...Which technique? Think, think... Incidentally, the fan he was holding was red and gold, the firebird pattern one he had received from the Liu clan back then. That would work.

“When we visited Huo Hong Valley, your family told me about an interesting fighting style that I’ve been trying to incorporate. I’d like to get your opinion.”

That sounded plausible. Internally, Shen Qingqiu heaved a sigh of relief at overcoming this hurdle.

Liu Qingge, at least, seemed to believe it. Nodding sharply, he stepped away — finally! — and turned to sweep a sharp look over the training ground. “Still here?” he said with a clear promise of further violence.

The ones he was addressing were the Bai Zhan disciples he had been ‘training’ before Shen Qingqiu arrived. They had been lying motionless where Liu Qingge beat them all to the ground. Too motionless, perhaps. Were they... eavesdropping, with far too much interest? Even these muscle-headed hooligans were apparently not immune to the lure of gossip.

At their master’s cold words, they flinched. They were on their feet and fleeing as if for their lives in the next moment. Nonetheless, Shen Qingqiu caught at least one quick backward glance at himself, and he just knew they’d be whispering about his and Liu Qingge’s non-existent romantic relationship as soon as they were out of earshot. It made him grind his teeth all over again.

Satisfied that they had the training field to themselves, Liu Qingge turned back to Shen Qingqiu and waited for him to explain more.

Fortunately, this excuse was not complete nonsense. Being from a martial clan, Liu Qingge’s relatives had discussed a variety of fighting styles and techniques. Shen Qingqiu knew they had warmed up to him by the fact that they took care to choose styles they thought might be useful or interesting to him — mostly involving fans. Since then, he had sometimes idly considered what he’d heard about, and he mentally pulled up something like that now.
“I wanted to start with some elemental skills. Wind, first,” Shen Qingqiu said, tilting his fan and waving it lightly to show what he meant. “But I’ve been having some trouble working it into my usual swordplay. Perhaps Shidi could provide another eye.”

Very reasonable. Training alone could only go so far, and none of Shen Qingqiu’s disciples were at the level where they could help. So asking another peak lord made perfect sense.

And... well, it did seem Liu Qingge was the peak lord he was closest with.

They’d gone through a few things together, so it was only natural.

To Shen Qingqiu’s relief, Liu Qingge backed away a little further, giving him the room to demonstrate... something. With all the experience he’d gained cheating off the original goods’ skills, Shen Qingqiu moved through motions he couldn’t have explained or described the moment after he did them and had no memory of performing. He even added some kind of commentary. Shen Qingqiu’s bullshitting skills impressed even him.

And they seemed to fool Liu Qingge, who watched with an expression of concentration, then nodded thoughtfully as the last of the small wind funnel Shen Qingqiu had summoned up faded away.

Liu Qingge didn’t use any elemental manipulation himself. His speciality was sword skills, like most of his clan, and he polished them almost to the exclusion of all else. However, he had a strong foundation of basic knowledge, as someone brought up in a cultivation family, and he was very familiar with different fighting styles — from the perspective of an opponent. So his advice was nonetheless invaluable, and Shen Qingqiu forced himself to focus to avoid missing anything he said.

...Instead of speaking, Liu Qingge crossed the distance between them and took Shen Qingqiu’s wrist.

His movements were completely natural and unconcerned, as if there was nothing strange happening at all. It even fooled Shen Qingqiu for a moment.

Then, good sense caught up with him, and the places where Liu Qingge’s fingers touched his skin began to burn with a prickling heat. He swallowed heavily, caught between at least three different impulses.
“—this kind of motion,” Liu Qingge was explaining... something. He had been guiding Shen Qingqiu’s arm through a demonstration, watching their joined hands and the fan with the sort of singular focus he directed only at enemies and his own cultivation, and now he turned to look at Shen Qingqiu in the same way. It was completely unfair. “Do you understand?”

Shen Qingqiu nodded, because he had long since decided to pretend he knew what was going on even when he didn’t.

“A... As expected, Liu-shidi has great insight,” he tacked on. “Coming to ask you was the right decision.”

It was absolutely the wrong decision!

Whatever it was, it was getting worse!

Liu Qingge didn’t brush off the praise, as Shen Qingqiu would have expected. He made an odd sound of what was probably intended as agreement, almost as if he was the one feeling inexplicably awkward, and proceeded to look everywhere except his fellow peak lord. But unless Shen Qingqiu was mistaken, the corner of his lips curled up in a way that was rather... pleased.

This sort of unexpectedly flustered look was terribly charming on him.

Well, of course it was. Even an ugly scowl looked good on Liu Qingge. That face was completely unfair. At this point, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help wondering how his sister could possibly be even more beautiful, when the man was already this attractive.

Liu Qingge was still holding his hand. His palm and fingers were slightly rough with calluses, contrasting his immaculately elegant and gorgeous appearance. His hand was also very warm, and Shen Qingqiu because suddenly aware that his mouth his gone dry. Heat was quickly climbing up his neck, flaring under his collar, and to his horror, across his cheeks.

Why?!

And why was he still staring at Liu Qingge’s lips...?
A horrible sort of realization nudged at the back of Shen Qingqiu’s mind.

He was still thinking about it, wasn’t he? That not-kiss. Was that really what had been bothering him all along?

Was he that much of a repressed virgin? Really?

...Apparently! He felt both annoyed and disgusted with himself.

Slipping his wrist out of Liu Qingge’s grasp, Shen Qingqiu closed his fan and pressed it tightly to his lips. He tried very hard to think through this incredibly inconvenient bout of, of delayed hormones.

It hadn’t even been Liu Qingge! But because of the way Water Moon Mirror had worked, it didn’t matter if Shen Qingqiu understood this logically. In his mind, Duxian-Er’s little life draining session was going to be indelibly associated with the real Liu Qingge.

Which was ridiculous. The real deal wouldn’t kiss him. And certainly wouldn’t kiss like that, confident and controlling, all open mouthed and invading tongue— He flushed at the memory that insistently popped up yet again, like some kind of horrible malware porn ad, except the stars were now him and his unfortunate, innocent junior brother, who had absolutely nothing to do with any of this.

The real Liu Qingge wouldn’t kiss like that, for sure. He had nothing but fighting on the brain, where would he get the skill?

The real Liu Qingge’s kiss... Well, actually. What would it be like?

It wasn’t as if Shen Yuan had any experience, so he couldn’t even really guess.

He had turned toward Liu Qingge, so they were standing nearly chest to chest. Raising his line of sight from Liu Qingge’s lips, he watched quick flashes of emotion flicker across the other man’s face as they looked at each other.
This person... it was easy to think at first glance that he would be rough, since his manner was so brusque. But that was only the surface, toward the things and people he didn’t spare any attention to. Toward what he considered important, Liu Qingge was devoted and attentive, even if his attempts were sometimes clumsy.

So probably it would be...

Shen Qingqiu’s thoughts had fizzled into white noise. Thoughtlessly, he leaned in and—

...

Oh.

Oh ****.

What was he doing?!

What was he doing?!

Only Shen Qingqiu’s own stupidity saved him as, distracted, he forgot to lower the folded fan he had raised against his mouth. Or perhaps better to call it a case of two instances of absolute stupidity cancelling each other out — when he leaned in, the fan became pressed between his and Liu Qingge’s lips, while the two of them stared at each other in matching stupefied shock.

Had he really just... tried to kiss Liu Qingge?!

He had. He actually had!

Shen Qingqiu could feel fine tremors of embarrassment and stress beginning to climb up his body. He and Liu Qingge still stood frozen, but he was suddenly aware that he needed to leave, immediately. Right away. Without delay. This situation had gone completely out of control.

His fan snapped open between them, the motion and even sound breaking the taut, frozen scene.
Liu Qingge’s eyebrows scrunched up in complete bafflement, and he actually took a step back in a way that couldn’t be called anything but retreat. He opened his mouth, but Shen Qingqiu cut him off quickly, before he could say anything.

“Shixiong just remembered something!” he blurted out. Yes, he remembered his brain! The upper one! ****, ****, ****! “I have to go. Right now.”

Without waiting for Liu Qingge to respond in any way, Shen Qingqiu spun around and jumped onto Xiu Ya. Maybe this was a mistake, because his head was spinning dizzyingly, and he felt like he might fall off at any moment, plummeting out of the sky into the steep valleys between the peaks. But it wasn’t as if he could stay at Bai Zhan or walk, giving Liu Qingge far too much time to stop him.

No, Shen Qingqiu needed to be alone, as soon as possible, so he could freak the hell out.

And freak out he did, the moment his feet touched the ground in some isolated corner of Qing Jing’s bamboo forest.

Why!! Why the hell did he try to kiss Liu Qingge?! He did that! Of his own will, without even thinking, he leaned in and, and, and—

No wonder everyone up to and including Luo Binghe thought they were a couple. Just how horny had Shen Qingqiu been acting? Did he get handsy without noticing? They had certainly become far too accustomed to invading each other’s personal space! When did this start? How long had it been going on? Who had noticed?

This was beyond humiliating. He might as well just die right there among the bamboo.

It was all that damn wife #298’s fault! Her and her magic mask! Why did she have to be so domineering and, and sensual about it? Hadn’t she acted like a blushing maiden when the protagonist got it on with her?

And why did it have to use Liu Qingge of all people!
...No, it was fine. This wasn’t strange at all, really.

Liu Qingge was an incredibly attractive man, truly a peerless beauty. Combined with his awe-inspiring reputation and his upright, noble character, who wouldn’t want to kiss him? That was completely normal! And of course Shen Qingqiu would be curious how the real goods differed from Duxian-Er’s illusion. That was normal too! Humans were naturally curious about things like that.

It was all completely normal. Just because Shen Yuan had never... done anything like that didn’t mean he had no interest. Surrounded by all these beautiful xianxia people, of course his libido would come to the surface. And maybe it expressed itself in a very stupid, confusing way, but that’s how these things often went. The revenge of his teenage years, as it were.

Now that he knew what was causing all those strange reactions in regard to Liu Qingge, he could definitely repress and hide all of it!

This was a good plan.

Shen Qingqiu had been walking in tense, crooked circles through the bamboo groves, slashing his folded fan at thin air as if trying to punish some great sin. All the while, his expression remained completely cold and blank, creating a strange pantomime. Now, he finally came to a sharp stop and, after staring into the distance for a short while, nodded to himself. Yes, a very good plan.

With his mind made up, the tension slowly seeped from his shoulders and stance. Even his cold, rigid expression eased, and Shen Qingqiu shook his head lightly.

Still. He could hardly believe it.

A crush at his age?

No wonder Liu Qingge had been made into cannon fodder in the original timeline. With this sky-high level of appeal, the IQ 40 little sisters of the harem would have stood no chance. How lucky that he’d only seduced this old man, and not one of the protagonist’s future wives. Otherwise, Shen Qingqiu might not have been able to save him the next time.
Feeling far more at least, Shen Qingqiu had been walking leisurely back to the main areas of Qing Jing Peak and his bamboo house when the hated notification sound chimed in his mind.

[-168 Coolness points]

The System’s announcement was merciless as always, but the high — and uneven — number made Shen Qingqiu pause. That number, wasn’t it... the remaining total of Coolness points he had?!

[Remaining Coolness points: 0]

Wait, wait, wait, this was really bad!

Technically, he only needed to keep them from going below 0, so zero itself was fine. But cutting it this close was too much! Especially since he still had no idea what Luo Binghe was upset about, or when the next sudden decrease would strike.

Hey, System! System, what am I supposed to be doing—?

But before he could properly start pounding at its door, the System spit out something else, bringing him up short.

[Coolness points +5]

Five points was basically nothing, given the recent fluctuations. But it was also the first increase he had seen in... a very long time, since before the entire business with Duanmu Yao and the secret route started. Somehow, it felt like a turning point.

And speaking of that...

[Complexity of the role of “Shen Qingqiu” +50. Congratulations on realization of feelings, stage 1! Please continue to advance to full mutual realization and confession to properly complete the Secret Route!]
Exactly which part of coming to understand the humiliating depths of his own thirst constituted adding ‘complexity’ to Shen Qingqiu’s character? Complexity of what, his sexuality? The original goods and his numerous brothel visits must have been writhing in disgust, wherever his soul had flown off to. And what did any of this have to do with the poorly defined secret route?

Shen Qingqiu reached out to mentally pound on the System’s box for answers, but something made him hesitate.

Because, well. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know how dating sims worked. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know what a route was. And if there was a stage 1, then there had to be subsequent stages as well. And especially that term, ‘confession’...

Firmly and decisively, he refused to think about any of that.

~.~.~
Notes: FINALLY. This arc gained like three extra chapters, I swear. Also, sorry guys, I just kinda... straight up forgot to cover LQG’s reaction to SQQ’s failure of an indirect kiss.

Basically, SQQ just refused to even acknowledge that anything had happened for a few months, so LQG eventually dropped the issue.

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Chapter 19: Resolutions

Shen Qingqiu had been right. Luo Binghe’s mood had definitely taken a turn, though it did not immediately appear to be a particularly positive one. At the same time, it didn’t appear negative either.

Instead, the boy was simply subdued and downcast when Shen Qingqiu pulled him out of training with the other disciples a few days later, when he judged they had both had enough time to sufficiently clear their heads.

They walked in silence for a while, the atmosphere slightly awkward but not nearly as heavy as Shen Qingqiu had feared.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe spoke up first, coming to a stop. Shen Qingqiu followed suit, turning to face him with an open, patient look. “This disciple acted inappropriately before. I apologize. I’ll gladly accept any punishment Shizun sees fit.”

“There’s no need for that,” Shen Qingqiu assured him, smiling.

If anything, Luo Binghe’s persistence had helped him realize some things — things he would have been happier not knowing, but the situation had already gone too far to deny it fully. Reaching out, he patted the boy on the head. The simple gesture he had done so many times made both of them relax, as if bridging the unexpected distance that had appeared between them.
Shen Qingqiu hesitated for a moment before plunging into the issue he knew they needed to address. “Will Binghe return to the side room? Or stay with the other disciples?” he asked. “This master would be happy to have him back. But if Binghe has reached the age where he prefers some space...”

“No!” Luo Binghe burst out. “No, I’ll come back! I want to come back! Please take me back, Shizun!”

A little taken aback by his vehemence, Shen Qingqiu nonetheless smiled and chuckled. “Of course. You’ll always have a place with me, Binghe.”

The boy beamed, his teenage moodiness lifted or at least momentarily hidden. It was... pleasant, even comforting to have him back. He had been a constant in Shen Qingqiu’s new life, a fluffy little sheep always nuzzling against him and always at his side — to say nothing of his divine cooking or his general handiness with miscellaneous errands. The Liu Qingge issue aside, the odd uncertainty between them and the awareness of Luo Binghe’s unhappiness had put Shen Qingqiu’s nerves on edge.

It was good to have him back.

But for some reason, there was a faint sense of distance. Probably, it was because Shen Qingqiu still wasn’t certain what had upset his disciple in the first place, and yet it had somehow been resolved entirely without his involvement. Luo Binghe was... growing up, into his own person and not just his master’s obedient little shadow.

It really left him with a melancholy feeling. In just a little over a year, the protagonist would leave Qing Jing Peak entirely, and he would never return again, except as a destroyer and conqueror, unless Shen Qingqiu’s actions managed to change the timeline enough to prevent that fallout. But even if Luo Binghe didn’t come into conflict with Cang Qiong, he would be far beyond the level of a disciple when he returned. Both the little side room in the bamboo house and the disciple quarters would no longer fit the stature of the world-shaking figure he would become.

That was just the natural outcome of the protagonist’s journey. No, it would be natural even if he hadn’t been the protagonist. No one could remain a child forever. And someday, every disciple outgrew their master, as people if not as cultivators.

Luo Binghe, the stallion lead of infinite potential, would outgrow every master he took, until he stood at the top of the world.
But unlike masters and training methods and cultivation manuals, you could only have one childhood, only one time when you were still young and innocent enough to open your heart and enjoy life in full.

Shen Qingqiu was glad, he realized, to have the chance to see this child and watch him grow up.

“Shizun?” Luo Binghe prompted, his tone quiet and a little uncertain.

His master petted his head again, before sliding his hand down to gently cup his cheek. It was soft and still tender, although the future graceful lines of his cheekbones and jaw were already beginning to form. Very soon, this child wouldn’t be a child anyone.

At the very least, Shen Qingqiu could make sure he was happy for the time he had left in this place.

This atmosphere... almost made him want to say something sappy.

But in the end, he pulled away and turned to head back up the path. “Binghe,” he called back when the boy didn’t follow, “come.”

He couldn’t deny how the answering cry of “Shizun!” and the quick pitter-patter of feet rushing to catch up warmed his heart.

~.~.~

“How are you doing?” Liu Mingyan ventured, looking over Luo Binghe surreptitiously after another of their training sessions.

He appeared to be doing well. The distraction and disquiet he had eventually grown unable to hide had faded. He looked faintly tired sometimes, but his gaze was clear and more focused than it had been for months.

Even around his master, he seemed calm and open, the few times Shen Qingqiu had dropped by
Luo Binghe’s self-control and acting skills were truly impressive.

“I’m fine,” he said, giving her a smile that was just the right level of warm and cheery to not be either worrying or obviously fake.

Liu Mingyan stared back at him motionlessly, then slowly raised her eyebrows, perfectly conveying how much she didn’t buy it. Clearing his throat awkwardly, Luo Binghe avoided her eyes.

“It’s fine,” he insisted. “It’s alright, really. I still have Shizun, so... I’m alright.” His expression softened, in a way that was far more honest. “You were right. At the very least, the connection between us will always remain. If I have this, even if it’s not what I wanted, it’s enough. Mm, it’ll be enough...”

It wasn’t enough, of course. But it would have to be, and one day, it might become so.

Not any day soon, however, and there was nothing either of them could do about it.

That didn’t mean she wouldn’t try. Although she had already made up her mind, Liu Mingyan still hesitated for a moment before steeling herself. Pulling out a simple brocade box, she gripped it tightly before thrusting it toward Luo Binghe.

“She looked off into the green forest as Luo Binghe accepted the box and, after running his fingers over the edges and the wing-feather patterns, slowly opened it.

“We’ll be getting our own swords soon,” Liu Mingyan said quickly, unexpectedly hesitant to see or hear his reaction. “So it’s a sword tassel. It’s... a paired one.” Reaching into her sleeve, she pulled out the match to the one in the box, letting the central ornament lie in the center of her palm while the tail hung off the edge, swinging lightly. She stared down at it, letting her determination settle her nerves.
“Paired...?” Luo Binghe repeated, his voice quiet and caught between confusion and a tentative awe.

“They’re a matched set,” she confirmed. “I will only have one sword, so I will...”

‘—Use this sword for you.’

That was what she had decided. That was the way of their clan — to pursue power, but also to never lose sight of the purpose for which they wielded it. There were many people Liu Mingyan would fight for. Her family, her master, their sect. But family was family, and joining Cang Qiong had been almost predetermined, following in her mother’s and brother’s footsteps.

This was the first time she chose someone she wanted to give her loyalty to of her own volition, based on nothing but her own feelings.

It was completely different. And for the first time, Liu Mingyan could understand her brother’s uselessness when it came to speaking what he felt. ‘I will use this sword for your sake’ — she absolutely couldn’t say this, no matter how hard she tried.

It was such a great line! Worthy of a moving confession!

...It was too embarrassing!

“I will... always be your friend,” she said instead. “This is also a connection you will never lose. I promise.”

She was so, so sorry for making fun of her brother.

Next to her, Luo Binghe made a soft sound, his fingers stroking the tassel he had received. “But... isn’t this something you’d share with your cultivation partner?” he said. “You should... save it. For them. You only have one sword, and one tassel, after all.”

When Liu Mingyan glanced at him, his profile was unreadable, a careful mask of no particular emotion. However, knowing him... he wanted this, she thought, but he was too afraid to take it.
“Yes, and I’m giving it to you,” she said firmly. “If I do find a partner, I’ll just give them a scented satchel. Or maybe we’ll have matching thumb rings. I read about that one, it sounds interesting...”

There was no guarantee she would ever find a cultivation partner. Many who pursued the path of immortality did not. But even if she did, any partner of hers would have to understand how important her other relationships were to her. So they would find some other way of expressing their devotion to each other.

Right now, she thought that Luo Binghe needed this far more.

She glanced at him when no more protests followed. A warm glow was suffusing his pretty face, lighting up his entire countenance. He looked cuter than she could have imagined. Liu Mingyan, who was used to thinking of him as someone very mature and even sharp-edged, found herself taken completely off guard. No wonder Shen Qingqiu sometimes treated him like a small, fuzzy pet.

“Th-then I’ll treasure it!” Luo Binghe said earnestly, turning to Liu Mingyan with shining eyes. “I will always keep it with me! I’ll never let it go!” He clutched the brocade box to his chest.

It was good that she had the veil, Liu Mingyan thought. He really was... very cute.

Unfortunately, neither of them would be able to keep their promises.

‘Luo Binghe was attacked by demons and perished.’ The impersonal, distant announcement made no sense when she heard it after finally escaping Jue Di Gorge. Zheng Yang and its tassel returned from the Immortal Alliance Conference without an owner, abandoned and forgotten. There wasn’t even a body.
Support him? Use her sword for his sake?

She wasn’t even there. How could it happen like that? Of all the things she had imagined, it had never been like this.

~.~.~
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Notes: Sorry if the timeskip is abrupt. The Endless Abyss scene went about as canon, with no major differences.

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Chapter 20: Interlude - Without Even the Chance to Bloom

The Immortal Alliance Conference this time around had been the bloodiest one since its inception.

Cang Qiong had been lucky, compared to the other sects and groups, but thirty nine disciples had still perished in Jue Di Gorge. More than half the peaks had been left in mourning, the others escaping only by virtue of having sent no participants that year.

Bai Zhan had not lost the most, but they had not lost the least either. Although their combat skills were particularly high, Liu Qingge knew his disciples were prone to letting themselves become arrogant and complacent in their strength. Some of them had doubtlessly charged at monsters that were far beyond their current level or let themselves become overwhelmed by numbers.

Qing Jing had lost four people. One theirs had died together with one of Bai Zhan’s, fighting side by side. Maybe it hadn’t been all arrogance that brought them down. Maybe they had done their duty, even if it meant their lives.

Regardless, that was the way Bai Zhan lived and died — in battle. Liu Qingge didn’t mourn for them, only paid his respects.

The ones that remained, he would drill harder.

His disciples followed his lead, throwing themselves into training with renewed fervor and determination. That was good. There was more than enough grief to go around, and not everyone dealt with it in such a straightforward way. Liu Qingge... had enough headaches.
His sister was at least a member of the Liu clan and knew how to turn her emotions into a blade-like resolve. She had been training almost non-stop, her expression set in cold, harsh lines as she remembered not only her disciple-sisters, but also that Qing Jing boy she had struck up a friendship with.

But even her demeanor was more brittle than Liu Qingge would have expected. They had lost relatives before, after all. She was not unfamiliar with the fate of those who fought, or with grief. Yet, the unhappy fluctuations in her qi were only barely short of worrying, and even Qi Qingqi had taken to keeping a closer eye on her.

With her master involved, there was nothing more for Liu Qingge to do, and it wasn’t as if he knew what to say.

He still tried. Even Qi Qingqi made no comment when he came by Xian Shu, letting Liu Mingyan throw herself and her sword against him.

Once, when they sat together quietly afterwards, she asked, “You’re so strong. But have you ever just... not been enough? How do you accept that?”

“Become stronger,” Liu Qingge replied, not quickly but without hesitation or doubt. “So you’re strong enough next time.”

Liu Mingyan’s expression was pensieve and downcast, as it often was these days. Her heavy breathing had finally slowed, and as the sweat across her body began to cool, she shivered slightly in the breeze. However, it wouldn’t be long before her cultivation became high enough where this kind of physical sensation would no longer affect her. She truly was a rare talent.

“It wasn’t even...” She shook her head. Absently, her fingers closed around the tassel of her sheathed sword. “No, it’s just arrogance to think I could have changed something, isn’t it? Shen-shibo was there, and he couldn’t stop it. I probably also... But at least then I’d know.” Her mouth twisted as she bit off the last words, dripping with frustration.

She hadn’t even been there. Whether she was strong enough or not, who could say? And now, there wouldn’t be a next time.

Liu Qingge really... didn’t know what to say or do.
You couldn’t win every battle. Some battles, you would never even be able to fight. Accepting loss and growing from it was something a clan like theirs understood well, so Liu Qingge knew that his sister would also accept it and grow stronger.

However, there was someone he could not be so certain about — precisely that ‘Shen-shibo.’

Everyone in Cang Qiong had known how much Shen Qingqiu favored his best disciple, and everyone knew the state he was reduced to after losing him. No matter how much he protested it, ‘as if he lost his soul’ was a truly apt description.

Shen Qingqiu was a peak lord and a master with decades of experience under his belt. So even if he didn’t understand his way of mourning, Liu Qingge at first thought the man would sort himself out.

But he didn’t.

Months passed, then a year. Shen Qingqiu no longer stood in front of the place where he’d buried the remains of his disciple’s sword. But instead, he ran. He was absent from Qing Jing and all of Cang Qiong almost perpetually, leaving his other disciples to manage themselves and all sect affairs except dangerous hunts. Just getting him to return regularly for his medicine and meridian cleaning was a cumbersome affair.

Liu Qingge, who had acted not much different for most of his tenure as Bai Zhan’s peak lord, shouldn’t have had room to point fingers — when had he changed his way of being in the sect, come to think of it?

But he had been seeking something, when he roamed the world, something he believed the sect couldn’t offer him. And if Shen Qingqiu had been seeking strength, like Liu Mingyan, like Liu Qingge himself back then, he would have understood.

However, that wasn’t the case. Shen Qingqiu was simply running away.

And yet it was still better that way.

Compared to coming to see him at Qing Jing, Shen Qingqiu out at some faraway town or mountain
or lake at least looked at Liu Qingge and spoke to him, instead of constantly becoming distracted by his thoughts — his memories. There would be emotions other than bleak despondency in his tone and the subtle shift of his expressions.

Sometimes, he even drifted close to Liu Qingge’s side and, laying a light hand on his arm, leaned in to say something with an amused, secretive look, the way he had taken to doing before the conference. It still made something twitch in Liu Qingge’s chest. He had never been able to tell why, and he never managed to ask before Shen Qingqiu pulled away again every time, hiding behind his fan.

Now, it would always be followed by a strange, troubled expression that Liu Qingge understood even less.

He didn’t understand anything. He couldn’t do anything — except go with him.

Cang Qiong had survived just fine with one peak lord barely present. It could survive without two as well. Because maybe there would be nothing he could do, but not even being there to try, losing without even having the chance to fight, was the most unbearable of all.

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The latest request they had received was a simple one. A succubus or perhaps several had been abducting young men from the local towns, and their families had begged the esteemed immortal masters to save their sons.

Succubi were weak demons, in terms of combat strength, and Liu Qingge saw fighting them as a waste of his time. But Shen Qingqiu had accepted the mission, and he had also made a rather odd expression in the process, his folded fan tapping against his pursed lips. For some reason, his eyes had slid toward Liu Qingge before quickly moving back to the couple making the request.

This pattern repeated several times as they trekked toward what Shen Qingqiu judged to be the succubi’s lair, until Liu Qingge finally couldn’t endure it any longer.

“What?” he demanded shortly.

“Liu-shidi, you really don’t need to come,” Shen Qingqiu said. He shifted slightly under Liu
Qingge’s flat stare. “I’ll be fine on my own. And it’s for your own good! These kinds of demons love beautiful men, so they’ll certainly target you if you come.”

And they wouldn’t target Shen Qingqiu, who had beauty befitting an immortal himself?

“I’m going,” Liu Qingge said firmly.

Shen Qingqiu sighed, hiding behind his fan again. It was clear he didn’t like this answer but also realized there was no point in arguing any further.

It had been a while since he finally stopped kicking up a fuss about travelling around with Liu Qingge. Why was he getting so worked up this time? There had to be something more to it. Watching him closely, Liu Qingge tried to figure out what was going through his head, but all he could see was the way Shen Qingqiu fidgeted intermittently, faintly furrowing his brows, and the way he chewed his lower lip until it was tender.

Following the motions, Liu Qingge’s eyes focused on his mouth — only to look away quickly. Picking up his pace so he overtook Shen Qingqiu slightly, he pressed down the weird thing rising up all of a sudden.

Seduction techniques were difficult to deal with, he remembered suddenly. That time, when he had been chasing that poison woman to interrogate her about Without A Cure... he had been completely overtaken. Both of them had.

Still, that was all the more reason to go together.

When the first tones of enchanting and clearly unnatural singing reached them, Shen Qingqiu caught up and took the lead again, heading off the narrow path they had been following. “There should be a cave around here...” he explained quietly, leaning toward Liu Qingge in his usual way. At some point, Liu Qingge had gotten used to doing the same in return, no matter how much this apparently made them look like a pair of gossipers, in Qi Qingqi’s words.

Shen Qingqiu’s lips twitched into a smile as several young girls — young succubi — appeared out of the brush and trees. “Ah, there it is,” he said before straightening again and assuming his calm, pretentious facade.
He seemed to be planning on speaking with the demons, but Liu Qingge didn’t share his sociable mood. Before the ‘girls’ could even say a word, Cheng Luan flashed out of its scabbard and the boulder that had been covering the cave entrance was cleaved in two. As the young succubi fled, shrieking, Shen Qingqiu tutted reproachfully.

“Liu-shidi, always so rough...” he complained.

Even so, being well used to Liu Qingge’s ways, he was already heading inside the lair.

“Pardon the intrusion,” Shen Qingqiu called out rather blandly, as they made their way into a wide cave carpeted with sweet-smelling herbs. The strong combination of scents made Liu Qingge wrinkle his nose, remembering the clouds of incense at Duxian-Er’s temporary abode. Preemptively, he began to circulate his qi to dispel any potential effects.

There had been more succubi inside, but all of them had rushed into hiding as the two cultivators approached, leaving only alluring silhouettes flitting in the dark shadows further in.

Finally, one silhouette separated from the rest and approached, her generous figure and thin waist swaying in a way that would be tantalizing to most. Liu Qingge only judged what he could feel of her demonic aura — stronger than any of the others, but not actually strong. Her bearing, while graceful, was not of a fighter either. Confident in his ability to handle the situation no matter which way it turned, he stood back and let Shen Qingqiu mess around as he wished.

Shen Qingqiu did indeed seem to be in the mood to mess around.

Fanning himself lightly, he pasted on a haughty, relaxed expression as he regarded the head succubus. “Greetings to the madam,” he said lightly. “It’s a pleasure visiting your lovely home.”

Even Liu Qingge could tell this platitude was a bit out of place. It was the sort of thing you said after being cordially invited in and greeted properly, not announced yourself when breaking and entering. Judging by the succubus’s chilly look, she thought so too. However, her lips still curled into a sharp smile and she tilted her head coquettishly.

“Welcome to our esteemed visitors,” she said, in a tone dripping with fakeness and passive aggressive annoyance. “This one is Meiyin. And who might these gentlemen be?”
“Shen Qingqiu,” Qing Jing’s peak lord introduced himself simply.

He didn’t need to say anything else. Madam Meiyin’s expression shifted as she struggled to hide her surprise and unease. It was obvious that she recognized his name and, with it, his position and power, and she knew that her coven was completely outmatched.

A more conventional demon, less full of certainty in their own slyness, would have run, or grovelled, or attacked, but Madam Meiyin smoothed out her expression after a moment and put on a smile again. This time, it was seamlessly charming and attractive, as she put forth significantly more effort. However, her eyes had grown completely cold with something far more ruthless than annoyance.

“Truly an honor,” she demurred. “And what are you seeking with us, Master Shen? We will be... very happy to help.” Her sultry gaze raked over Shen Qingqiu — and then lingered a bit longer on Liu Qingge.

Noticing that, Shen Qingqiu surreptitiously shot him a look that said, ‘I told you so.’

Liu Qingge rolled his eyes in return.

“We’ll have to trouble Madam to give the young masters in her care over to us,” Shen Qingqiu said. “Their families are quite anxious to have them back.”

Calculation flashed through the succubus’s eyes, but she didn’t attempt anything overt. “Of course,” Madam Meiyin agreed easily. She gestured to her younger subordinates hidden in the shadows, and there were some faint motions as several of the unclear silhouettes departed, supposedly to carry out their request. “But it will take some time to gather them and... make them presentable. Perhaps the esteemed masters will allow me to provide some entertainment meanwhile?”

She gestured to a stone table, and, inclining his head, Shen Qingqiu followed her to take a seat, while Liu Qingge remained standing behind him like a looming guard.

“If I might enquire,” she said slowly, still smiling as she poured him a cup of wine, which Shen Qingqiu wisely only swirled without drinking, “do either of the masters have a... cultivation partner?”
Shameless, as expected of a succubus. She had to know that neither of them would be stupid enough to accept any overtures from her or her lot, so she was simply using the question and the answer as a conversational stepping stone.

Fortunately, Liu Qingge had learned how to answer questions like these.

Before Shen Qingqiu could do more than shoot her a considering glance, he said firmly and without hesitation. “Yes. Each other.”

It was like a waterfall’s worth of cold water had been dumped over the stone table and the two sitting at it. Shen Qingqiu recovered first, lifting up the wine cup and pretending to take a sip. Liu Qingge didn’t understand why he had been surprised at all — since they never explained the situation to his clan, this was what they told everyone outside the sect. It was actually quite convenient, and Liu Qingge himself had long since stopped stumbling over the words.

Madam Meiyin’s expression wavered more obviously and intensely. In fact, she nearly broke character enough to glare at them. But in the end, she only laughed, high and flat.

“It was just a small joke. My modest abilities are enough to tell that both of you have not experienced the pleasures of... dual cultivation,” she said, in a light, pointed tone. She obviously did not appreciate the lie, not that Liu Qingge cared.

Admittedly, getting caught out was somewhat embarrassing.

But the one to react the most was surprisingly Shen Qingqiu. He stared at Madam Meiyin in shock, then glanced down at himself as if in disbelief.

“Among my abilities is also some skill in divination, particularly pertaining to matters of romance,” Madam Meiyin went on. “Would the esteemed master be perhaps interested, to pass the time?”

Shen Qingqiu cleared his throat slightly, pushing away his strange confusion. “In fact, I’m quite interested,” he said. “If Madam will oblige...” He gestured for her to go on, turning his wrist in a small circle.

It seemed he still wanted to mess around, so Liu Qingge didn’t remind him that many kinds of
The tips of Liu Qingge’s ears burned, and he suddenly didn’t know whether to turn away and pretend he couldn’t hear — or demand an explanation.

Shen Qingqiu... was in love with someone?

What??

“Indeed, it’s entirely unsurprising!” Madam Meiyin agreed with a leer. For some reason, Shen Qingqiu stiffened as she tilted her head slightly. “However, you don’t need to worry, good sir. The other party’s feelings have already matured and are ready to blossom!”

Who’s feelings?
Who was it?!

The agitation suddenly pressing down on Liu Qingge’s chest was overpowering, and he couldn’t think past it enough to wonder why it mattered so much to him.

“You didn’t say anything about such feelings,” he blurted out — accusing even to his own ears.

“There aren’t any feelings! None!” Shen Qingqiu denied. He made a gesture that was probably meant to be vaguely threatening, but he had forgotten that he hadn’t closed his fan, so it looked slightly ridiculous instead. His unhappy gaze alternated between Liu Qingge and Madam Meiyin, making him constantly change the direction he was facing.

Even to Liu Qingge, it was obvious that ‘no feelings’ was a complete lie. Slapping a heavy hand down on Shen Qingqiu’s shoulder to keep him in place, he leaned in and glared at the succubus.

“Is that the truth?” he demanded.

“It’s completely inaccurate!” Shen Qingqiu snapped before she could answer.

Madam Meiyin had been watching them with amusement of someone enjoying a good show, but her expression quickly darkened. “Esteemed master, there’s no need to slander my fortune telling so carelessly,” she protested, “just because you don’t want to hear it!”

“Why don’t you want to hear it?” Liu Qingge’s frown deepened as the situation made even less sense. “It’s... reciprocated.” That was supposed to be a good thing, wasn’t it?

“It’s not reciprocated! And there aren’t any feelings! Can’t you tell she’s just having fun at our expense?” Shen Qingqiu complained.

Madam Meiyin’s demonic aura flared in agitation. “I would not lie about my fortunes,” she declared coldly. “Certainly not for the likes of you! Regardless of what you call your own attraction, I can tell you — this person is deeply in love with you! And if you won’t believe me...” She sneered. “You can learn it with your body!”
Unforgivably for a warrior, Liu Qingge had allowed himself to become distracted, focusing his attention more on Shen Qingqiu than the demon across the table from them. He couldn’t react in time when Madam Meiyin moved abruptly — engulfing the two of them in a storm of flower petals. The cloying scent was overpowering, and the red flurry hid her figure just long enough to give her a head start.

Liu Qingge was about to chance after her even so, but Shen Qingqiu, who had sprung to his feet, unexpectedly wavered in place before bracing himself against the stone table.

“What is it?” Liu Qingge asked sharply, returning to the other man’s side.

Shen Qingqiu made a strange noise and swayed where he stood. When Liu Qingge took hold of his arm to support him, he jumped as if he had been scalded and clapped a hand over his mouth before he could let out an even worse sound.


“Off, off, off! Liu-shidi, stop crowding—!” Shen Qingqiu tried to wave him away, but Liu Qingge ignored him. Holding the man firmly in place, he grasped his wrist and felt his pulse.

It was erratic, and his skin was too hot. “You’ve been poisoned,” Liu Qingge surmised. Poisoned with something else, and it was always going to be unclear how Without A Cure might react. “We need to get back quickly. Just hold on, I’ll carry you.”

“That is entirely unnecessary! Go look for the missing men,” Shen Qingqiu insisted. “I can take care of this on my own!”

“You know how to cure it? I’ll help.”

“Liu Qingge!” Shen Qingqiu snapped, glaring up at him. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes looked misty. He was angry on the surface, but beneath that was something closer to distress. It was a picture unlike his usually controlled manner, enough to be nearly heart-stopping. “Use your head! What poison would a succubus use! What are you offering!”
...Liu Qingge flushed.

He did know what ‘dual cultivation’ was and how it worked, even between two men. He was naturally aware of a succubus’s nature and methods. So Shen Qingqiu’s current problem was likely... and the help he needed would be...

Letting go, he quickly backed away two steps.

Shen Qingqiu immediately spun around, hiding his disarrayed appearance, and huffed as if to say, ‘I knew it.’ However, there didn’t seem to be anything he could at the moment, and he only leaned against the table again, his somewhat heavy breathing loud in the sudden silence of the cave.

Despite having half turned away as well, Liu Qingge glanced at him repeatedly. He opened his mouth and almost said again, ‘I’ll help.’

But just before the words could leave his mouth, he remembered — Shen Qingqiu... had someone in his heart. And those feelings were returned. This kind of ‘help’ was something he wouldn’t want from others, most likely. Wasn’t that how it went?

It felt like there was something pressing on his chest again.

“Liu-shidi,” Shen Qingqiu called out. His voice was even and cool, and he had straightened, having regained at least some of his composure. Nonetheless, he didn’t turn around, “Shixiong will handle it. Go on ahead.”

How was he going to handle it? Just endure? Or was he going to...

An unclear impression flashed through Liu Qingge’s mind unbidden. The prim and prissy Shen Qingqiu even further disheveled, his jaw set in annoyance and frustration while he squeezed his eyes shut and pulled open his robes, reaching down the planes of his pale chest and under his loosened clothing to curl those long fingers around——

Liu Qingge choked, his entire body jerking, and his mind went blessedly blank.
Suddenly, he very much wanted to cover his face, but he couldn’t seem to move. All of his muscles had tensed to the absolute limit, leaving him trembling with strain.

Shen Qingqiu shifted, startling Liu Qingge out of his daze. He didn’t wait to see what the other man was doing — turning on his heel, he fled.

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The entire succubus coven had escaped in the confusion, and the halls and chambers of their cave lair were deserted. It was easy to find the missing young men, scattered across the smaller caverns that must have been occupied by individual succubi. Liu Qingge ignored their state — the sights, sounds, smells of it — and focused on checking their condition.

None of them were in immediate danger, although many were suffering from qi drain, exhaustion, or even dehydration. There were too many for them to move, so he decided to leave them there for the local authorities and their families to retrieve, now that the demons were gone.

Instead, he headed back to the main chamber, both anxious to check on Shen Qingqiu’s state and apprehensive on what he’d find. In the end, what had Shen Qingqiu decided to do...?

...Shen Qingqiu had jumped into the sweet scented rose pool.

“What are you doing?” Liu Qingge demanded, his steps speeding up as he caught sight of his ‘senior brother’ sitting in the water motionlessly. It was cold, and he had been in it for some time, even the shoulders of his robes soaked through. “Mind your body, have you lost your head completely?”

He stiffened as Liu Qingge gripped his arm firmly, but he didn’t resist as he was hauled out of the water.
His agitation, from the succubus’s fortune telling and from the yin poison, had cooled off, so even with his soaked, rumpled state, Shen Qingqiu had regained some of his usual bearing. He looked particularly unapproachable as he shook the water from his sleeves and the hem of his robes, not even acknowledging Liu Qingge’s presence.

This was... he didn’t like it, Liu Qingge realized.

He didn’t like any of this.

“You have feelings for someone?” he blurted out.

Shen Qingqiu’s motions paused. “Liu-shidi...” he sighed without looking at him.

“Who is it?” Liu Qingge persisted. “Is it the sect leader?”

It had to be. The two of them had shared a strange, unclear but strong relationship from long ago. And yet, whatever feelings Shen Qingqiu had for Yue Qingyuan, he had always denied and hidden. To the point that the two of them hadn’t been able to speak for more than five sentences back and forth, and yet the connection had persisted.

Now that things were different and Shen Qingqiu had warmed up to the sect leader... it really would make sense for something to ‘blossom’ between them.

That sense of pressure in his chest left Liu Qingge increasingly unsettled, itching to... to do something.

“We should stop saying it,” he said, latching on to the first thing that seemed to follow logically from all this. “That we’re... partners. Sect Leader knows the truth, but it’ll cause confusion, when you...” He trailed off, swallowing against his suddenly dry throat.

“Liu-shidi,” Shen Qingqiu said more firmly. His lips pursed as he gave up fussing with his robes and pulled out his fan instead. It was soaked as well, and he waved it several times to dry it a little. It said something about his state of mind, that he hadn’t thought to leave it out before taking his swim. “Liu-shidi,” he went on finally, “there’s no need. It doesn’t matter.”
Liu Qingge’s eyes narrowed. “You... why weren’t you happy to hear it?” he wondered, remembering again his agitation at the succubus’s fortune.

“Really, Liu-shidi... Why do you think? Do you think something good can come of that? For someone like me?” Shen Qingqiu said. His tone edged on sharpness, but it lacked any passion. It was hard to see his expression as he kept his gaze aimed down and away.

“Like you?” Liu Qingge repeated incredulously. “What, like you?”

But Shen Qingqiu only shook his head and refused to explain. “It’s better like this,” he insisted, turning away again. “It can’t work out, so it’s better not to give anyone false hope.”

No matter how much Liu Qingge pressed, he refused to say anything further.

However, for a long time afterwards, he could feel the weight of Shen Qingqiu’s gaze resting on his back, only to flit away again. When he turned, the expression he caught a glimpse of was pensive, desolate and, strangest of all, remorseful.

After they returned to Cang Qiong, Shen Qingqiu no longer accepted any task that involved Liu Qingge.

He didn’t sneer or glare, but the distance that returned between them was just as wide as years prior.

The person he didn’t want to give false hope to, the one who loved him deeply and whom he had feelings for as well, was it possibly...

Liu Qingge didn’t know. And suddenly, with Shen Qingqiu avoiding him with every effort, he couldn’t find a way to ask. But with every passing day, he became more certain — if it was him, he wouldn’t be satisfied with not even trying. Even a battle he couldn’t win, he would rather still fight than let it pass without even knowing.

He wouldn’t accept this. ...But for that, he needed a chance to try.
Chapter End Notes

Now, a week's break from posting while I work on the backlog and the last two arcs :)
Arc 4 - Welcome Back, Luo Binghe

Notes: Is everyone ready for moar het

Also, I found out that the ‘er endearment should only be used by people senior to the subject, with one generation older being a rule of thumb (apparently). Naturally, this was not correctly reflected in this fic, so there’ve been some minor changes.

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Chapter 21: Arc 4 - Welcome Back, Luo Binghe

The air of the human world tasted strange after so long in the Endless Abyss and then the demon realm. Closing his eyes, Luo Binghe took a deep breath and tried to acclimate himself.

Or maybe he was trying to steel his nerves, who could say.

In his mind, all the petty arguments against this idea lined themselves up again, but Luo Binghe refused to hesitate. He would do this, even if he wouldn’t consider just why he was so adamant on taking this risk.

In the end, his decision had already been made the moment he had seen it — the tassel swinging from the hilt of that young woman’s sword.

The matched pair to it was gone, most likely discarded when Zheng Yang’s pieces were returned to Wan Jian Peak. There was no need to keep the promise it represented.

But Liu Mingyan continued to wear it still.

Before that, Luo Binghe had only considered it distantly, the possibility of seeking her out. Any part of him that might have tried to hope was drowned out by the dark certainty that it would only be a repeat of... of what started it all. However, knowing she still remembered him, no matter if she knew the truth, made him unable to dismiss the idea.
Liu Mingyan had accepted his use of demonic cultivation. Perhaps she could also accept this.

He couldn’t really believe it. But he couldn't forget it either.

The only way to get rid of this uncertainty was to confront it.

Telling himself this, Luo Binghe stepped out onto the narrow mountain path.

A black-clothed stranger appearing suddenly ahead of them would have made most people stop warily, but there was no change in Liu Mingyan’s pace, nor in her expression. It was only Luo Binghe’s familiarity with her that allowed him to notice the subtle shift in her bearing as she readied herself to fight if necessary.

She had continued to look ahead, but now her eyes finally moved toward him casually. Luo Binghe could tell the exact moment she saw his face, as he turned to face her as well.

Liu Mingyan’s footsteps came to an abrupt stop.

“It’s been a long while, Liu-shimei,” Luo Binghe greeted her. He tried to put on a smile, but he had no idea what expression he really made.

Liu Mingyan’s eyes grew wider and wider, even while she blinked rapidly as if to clear away this mirage. Her veil wavered as she drew a shaking gasp, raising one hand as if to cover her mouth. “Luo Binghe...” she murmured.

With that realization, she nearly threw himself toward him. But her training and sense kicked in just as quickly, and she caught herself. The rapid, conflicting reactions left her swaying in place like a stalk of grass in the wind. No, if it was her, it had to be at least a single, upright bamboo... To see such a composed person acting this way would have been comical at another time, but Luo Binghe could barely maintain his calm facade. His mouth had already gone dry and for all his usual eloquence, he couldn’t find a single word to say.

“You—!” Finally, she reined in her emotions, and her expression hardened. With her brows set in a furious, determined, desperate slant, she held out her hand commandingly.
She wanted to confirm his spiritual energy, to make sure his appearance wasn’t some trick.

Her outstretched hand was trembling almost imperceptibly.

When she examined his qi, she would be able to sense his demonic energy as well. She’d know, and then...

Exhaling quietly, Luo Binghe step forward and took her hand.

It was surprisingly small, compared to his. When they first met, he had barely started growing into his future stature, and Liu Mingyan had been a tall girl, so they had been almost the same size. As they grew, the difference had grown as well, but he had seen her so often that he had barely noticed. Only now, after years away, Luo Binghe became aware of the way her fingers couldn’t even wrap around his wrist and the way he had to tilt his head to look down at her face.

A small pulse of qi cycled between them.

A myriad of emotions flashed through her eyes, before they slid shut and Liu Mingyan took a deep, steadying breath.

Her other hand, which she had held in a surreptitious seal, ready to draw her sword at any moment, dropped down to her side. Her entire body relaxed, and she let herself lean forward, her forehead pressing against his chest.

“You’re alive,” she whispered. Her shuddering breaths puffed against the open collar of his robes. Without thinking, Luo Binghe shifted his hand to give hers a comforting squeeze. She must have realized his nature already, but it was just like then — she accepted it with calm and for later consideration. She really... hadn’t changed.

Finally, Liu Mingyan lifted her head and drew back slightly.

“What happened?” she asked.
There was a small outlook nearby, where Luo Binghe led Liu Mingyan. Judging by the quick look she shot him as they settled on a couple of boulders there, she realized that he had chosen that particular stretch of road specifically for this reason. However, she didn’t say anything.

Folding her hands in her lap, she watched him and waited patiently for the explanation.

Those hands clenched tighter and tighter as Luo Binghe began to speak, relating the events he had experienced at the Immortal Alliance Conference. At first, what could be seen of her expression furrowed as well, but then it blanked, growing more and more rigid instead.

The only movement she made was a sharp, choked gasp when he told her, ‘Then, Shizun pushed me down into the Abyss.’

However, she didn’t say anything.

“...I finally gained enough power to escape the demon realm and returned here,” Luo Binghe concluded. “And... came to see you.”

For a long moment, Liu Mingyan continued to watch him without expression. Then, she blinked quickly and took a deep breath, her entire body shifting from the position she had kept motionlessly. Slowly, she shook her head.

“That’s... I don’t understand,” she said. Her hand reached up subconsciously to close around the tassel at the hilt of her sword. “Shen-shibo said you died. And he mourned so much, it was like he’d lost his soul, he wouldn’t even return Zheng Yang to Wan Jian. All this time... it was guilt?”

That Shen Qingqiu would have concealed the truth was not outside even the most pessimistic of Luo Binghe’s conjectures. But that he would mourn, even going against the sect to keep the broken Zheng Yang... he hadn’t imagined it possible.

Shizun... felt guilty?
Shizun thought he had made a mistake?

It was enough to leave Luo Binghe floundering, unable to remember what he had planned to do next. No, he’d never had a plan for this in the first place. The only thing he had considered was what to do when he was rejected again — dream manipulation couldn’t change memories, he had thought, but shaking someone’s mind around a bit could easily erase the last few hours, so Liu Mingyan would just wake up thinking she’d had a strange, vague dream...

Except that she didn’t reject him.

Instead, she was glaring painfully down at the ground between them as she tried to reconcile what she had been told with what she had seen for herself these last two years.

“We need to ask him,” she decided finally, “what happened and why—”

“No!” Luo Binghe burst out. He faltered as Liu Mingyan looked at him with confusion. “No,” he repeated more calmly. “That... I can’t face Shizun like this. Not yet.” He had intended to stop there, be firm. But for some reason, words continued to spill out. “I need to prove that this demon blood doesn’t mean anything. If I become a high-ranking righteous cultivator, then even Shizun will have acknowledge me. That’s why...”

He could tell that beneath Liu Mingyan’s veil, her lips had thinned in displeasure. “You don’t need to prove anything,” she said firmly. “You haven’t done anything wrong. For Shen-shibo to react like that, it was...”

She couldn’t say it was wrong or unreasonable. In fact, almost any righteous master would agree at least in principle. Demons were their enemy. Even if that demon blood was diluted, it was already an unforgivable matter.

In principle. In practice, doubtlessly, few would be able to harden their heart against the disciple they loved the most in such a situation. And thinking of Shen Qingqiu, the way he had treated Luo Binghe before...

There had to be something more to it. Didn’t there?

“It was too much,” Liu Mingyan chose in the end.
He hadn’t done anything wrong. He didn’t need to prove himself. Luo Binghe could barely believe he was being told this, when he hadn’t even been able to say it with certainty in his heart. ...He didn’t know how to react.

“But if I just return to Cang Qiong...” he said uncertainly.

Liu Mingyan nodded slowly. “Then we’ll just have to talk to Shen-shibo alone. He’s almost never at the sect anymore, so it won’t be hard to catch him outside.” She tilted up her chin resolutely. “We’ll find out the truth. It’ll be alright... I will support you.”

That was nothing like the plan Luo Binghe had started to form about what he would do upon returning to the human realm. He had intended to join another sect, establish a base of support, make a name for himself — make sure that he couldn’t be simply dismissed without dragging the entire cultivation world into chaos. However, he couldn’t seem to form any words of protest as Liu Mingyan pulled him along, driven by determination and indignation — on his behalf.

Rushing off like this was a risk. He hadn’t thought he had it in him to go on faith like this anymore.

But...

Maybe just this once. This one last time, he would trust in someone.

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Since Luo Binghe had nowhere to go, Liu Mingyan took him to Huo Hong Valley.

Her clan didn’t ask any questions about who he was or why she had brought him. It was doubtful any of them remembered him — he had only been in Huo Hong once before, after they escaped from the Violet Heaven secret realm and came to report.

That was when Liu Mingyan found out about his demonic cultivation under Elder Dream Demon, and accepted it as long as his reasons remained pure. Maybe that was why this scenery — the eternally autumn-red trees, warm and burning like fire — remained clear in his memory. He could still remember standing with Liu Mingyan as they gazed out into the dusk and talked about
strength and desperation and what it meant to have someone who would stand by you.

That was also when he accidentally caught a glimpse of Shen Qingqiu’s closeness with Liu Qingge.

Luo Binghe frowned. He had asked Liu Mingyan if there was any chance of Shen Qingqiu hearing about his presence, but she had waved away his concern with a faint furrow in her brows.

“He’s avoiding my brother recently,” she said. Her expression was displeased as she remembered something, probably Liu Qingge’s frustration. “They haven’t even talked in months.”

But Liu Qingge was the person Shen Qingqiu loved. Why would he do something like that?

What was his master thinking? Luo Binghe could not understand any of it at all.

There was a knock on the doors to his rooms, pulling him out of his thoughts. “Yes, what is it?” Luo Binghe called out. It was instinct to ready his qi and shift his stance subtly, awaiting an ambush, but the reaction came a hair later than it should have. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

A young man, a little older than Luo Binghe, let himself in and carefully closed the door behind himself. When he met Luo Binghe’s gaze, he smiled — unexpectedly mild for a member of this clan. “Please pardon the intrusion,” he said. “I’m Liu Mingchuan, one of Mingyan’s cousins. If you have a moment, I’d like to chat a bit.”


Even the most diplomatic member of the Liu clan was still straightforward, in the end.

However, his expression remained calm and neutral. “Of course,” Luo Binghe said, gesturing him to a couch. “Please, take a seat.”

He made tea, then served it with all the grace and manners he had learned at Qing Jing Peak. He was a little rusty — demons had a very different perspective on manners and social interactions in
general. Liu Mingchuan received his cup with a smile and savored both the scent and the taste with care.

...Then, after the first sip and pause of enjoyment, he downed the rest of the cup in one gulp, just like Liu Qingge used to, when he visited Shen Qingqiu at the bamboo house.

Luo Binghe had never managed to catch Liu Mingyan drinking anything — or eating — but he suddenly imagined her doing the same. Maybe that was how she did it — pull down her veil in a lightning fast movement and then just tip the entire cup back. His shoulders twitched as he bit back a chuckle.

Setting the empty cup down with a gentle clink, Liu Mingchuan let out a satisfied breath and faced Luo Binghe again. It seemed he was ready to get down to business.

“Mingyan didn’t say anything or ask for help, so I won’t meddle too much,” he said. “But you know... I remember the name of Master Shen’s apprentice, Mingyan’s friend who died at the Immortal Alliance Conference. I remember what he looked like too.”

He said he wouldn’t meddle, but what else could you call this?

Luo Binghe was not aware that this cousin of Liu Mingyan was the current likeliest candidate for succeeding as clan head, assuming neither of Liu Qishuang’s children left Cang Qiong to return to their family. So this visit was not just his own decision, but rather acting on behalf of the entire Liu clan.

However, even without knowing that, Luo Binghe didn’t make any protest. After all, this person was Liu Mingyan’s relative, and their temperament was somewhat similar. Before taking rash action, it was better to let him say his piece.

Liu Mingchuan appeared unperturbed by Luo Binghe’s silence. “I don’t know what you’re involved in, and I’m not going to ask. Everyone has their own path to walk,” he went on. “However, Mingyan has decided to support you, and we don’t give our loyalty lightly. That means your path will also be her path. Whatever you choose to do—”

The mildness slipped off his face and out of his voice, as he delivered the message he had come convey.
—Don’t go overboard.”

For someone who had fought through the hellscape that was the Endless Abyss and faced off with demons of every rank and faction, a sharp look from a human cultivator had no power to move the heart. But it didn’t really matter either way. After having said his piece, Liu Mingchuan only held that cold expression, like a half-drawn blade, for a moment before his face relaxed into his previous genial mien.

“That’s all. Please keep my words in mind, Young Master Luo,” he said, standing and moving to excuse himself.

“...Mm.” Belatedly, Luo Binghe made a sound of agreement. He made to see Liu Mingchuan out, but the other man waved him away, and the doors closed once more behind him, leaving Luo Binghe alone in his rooms.

He wasn’t shaken or disturbed or worried by the vague warning, of course. If it had been Liu Mingyan’s mother, there might have been at least some element of danger, but Liu Qishuang was still in seclusion, and Luo Binghe estimated that there was no one in the entire valley who could match him. Even if they were unhappy with him, even if they disapproved or wanted to fight, what could they do?

...What would Liu Mingyan do?

This was that again, the thing the two of them had talked about in this same place years ago — that having people who support you could be a double-edged sword. Their own lives, they could bet freely. But when there were others on the line, every choice had to be made with care.

But in the end, it wasn’t anything Luo Binghe chose that led to him being condemned and rejected. It was his blood.

There was a nameless agitation building in his chest and a throbbing behind his temples. The perfectly fine rooms suddenly felt cramped and suffocating, as Luo Binghe paced the length of them like a caged beast. He’d planned to remain as inconspicuous as possible, the fewer aware of his presence the better, but he needed... air. Something. Throwing the carved doors open, he headed out into the estate.

The slightly chilly evening air helped. Killing something would have helped even more — Luo
Binghe’s lips twitched as he realized just how demon-like his thoughts had become. He really didn’t know how to feel about that.

He wandered aimlessly, ducking aside whenever another presence approached, until that Liu clan member or servant passed by. With their red and gold robes, they flitted by like the warm lights of the lanterns that were being lit across the estate grounds. There had been robes like that in his rooms for him to change into, but Luo Binghe hadn’t touched them.

He chose black because it was the opposite of Cang Qiong’s pale uniforms. And in any case, he wasn’t this sort of fiery, passionate person. It wouldn’t have suited him anyway.

Even though Liu Mingyan was helping him, he needed to remember that this was just a temporary thing. She had a home and a family, a sect and her own master. She’d said it herself — choosing between the important things wasn’t possible. So it wasn’t as if she would choose—

“...Luo-shixiong?”

Luo Binghe turned — and stared in shock.

“You weren’t in your rooms, so I came looking for you,” Liu Mingyan explained. “I have an idea about what we can do... Luo-shixiong?”

“Y, Yes!” Luo Binghe sounded off, his back snapping straight on reflex.

He felt like a young disciple again, but he couldn’t help it. Liu Mingyan... was not wearing her veil. Of course she wasn’t, she was home, surrounded by relatives who had seen her grow up. What reason was there to keep wearing it, when she had already changed into simpler robes and even let down her hair?

But it was just...

She really was a beauty that could move the heavens.

“Yes. Yes, what is it?” he repeated, trying to gather his thoughts. His eyes continually slid away
from Liu Mingyan’s face, only to dart back. She really did look like her brother, mother and even cousin, just... more. There weren’t words to describe it. In fact, it seemed impossible to even process.

Liu Mingyan watched him fumble, her eyebrows slowly rising higher and higher. Finally, even her composure couldn’t endure. With stifled ‘pfft,’ she glanced away and tried to hide her laughter, her shoulders shaking.

Taken aback, Luo Binghe stared.

A stray chuckle escaped him too, and soon he was laughing along quietly. It had been a long time since he had laughed like that.

His head finally felt clear.

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In the last while, Shen Qingqiu had become very familiar with Cang Qiong’s wards. Mostly, he had become very, very familiar with slipping past them and approaching whichever peak from the back without being noticed — which was precisely what he did this time, landing stealthily in the forests behind Qiong Ding Peak.

With a sigh, he pulled out the message talisman from Yue Qingyuan and eyed it with annoyance.

If it wasn’t for this, he would have continued his pattern of avoiding the sect except for picking up his medicine and getting his meridians cleaned... by the sect leader. It wasn’t as effective as Liu Qingge’s treatment, but it was good enough and well worth not seeing Bai Zhan’s War God.

Not that Liu Qingge hadn’t done his best to intercept Shen Qingqiu even so. It was just that he fell for the fake beard trick every time, in the end.

It was fine. They were already more than halfway through to Luo Binghe’s return. And then... well, it would be for the best if there was some distance between them.

Those that supported a scum villain wouldn’t have a good end, even if their only fault was misplaced loyalty. Shen Qingqiu hadn’t really considered that when he schemed to pull Liu Qingge in as another defense against Luo Binghe’s eventual vengeance. He wanted to say he had assumed that his status as Liu Mingyan’s brother and thus Luo Binghe’s eventual brother-in-law would protect him, but the truth was that Shen Qingqiu just... hadn’t thought about it.

He hadn’t thought about a lot of things.

Things like... Liu Qingge’s feelings.

The nature of those feelings aside, it was undeniable that the two of them had become close. So when Shen Qingqiu carried through with his plan — or, alternatively, failed and was turned into a human stick... — Liu Qingge would not come out unconcerned, even if he did not get dragged into the events themselves. Even Shen Qingqiu would... miss him, at least once in a while, in his new life, and he would have the benefit of knowing they were both alright, if separated.
But it wasn’t like he could change his plan either. He wanted to live on — even as a root vegetable, if that’s what it took!

So, since separation was inevitable, freezing Liu Qingge out in preparation was the best choice.

Liu Qingge was being frustratingly persistent, but eventually, he’d get fed up, curse out Shen Qingqiu, and decide to have nothing more to do with him. They’d drift apart, and then... Maybe Liu Qingge would go back to disdaining him, the way he had treated the original goods. Maybe when the reputation smearing plot rolled around, he’d cross his arms and stand in the crowd of those condemning Shen Qingqiu.

The image was a little uncomfortable. Hopefully, Liu Qingge would at least spare some kinder words at Shen Qingqiu’s memorial.

It was for the best, in the end.

It really was. Now, if only Liu Qingge would stop being so stubborn and so patient, and get on with renouncing him...

Fortunately, Yue Qingyuan was not the meddling sort, or had at least been cowed into keeping his nose out of this by Shen Qingqiu’s uncharacteristically harsh glare and sharp words the one time the sect leader had tried to arrange for him and Liu Qingge to ‘coincidentally’ run into each other. When Shen Qingqiu snuck into his office this time, there was thankfully no sign of the Bai Zhan peak lord.

Yue Qingyuan greeted him with a smile like usual, politely making no comment about the way he had arrived.

“Thank you for coming, Shen-shidi,” he said instead.

“It’s a request from the sect leader. I can hardly refuse,” Shen Qingqiu replied neutrally. “There’s something you need my help with?”

Yue Qingyuan nodded, making a vague sound of acknowledgement. Normally, it wouldn’t have
been notable, but Shen Qingqiu’s paranoia was at an all time high, and he felt a sliver of suspicion, his eyes narrowing as he shot the sect leader a look.

“Why don’t I prepare us some tea?” Yue Qingyuan offered.

“No need,” Shen Qingqiu said, crossing his arms and putting on a cold, accusing expression. Stalling? His suspicions rose.

It didn’t take much for Yue Qingyuan to cave. The man had no capacity to go against Shen Qingqiu when his junior brother was determined to have his way. Shoulders slumping slightly, he gave up whatever game he had been playing and tried to placate instead. “Shidi, please don’t misunderstand. This is a genuine request that requires your knowledge.”

There was definitely a but. Shen Qingqiu waited, silent and unmoved.

“But... it came through the Duanmu family... and Liu Mingyan,” Yue Qingyuan admitted. He quickly held out a hand, whether to forestall Shen Qingqiu’s protests or to symbolically halt him from departing in a huff. “Please don’t be angry, this isn’t some trick. Liu-shizhi was just the one the Duanmu family contacted. It really doesn’t have anything to do with... well... Liu-shidi.”

He looked deeply uncomfortable bringing up the unexplained sudden discord between his two junior disciples. Shen Qingqiu studied him closely for several long moments, before finally conceding that it sounded legitimate.

Liu Qingge wouldn’t have thought of some underhanded trick, of course, but Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t have put it past Liu Mingyan or even Yue Qingyuan trying to help. Well, the sect leader was rather passive, really. But that Liu sister had stuck her nose in her brother’s business before, asking Shen Qingqiu to help with his engagement back then. If she was setting him up—

He’d run away. That was all, no need to get worked up. Didn’t he escape from Liu Qingge plenty of times before?

“Fine,” Shen Qingqiu sighed.

Yue Qingyuan smiled in relief, though there was an awkward slant to it. He hesitated, glancing at Shen Qingqiu several times, and it was obvious he wanted to say something else, most likely
precisely about the person Shen Qingqiu didn’t want to discuss. In the face of his junior disciple’s stony silence, he thought better of it in the end.

“Then, I’ll bring her here,” he said and stepped outside, leaving Shen Qingqiu alone in the study.

Just in case, he checked the windows as a possible escape route.

However, he didn’t move from his spot and, finally, the door opened again, admitting Yue Qingyuan and Liu Mingyan herself.

As Shen Qingqiu expected, there was something different now in the way she looked at him. Something sharp, assessing and even unexpectedly conflicted. It was not a good look, though he supposed it was still far short of the feelings she had doubtlessly harbored for the original goods by this point in the novel’s timeline. It didn’t even match up to the scorn he’d received from various corners based on the original’s reputation.

It was just surprising. He had gotten used to seeing her training with Luo Binghe, or visiting her brother, or lending him novels she had liked.

Catching herself, Liu Mingyan tore her gaze away and greeted him with precisely the expected degree of deference. “Many thanks to Shen-shibo for accepting the Duanmu family’s request,” she said. “Here are the details.”

She held out a letter, which he skimmed quickly. Reaching the end, he went back to confirm the key points, then folded it again. It really did seem legitimate.

“Then I’ll take my leave,” Liu Mingyan said, dipping her head respectfully.

“You’re not coming?” Shen Qingqiu asked in surprise.

“Unless Shen-shibo needs a guide to the Duanmu estate, I don’t believe there’s a reason to,” she said. Her tone was even and polite, but the way she didn’t look directly at him was obvious. “Yin-jie will meet you there. The request is from her.”
He might have been imagining the unspoken ‘otherwise I wouldn’t want to have anything to do with you.’ But probably not.

“Many thanks to Liu-shizhi,” Shen Qingqiu replied. He nearly added a faint smile and a teasing lilt out of habit — How many times had he needled Liu Qingge with politeness? — before squashing it down into cool detachment at the last moment.

The air in the room felt thick and stifling.

Right.

“Then I’ll be on my way,” he added in the silence, trying to beat a retreat without looking like he was beating a retreat.

He almost expected one of them to call him back, but neither spoke up and the door to the study shut behind him. Alone in the hallway, Shen Qingqiu let out a quiet breath.

It didn’t matter, really.

It was for the best.

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Before Liu Mingyan could depart, the sect leader held up a hand to stop her. “A moment, if you don’t mind,” he said. There was a faint frown on his usually gentle, patient face. “About this... do you know what happened? Between them?”

“...No. I’m not aware,” Liu Mingyan said honestly.

Among the mysteries of Shen Qingqiu’s behavior, that had unexpectedly gone down in priority. Given that it was her brother, it could have been any number of things, and she hadn’t seen the point in getting too involved. But in light of everything she had found out, she wondered...
Shen Qingqiu. What exactly was he thinking?

That was something many people were wondering, including the sect leader, whose frown only deepened as he nodded, accepting her answer and dismissing her.

Excusing herself, Liu Mingyan did not return to her Xian Shu Peak. Instead, she circled around — covertly, much like Shen Qingqiu himself, in fact — and headed to the forest behind Qing Jing, carefully avoiding being seen.

She had an excuse lined up, of course. There wasn’t anyone in Cang Qiong who didn’t know about Shen Qingqiu’s refusal to return Zheng Yang to Wan Jian, or about the sword mound he had chosen to erect instead. Opinions about this were wildly split — wasn’t it too much to mourn like this? Liu Mingyan herself had never quite known what to feel. No matter how many times she had seen that monument, it had never quite felt real and final. She had thought it was just her inability to accept her own failure, but it turned out to be liked this...

Regardless, it was useful now. No one would question her too much even if she was caught visiting her old training partner’s ‘grave,’ and... Seeing it, maybe it would help him.

As they had agreed, Luo Binghe was waiting for her at the sword mound.

His expression was unreadable as he stared at the writing on the sign. Liu Mingyan wondered if he could imagine the many times Shen Qingqiu had stood in the same place, a desolate air clinging to him. She wondered what Luo Binghe felt, knowing that, at the very least, his master had never forgotten him.

Finally, she reached out and gently laid a hand on his shoulder. “Come on,” she said quietly. “Let’s go.”

Shaking his head once as if to clear it, Luo Binghe followed her.

There was a narrow but clear path from the sword mound to the bamboo house, or rather, vice versa. In the first months after the Immortal Alliance Conference, Shen Qingqiu seemed to spend more time at the memorial than away from it. He had not been the only one to come — other Qing Jing Peak disciples, Liu Mingyan herself, even Liu Qingge had all stood in front of that sign at some point, thinking and trying to understand. Even when Shen Qingqiu stopped returning to the sect more than once a month, the path down remained well-worn.
Fortunately, there was no one at the bamboo house, and Liu Mingyan slipped inside unimpeded. She moved carefully, so as not to disturb anything about the furniture and belongings that Ming Fan and Ning Yingying dutifully kept in perfect order in their master’s absence.

“Liu-shimei,” Luo Binghe called out, lingering in the doorway, “is this... necessary? Shouldn’t we follow Shizun?”

“There’s no need to rush,” Liu Mingyan said. Her tone was a little absent as she looked around carefully, searching. “He’ll need to have things explained when he arrives, then they’ll travel to the location... It’s better if we wait a while before following.”

As for whether it was necessary — it was necessary to her, personally.

It didn’t seem to be anywhere in the main rooms, so she made her way toward the small side room. She supposed it would have made sense for him to leave it there. Behind her, Luo Binghe made a soft sound and, finally, followed her inside. His footsteps were uncertain and slow, as if he reconsidered every step.

The side room was just as well cared for, with that strange combination of being too neat to have been used recently and yet too carefully maintained to be called abandoned. The brushes were still neatly lined up on the small table, the robes and jade pendants all hung in their places. It was Liu Mingyan’s first time seeing where Luo Binghe had lived, in fact, and she paused in the doorway, taking it in and imagining his younger version in that space.

The tall, dark form of his present self stopped silently behind her, an unreadable atmosphere clinging to him.

“It’s exactly the same...” he murmured.

There was one thing that seemed a little out of place. A small box had been conspicuously placed on the writing desk. Liu Mingyan recognized it — this was the box Shen Qingqiu had tried to give her, two years ago. Making her way over, she picked it up and opened it.

Inside were two jade carvings. Just as she had expected... one was the pair to the tassel hanging from her Shui Se.
At the time, she hadn’t been able to imagine why he would want to return it to her. Why not bury it with Zheng Yang? She had felt too numb and dazed to even get angry. But now she wondered if it hadn’t been a sign of the things Shen Qingqiu had hidden. He had known that Luo Binghe had not been killed. Had he perhaps even believed that he might return one day, that she would need to give him this tassel once more?

There was no way to tell, so she didn’t say anything about these thoughts.

“My gift,” she said simply, holding out the box to Luo Binghe. “It’s for you.”

She didn’t recognize the other object inside, but she imagined that it must have also been his.

From Liu Mingyan’s perspective, there hadn’t been anything more to say. Whether he chose to wear it or not... that was out of her hands. She had simply wanted to give him something tangible, but her promise wouldn’t change regardless. So after handing him the box, she had turned to head back out. Neither of them were careless enough to get caught off guard by someone walking in, but lingering wasn’t a good idea all the same.

She didn’t see the way Luo Binghe’s entire body went stiff with shock when he opened the box and stared at the contents.

It wasn’t because of her gift, as much as he treasured it. Instead, his trembling fingers skimmed over the surface of the Guanyin amulet next to it. Why was this here...?

In this room, unchanged and carefully preserved, this one precious memento he had thought lost forever... What was the meaning of it? Why had his master done this, any of it?

Squeezing his eyes shut, Luo Binghe reached up to cover his face with one hand. It was a long time before he followed Liu Mingyan out, a pale, elegant tassel swaying from Xin Mo’s hilt.

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It had been a long while since Duanmu Yao had returned to her family’s main estate, and she savored the feeling of being back in her childhood home, purposefully slowing her steps as she walked along the familiar paths.

Despite all the drama and trouble she had caused, and even relinquishing her position as heir, everyone she encountered greeted her respectfully. A few of her closer cousins and aunts even stopped to chat, trading gossip and asking after her.

“Yes, I’ve been very well. She’s wonderful. I’m so happy,” Duanmu Yao found herself repeating with a smile. No matter how many times she said it, she didn’t get tired of it.

Third Aunt smiled and began to reply, only to freeze, staring at something over Duanmu Yao’s shoulder. When she tried to turn and see what it was, her aunt clamped a red-nailed hand tightly over her shoulder and steered her in the opposite direction.

“Hahaha, I say, why don’t we come by my courtyard!” she said, her voice high and forced. “I’ve got some lovely... er...”

Unexpectedly, she found herself tugging ineffectually, as if pushing against a stone pillar. Duanmu Yao had dug in her heels, and with her cultivation, there was nothing that could be done to move her if she didn’t want to be moved. Her smile was bright as she raised her eyebrows at her aunt in amusement. As the older woman coughed awkwardly, Duanmu Yao glanced back over her shoulder.

Two people were making their way down a nearby path.

One of them was her sister, and Duanmu Yao began to smile, about to call out to her.

The other was Shen Qingqiu.
She paused, her eyebrows climbing. What was a Peak Lord of Cang Qiong doing at their family estate? ...Was Liu Qingge with him? Without thinking, she glanced around in search of his familiar figure. What was she supposed to do in this situation? ...Apologize?

Duanmu Yao’s eyebrow twitched.

This was the man who had seduced her fiance, but on the other hand, it wasn’t as if Liu Qingge had ever been hers to begin with — or at all unwilling. She had basically gone and nearly attacked Shen Qingqiu at his own sect... it was a bit embarrassing in retrospect.

She wasn’t a child or even a teenager. It had been years. At first, she had put every effort into avoiding Liu Qingge and his... cultivation partner, but it had been a long while since she had even thought about them. It would be good to settle things.

But when Duanmu Yao turned to head over to her sister and their guest, her aunt grabbed her arm and pulled her back. “Yao’er, it’s not worth it,” the older woman pleaded — misunderstanding her intent. “Don’t waste your time on those two. Did you know, they had a falling out? Hmph, that Liu Qingge must be regretting it now, letting you go!”

Duanmu Yao doubted it. Liu Qingge hadn’t cared about her to start with.

Still. ‘They had a falling out?’ she thought, glancing again at Shen Qingqiu’s figure as he continued down the path with her sister, before vanishing from sight.

“Auntie,” she said, turning to her third aunt with a smile, “tell me about it?”

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“This way, Master Liu,” the Duanmu family servant gestured into a lavish tea room — doubtlessly the fanciest one in the entire tea house. That alone would have been a give away, if Liu Qingge hadn’t already guessed who had ordered the servant to bring him over.

He wasn’t sure what the point of the secrecy was. Did Duanmu Yao think he’d run instead of coming if he knew it was her?
That was simply insulting. When had he ever run from anything?

The one running wasn’t him!

As had been happening so often in the last while, thoughts of that matter intruded suddenly, making Liu Qingge scowl furiously. Catching a glimpse of his face before he strode into the tea room, the Duanmu family’s servant gulped and glanced worriedly inside.

Duanmu Yao, the eldest young miss and former heir of their family, was lounging at the table, sipping a light, fragrant tea. Her eyebrows rose as she caught sight of Liu Qingge’s expression. A few years prior, she would have flinched and teared up, but she could see that he wasn’t even looking at her. Her lips quirked up wryly — when had he ever looked at her? This kind of emotion, she had only ever seen him display toward one person.

“You really did have a fight,” she judged. “And a bad one, too.”

Liu Qingge glared down at her before cropping onto the opposite seat. There was a steaming cup of tea waiting for him, and he downed it in one gulp, heedless of the heat. It was a miracle the cup didn’t crack when he slammed it back down onto the table.

“We didn’t fight,” he ground out.

If they fought, he’d have some idea what to do. But no, Shen Qingqiu had just decided he would run away and refuse to even acknowledge Liu Qingge’s presence when they were forced into contact. And he kept running! All because— because—

The wood of the tabletop creaked as Liu Qingge pressed his fist against him, tightly clenched.

Duanmu Yao propped her head up with one hand and watched him with the expression of someone enjoying a good show. “You really are completely hopeless,” she mused.

Turning his glare on her, Liu Qingge faltered as he finally realized who he was talking to and just what their history was. The frustration slid off his face, leaving behind a blank mask that nonetheless showed a hint of apprehension. They stared at each other in silence, which grew increasingly tense and awkward.
What was he supposed to say? For that matter, why had Duanmu Yao requested to meet him?

Latching on to that, Liu Qingge demanded, “What do you want?”

His voice came out sharper than he had intended, and he cringed inwardly. This precise tone and question had sent Duanmu Yao crying at least once in the past — she had just wanted to talk to him, but the person she’d loved instead treated her like an annoyance. Liu Qingge could feel himself breaking out in cold sweat from dread.

But Duanmu Yao only raised her eyebrows. “Completely hopeless,” she repeated. Closing her eyes, she sighed. “I was quite lucky not to end up with you.”

Liu Qingge’s lips thinned. However, against her, he couldn’t just storm off either, even if he was being mocked. It had been years since Duanmu Yao had been willing to even see him, and he still felt that he owed her at least a little. If ridiculing him helped, it was something he could endure.

Crossing his arms and straightening his spine, he waited.

Unexpectedly, Duanmu Yao smiled.

“Your partner is helping Yin’er with something. He’ll be in hanging around in one of our clan’s sealed fields for a while,” she said. “So if you use the key when you go it, he won’t be able to run off and avoid you. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

No. He didn’t. Liu Qingge’s blank expression said that very clearly.

“I’m helping you make up,” Duanmu Yao explained. “Go and beg forgiveness. Maybe bring a good present too.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” Liu Qingge protested. ...That was not the main point here. Instead of following that train of thought, he shook his head. “Why are you helping me? You were...”
“You think I’m trying to trick you? Break you up?” she guessed. More than offended, she looked amused by the idea. “Don’t worry, I’m not interested in you anymore. You’ve long since been replaced in my heart, by someone far better.”

Although her tone wasn’t particularly harsh, this was the first time Liu Qingge had heard Duanmu Yao speak like this, carelessly and without worrying about his reaction. Based on what their families had sometimes said, he had the general impression that this was her real personality, but seeing it still left him a little uncertain how to proceed.

Growing tired of his silence, Duanmu Yao sighed again and waved her hand.

“Just take it as my apology for all the fuss I caused before,” she said. “And... I think love is something to fight for. It’s just too pitiful for it to slip away because you hesitate and doubt. Even if it didn’t work out, I still... care about you a lot, Liu-gege.”

Love? “It’s not—” Liu Qingge started to say.

‘This person is deeply in love with you!’

He cut himself off, his expression twitching.

It wasn’t that he believed a demon, of course not. But he was not one to run, including from himself. He had learned what a foolish thing that was. So he could only admit.

...It... was probably that.

“No...?” Duanmu Yao repeated. “Not my business? I suppose so. It’s just this time. Like I said, take it as my apology.”

Liu Qingge shook his head. Even like this, they easily ended up misunderstanding each other. At least now he knew not to let it go on. “You don’t have anything to apologize for,” he said firmly. It was the other way around. “You... you found someone?”

Duanmu Yao gave a sharp, startled laugh. “Liu-gege, are you worried about me?” she wondered.
“You are!” And she began to laugh in earnest.

She laughed for a long time, while Liu Qingge endured silently.

This time, she didn’t make any remarks about how it was too late to start caring. It had, after all, been years, and her bitterness had faded. From the start, Duanmu Yao had been a person who moved forward and passionately gave her everything. After being rejected so firmly, venting her anger, and crying out her heart, naturally she began to move on.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry,” she said, waving her hand. Her smile deepened, her eyes shining. “I did find someone. I’ll have you know I didn’t close off my heart and give up on love! So when she pursued me, I gave her a chance. She had an entire garden of my favorite flowers planted, so we could stroll through it romantically, so... Well. How could I not be moved?”

Yes, that was indeed a steep improvement from having Liu Qingge as a fiance. Needless to say, he didn’t even know Duanmu Yao’s favorites, much less in terms of things like flowers.

...And yet, he knew that Shen Qingqiu’s favorite tea was huangshan maofeng and his favorite novel was Thrice Ascended Immortal’s Love. He liked sunny days, but only from the shade, and he got moody when it rained. Although he enjoyed sweeping them dramatically, he didn’t actually like wide sleeves. He didn’t have a favorite flower, but he could name the properties of anything you brought him, though not their symbolic meaning.

...It really was that, Liu Qingge admitted to himself.

‘Deeply in love.’

He stood abruptly, but instead of walking away, he faced Duanmu Yao and cupped his hands respectfully. “Thank you,” he said with all seriousness. He didn’t expect a response and headed toward the door, only to pause and add, “…Congratulations.”

Duanmu Yao stared after him for a long while, before picking up her now cold tea and taking a sip. She let out a gusty sigh that turned into an amused chuckle. “Good luck, Liu-gege,” she murmured, shaking her head.

He was probably going to need it.
Although the Duanmu family had a unique sword style that they took pride in, what they were ultimately most famous for was their sealing arrays. Because of this, the Duanmu family took on a self-imposed duty to oversee and maintain the seals around many ancient artifacts and structures, after their original masters or guardians vanished into the mists of time.

For a great number of those places and things, the Duanmu family was no longer aware of why they had been sealed or even what they were, as such. The timescale of cultivation worlds was always kind of ridiculous, after all, and ‘their entire line vanished without a trace’ was entirely too common. Thus, trying to figure out the nature and origins of their properties, so to say, was a task that the family heir would undertake as part of their training.

Duanmu Yao, who had treated her position as somewhat secondary, had never really made headway in this before stepping down to marry out. However, her younger sister had approached it with the sharp focus that she afforded all her duties. The gap between her timid personality and her competence in taking action had been something of a charm point in her character.

Incidentally, it was precisely one of these sealed things that had brought her into Proud Immortal Demon Way to begin with.

However, not the same one she asked Liu Mingyan to contact Shen Qingqiu about. This was an entirely different recycled plot.

“...Yes, I can read this script,” Shen Qingqiu said, leaning back from the wall carvings he had been studying.

He had no idea why he could. Was it something left over from the original goods? Was it some bonus from being a transmigrator? But regardless of the cause, it seemed his reputation as the foremost scholar of Cang Qiong would be upheld this day.

Duanmu Yin, who had been standing nearby with a soldier’s rigid posture, nodded sharply in acknowledgement. “Then, we will request Master Shen to help investigate this tower,” she said. “The reimbursement will be as discussed.”

Shen Qingqiu’s lips twitched slightly, but he didn’t disagree. “I’ll need paper and writing
supplies,” he said instead.

“They’ll be sent over,” Duanmu Yin promised. “Our thanks to Master Shen.” Cupping her hands, she bowed formally.

He waved her off, pretending to turn his attention back to the carvings along the walls. Unfortunately for her, she underestimated the range of his senses. He could still hear her footsteps when they came to a stop just out of sight, and Duanmu Yin gave a gusty sigh of relief, along with a quiet squeak. Then, after probably panicking for a while without moving, she took off at a quick run.

When her footsteps faded into silence, he began to examine the carvings in earnest.

The thing Duanmu Yin wanted him to examine was a nine story pagoda. At first, Shen Qingqiu hadn’t recognized it, but after looking at the layout, he began to harbor a certain suspicion.

In this world, there was definitely something like a “God of Recycling Plot Lines.”

Even though the setting had come from Proud Immortal Demon Way, it was obviously much larger — an entire world full of people and places and things which had never been described or even hinted at in the novel. However, Shen Qingqiu had found that, with exceptional regularity, the things that had been described would absolutely make an appearance, even if the specific circumstances around them in the book had been rendered obsolete.

It was something more than coincidence, although it couldn’t quite be called fate either. But in some way, monsters and characters and even general events had a way of converging back onto the original plot.

This was useful, really. It meant that Shen Yuan’s limited knowledge would generally just happen to cover whatever he might run into.

It was also by turns annoying and somewhat unsettling.

There hadn’t been that many pagodas mentioned in Proud Immortal Demon Way. So he could take a stab and guess...
This was the very building used in a certain ritual, where four great ancient beasts were brought together to merge their power into something that would supposedly match even Luo Binghe himself. One of those beasts was, incidentally, the phoenix Zixie that Duanmu Yin had been sent to investigate years ago.

It had indeed been mentioned as a nine story pagoda — because Luo Binghe had to fight his way through every level... and Airplane Toward the Sky had lost track and ended up having him go through ten.... Also mentioned had been the detailed carvings across the walls, floor, ceiling and pillars, which contained the arrays of the ritual, thankfully currently inactive. Shen Qingqiu could even read the descriptions of the four beasts that needed to be used.

How had the forgettable — and forgotten — minor villain of the arc gotten control of this pagoda from the Duanmu family? Had that been before or after Duanmu Yin joined the harem?

She would have been heir even longer in the novel, so had she investigated this pagoda in the original timeline too? Obviously, she wouldn’t have approached the original goods Shen Qingqiu about it, but he was hardly the only scholarly expert. Had the report put together kicked off that forgotten minor villain’s plans? Would the report Shen Qingqiu planned to put together serve the same purpose in this timeline?

In the end, he was also just another gear in the great machine of the plot.

“Tch,” he couldn’t help irritably clicking his tongue.

Sitting back on his heels, he folded his arms and tried to clear his thoughts.

It didn’t matter, the plot and story arcs after Luo Binghe’s return would have nothing to do with him. Shen Qingqiu’s role would end, and he would begin a new life free of the System, far away from the protagonist, Cang Qiong, all of this...

Just two more years. And then—

Shen Qingqiu let out a sharp breath, his brow furrowing.
He didn’t understand why, but there was an overpowering sense of discontent pressing down on his chest.

Occupied with his thoughts, it took him a moment to register the approaching footsteps — and why there was something strange about them. It was much too fast for Duanmu Yin to have returned with a servant and supplies, but she hadn’t just turned back either, since there was clearly a second person.

Turning toward the corner where they would appear, Shen Qingqiu began to say, “Miss Duanmu, did something—”

The words died in his mouth.

A man and a woman stepped into view and halted, their eyes fixed on him. The woman was not Duanmu Yin. It was Liu Mingyan.

And the man...

‘Binghe,’ Shen Qingqiu mouthed soundlessly, his mind going blank from shock.

Luo Binghe regarded him with an unreadable expression, much changed from the child of three years ago and yet unmistakable. “Shizun,” he said slowly. “It’s been a long time.”

~.~.~
Chapter 24: It’s Guilt

[Returning from reduced function standby mode. Reactivating full system operations. Activation password—]

Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu stood across from each other in silence. Both of them wore unreadable expression, giving away nothing of what they might have felt at this reunion.

Inside Shen Qingqiu’s head, there was nothing but confusion and panic. Even the System’s notifications were little more than accursed white noise. Why was Luo Binghe here? It had been only a little over half the intended time! And even then, confronting his master like this... what kind of plot twist was this? Was it an illusion? A shapeshifter? A dream—?

There was nowhere to run and no one to help him. All he could do was stand in place, frozen with indecision and fear.

...Ah, he thought strangely, Binghe was so tall now. Tall and devastatingly handsome, and with all the charisma of a man who could overturn three realms.

Finally, Luo Binghe spoke up. “Liu-shimei,” he said without looking away, “could you stand guard, so we’re not interrupted?”

Liu Mingyan turned to glance at him, her brow furrowing slightly. She understood the real meaning of his request — to leave him and Shen Qingqiu alone, along with making sure no one tried to stop... whatever it was Luo Binghe had planned. Shen Qingqiu’s hands clenched, hidden by his sleeves.

After a long moment, Liu Mingyan nodded, but she still lingered further, trying to find the right words to say. “Shixiong... whatever you choose, I’ll support you,” she said slowly. “But, don’t do something you’ll regret.”

Something flickered across Luo Binghe’s face, as she hurried away, her footsteps fading into silence, but it was gone before Shen Qingqiu could even try to read it.
Instead, his eyes were drawn now to the tassel hanging from Xin Mo’s hilt.

It was, without a doubt, the paired tassel from Liu Mingyan. Shen Qingqiu had removed it from the broken Zheng Yang himself. Liu Mingyan had refused to take it back — naturally, since she didn’t know that she would need to give it to Luo Binghe again — but it seemed that these two had retrieved it somehow.

...It seemed they had met up somehow.

Given this timing... had Luo Binghe gone to Liu Mingyan immediately after returning to the human realm. This entire setup, including going through Duanmu Yin, had probably been her idea. This kind of straightforward confrontation was worthy of the Liu clan, but with just enough detail to come from the somewhat meddlesome, somewhat circumspect Liu Mingyan.

Even that look in Yue Qingyuan’s study... it hadn’t been about Liu Qingge. Of course. It had been about Luo Binghe.

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes for a moment.

Unexpectedly, he felt a cool flash of relief. Not for himself, naturally, but for Luo Binghe. Unlike the various demon subordinates he had rounded up in that realm, including even the obsessive and unpredictable Sha Hualing, Liu Mingyan was a dependable ally who would always look out for his best interests. And like this, she must have surely gained at least a small part of his heart that she could protect from being completely blackened.

When he opened his eyes again, Luo Binghe hadn’t made any movement. Pulling out his fan, Shen Qingqiu flipped it open and tried to regain some measure of calm as he held it up to shield his expression.

“Shizun, you haven’t changed at all,” Luo Binghe spoke finally. It was hard to say what emotion colored his tone.

Shen Qingqiu inclined his head in acknowledgement. He was an immortal, how much would he change in just three years? “On the other hand, Luo Binghe is much changed,” he noted. “You look... well.” Internally, he winced as his voice caught.
“Do I?” Luo Binghe wondered, with a strange inflection.

...What was with this attitude?

Going by his understanding of the vengeful, post-Abyss protagonist, wouldn’t Luo Binghe approach with a beatific smile and a warm, honeyed tone? He was a master of acting, and enjoyed sliding a knife between the ribs while speaking softly and gently. And if he didn’t use that angle, then Bing-ge had always gone for the most tyrannical, domineering method instead — pure, overwhelming power.

So what was this tense, surly look and tone? Neither playing with his enemy nor destroying them...

Was there something else Luo Binghe wanted?

 Unsure how to answer the question, Shen Qingqiu changed the subject. “Given that she didn’t insist on storming Qing Jing Peak directly, you told Liu Mingyan about your bloodline?” he guessed.

“...Yes,” Luo Binghe replied, his eyes narrowing slightly. “And it seems even a Heavenly Demon is not intolerable to her.”

Again, this weird tone... “That’s good,” Shen Qingqiu said neutrally.

“Is it?” Luo Binghe wondered. “Shizun keeps saying ‘well’ and ‘good’ — I wouldn’t have expected you to use words like that toward a demon’s wellbeing.”

He took a step forward. His eyes and the demon mark on his forehead were beginning to glow an ominous, eerie red, and his expression was dark. Instinctively, Shen Qingqiu took a step back. As soon as he did, he scolded himself mentally. Because it was embarrassing, to be flinching away like a helpless maiden menaced by a bandit — but mostly because Luo Binghe’s expression twisted, turning ugly.

“So it’s like that after all,” he spat, gritting his teeth. “Shizun... you’re such a hypocrite! Why did you say that I shouldn’t care about someone’s race? Why did you say there is no one who is
intolerable by both heaven and earth? Just to turn around and reject me!”

With every furious proclamation, he advanced. Every time he advanced, Shen Qingqiu took a step back. But those steps were instinctive and small. The originally fairly wide distance between them, Luo Binghe closed quickly.

“Just because of half my blood, you would even cut the bond between us as master and disciple! It’s not impossible to accept! So why couldn’t you?!” he demanded, his voice rising and rising until it reverberated throughout the pagoda. He sounded like a furious deity come to judge Shen Qingqiu for his sins.

Maybe he was. Luo Binghe was, after all, the closest to a deity in this world — immortal, all powerful, undefeatable.

But what was Shen Qingqiu supposed to say? ‘I had to do it because your original, actual scumbag master did it?’ Obviously, that was impossible. ‘It was so you could gain ultimate power?’ What, was he expecting to be thanked? Also impossible!

So what remained? Doubling down on his original nonsense about Heavenly Demons being unforgivable?

Why had he even said that?

Stupid!!

Now, there was no good answer. There wasn’t even a so-so answer. All Shen Qingqiu could do was remain silent, looking up at Luo Binghe’s dark, angry face.

“So you won’t say anything? Is it because you won’t speak to a demon like me?” he spat. Something in his gaze hardened, freezing over. “She was wrong. All of that... it wasn’t for me. It was for your pure, human disciple!”

Shen Qingqiu stumbled back again. There was nowhere to run in this place, and Luo Binghe would have caught up in any case. Fighting was even more pointless. No one was coming. Even his backup plan was far from ready. This was—
A hand clutched the front of his robes and hauled him back, holding him in place.

Shen Qingqiu’s fan cluttered to the ground as he reached up to grab pointlessly at the arm slowly lifting him up until his feet barely touched the floor. Dark and red demonic energy gathered in Luo Binghe’s other hand as he drew it back. But he didn’t strike. The edge of fury drained away as he looked at Shen Qingqiu, hanging expressionless in his grip.

“Do you regret it?” he asked. “Even a little?”

...yes. Of course he did! Who wouldn’t?!

But even so—

“Does it make a difference, if I do or if I don’t?” Shen Qingqiu said shortly, lifting his chin and meeting Luo Binghe’s eyes.

Luo Binghe’s brow furrowed, but not in anger. It was clear that Shen Qingqiu’s answer made no sense to him, and for the first time, Shen Qingqiu thought that Luo Binghe couldn’t understand him any more than he could understand this version of his disciple.

Somehow, that realization was more painful than the threats and the fear. The two of them had lived side by side for three years, but now they were separated by an immeasurable distance.

...But was it a limb-ripping-off distance?

This strange Luo Binghe who didn’t pretend to smile but also didn’t strike, Shen Qingqiu wasn’t sure how to even begin addressing.

At the very least, giving an answer — even a poor, incomprehensible one — seemed to have been better than nothing. Luo Binghe’s stance eased slightly and the demonic energy faded from his grasp. Even so, he didn’t release Shen Qingqiu. If anything, the grip on his robes tightened.
“Shizun... what am I to you?” he asked.

The future ruler of three realms?

Hopefully not his murderer?

His disciple?

...As if he had the right to still say that.

And yet, what was he supposed to say, then? What kind of answer was he looking for? This version of the protagonist, Shen Qingqiu just couldn’t understand at all.

Looking at the man who held him in place, Shen Qingqiu wondered, “Luo Binghe, what exactly do you want?”

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By the time he approached the Nine Heavens Divine Pagoda, Liu Qingge was already aware that something was wrong.

Duanmu Yin had been absent, out with Shen Qingqiu in fact, but it had taken the servants far too long to find out where they had gone. Unlike her free-spirited, fond of improvising sister, Duanmu Yin took her duties extremely seriously and had a meticulous approach. Explaining nothing and leaving no clear record of her actions, that wasn’t like her in the least.

But more than anything, it was because his instincts were screaming at him.

And they were right as always. Seeing his sister standing guard at the entrance of the pagoda, Liu Qingge’s expression grew colder.
Liu Mingyan watched him land in front of her with a rare uneasy look and a tense stance. Her hand drifted to her sword’s hilt — and that was enough to set Liu Qingge’s teeth on edge. Their clan did not go against each other easily. For her to even consider it...

“Mingyan,” he called out sharply, “what is this?”

“I won’t move,” she shot back flatly. “Brother, please don’t interfere.”

“Interfere with what?” Liu Qingge demanded.

If it had been anyone else, he wouldn’t have bothered continuing to ask. He would have just attacked and forced his way in, and sorted it out afterwards. There was a growing sense of urgency at the back of his mind, making him feel like he was running out of time — time to reach Shen Qingqiu and whatever mess he had walked into. By the look on his sister’s face, it couldn’t be anything benign.

But that was just it. Why would his sister be involved?

“With finding out the truth,” Liu Mingyan said firmly. What could she be, except firm, when she was already drawing her sword at him? “With righting a wrong.”

“What wrong?” Liu Qingge pressed.

His sister didn’t answer, only holding Shui Se steady. It didn’t waver, but her stance was too stiff. She didn’t feel as sure or as confident as she was trying to project.

At least she probably wasn’t mind controlled — she wouldn’t have any doubts then.

But she wasn’t getting out of the way either.

“Mingyan!” he snapped. “Do you think you can stop me? Move!”

Her expression twitched slightly. “...No. But— I have to... I have to do everything I can!” She
glared, her voice cracking. “Otherwise, what’s the point?!”

That, more than anything else, took Liu Qingge aback and made him hesitate. Mingyan was glaring at him with red-rimmed eyes, more upset than he could remember seeing her in years. As someone from a cultivator clan, she had learned to moderate her emotions from childhood, so even when she had grieved for that boy, she had maintained a certain calm and self-control — which was conspicuously breaking now.

This kind of reaction wasn’t something that could come from a single shock. It had to have been building for a long time. And yet, hadn’t she been fine not too long ago? What could he have possibly missed, to cause this?

Liu Qingge’s hands twitched helplessly, wanting to grip Cheng Luan’s hilt or strike out but all too aware that it wouldn’t help at all.

“What? Have to what?” he blurted out, feeling unexpectedly pressured, almost to the point of wanting to back away. He didn’t retreat, of course. He never did.

“I have to help him,” Liu Mingyan said fervently, forcefully. “Even if it’s against you! You... you’re strong, so you’ll be alright. You and our clan... It didn’t matter if I didn’t do anything. You never needed me. But it’s different for him... I don’t want it to be like before! I promised I’d protect him, but I couldn’t do anything at all when he needed help! Just saying it meaningless! That’s why, this time, I’ll do whatever it takes!”

Help him? Help who?

...His little sister had been taken in by some man.

Which man? He’d eviscerate him!

Given Liu Mingyan’s dedication to cultivation and the sword, and her cool, capable nature, this kind of possibility had never occurred to him before. Wasn’t this the kind of thing that might happen to a passionate woman like Duanmu Yao instead? Could that really be the reason—

Liu Qingge’s flustered indignation washed away abruptly as he felt it — a surge of powerful demonic energy from inside the pagoda.
His sister gave no reaction, even though she certainly sensed it as well. And that meant she knew. She knew that she was lending support to a demon. A demon that was most likely alone with Shen Qingqiu for reasons unknown but certainly malicious.

Without a further word, he attacked, Cheng Luan sliding out of its sheath in the same single, smooth motion.

The difference in their cultivation levels was not small, but Liu Mingyan had the advantage of knowing his fighting style well and being on the defensive. With no leeway, she managed to parry Cheng Luan, the two swords shining and ringing as they slid against each other.

“You’ve been deceived by a demon,” Liu Qingge judged as he pressed down on his sister. It was nearly enough to knock her off her feet, but, gritting her teeth and flaring her qi, she endured.

“I haven’t!”

“You have!” he repeated firmly. Exerting just a little more effort, he sent her stumbling back. “Or else you wouldn’t think I’ll stop what you’re doing!”

‘Finding out the truth,’ ‘righting a wrong,’ naturally he wouldn’t have anything against those. And Liu Mingyan had certainly not feared to ask for Duanmu Yin’s help. So to feel she had to stand against her brother...

Liu Mingyan threw herself aside just in time to avoid his next strike — he had slowed so as not to injury her too seriously, giving her enough of a handicap. But even so, a thin cut appeared across the sleeve of her robes and the white cloth began to dye red.

Although he had prepared himself for it and judged this to be a necessary measure, Liu Qingge’s hand clenched around the hilt of his sword.

“Brother, please just believe that it’s important,” Liu Mingyan calmed enough to change her approach, pleading. “It’s something that they have to resolve between them. Barging in now, we’d only get in the way.”
“And what does a demon have to resolve with Shen Qingqiu?”

“It’s Luo Binghe!” Liu Mingyan finally revealed.

Whatever Liu Qingge had expected, it hadn’t been that. For an instance, he froze.

Then, a hot, molten fury burned through him.

A demon had lied to his sister, playing on her grief to make her believe her friend had returned. That same cowardly, evil thing was doubtlessly playing on the same feelings in Shen Qingqiu. Would he even be able to fight back against something that would appear to him as his precious disciple?

It didn’t matter if Liu Mingyan was convinced. Luo Binghe was long since dead, and demons had insidious ways. Hadn’t Liu Qingge himself been completely overcome by that poison woman’s demonic artifact? At worst, your senses, your logic, and even your memories couldn’t be trusted.

All those years of sorrow and helpless suffering...

Liu Qingge couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Mingyan,” he said. “Endure this.”

He could see that his sister understood what the subtle change in his stance meant. She raised Shui Se and darted to the side, but they both knew it wouldn’t be enough now that he was no longer willing to be stalled. It was good that he had trained his peak’s disciples so much — he knew how to those weaker than him, to injure without crippling.

His sister’s body was thrown backwards, slamming into one of gate’s pillars. She coughed up a mouthful of blood that dripped out from under her veil, and fell to the ground, her limbs twisting without any of her usual grace. Shui Se flipped through the air, vibrating, before planting tip first just out of reach.

It wasn’t a serious injury, for a cultivator. Liu Qingge had done much worse to his disciples in the
past. She would doubtlessly be back on her feet within a few moments. Already, Liu Mingyan was struggling to rise.

But Liu Qingge’s face had paled with fury and loathing, his grip on Cheng Luan painfully tight. Being forced to do this — he would pay it all back a thousand fold to thing wearing that boy’s face!

Rage pounding through his veins, and blood pounding in his ears, he raced into the pagoda.

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Chapter Notes

Since like three separate people cried about not being able to endure a cliffhanger,
bonus update

Notes: Because it needed to run the secret route for SQQ, the System didn’t fully hibernate while
LBH was away. Instead, it just shut down most functions to save power. And because of that, it
sadly couldn’t upgrade either. No multiple choice answers for SQQ :(

~.~.~

Chapter 25: It’s Guilt II

‘What do you really want?’

This was the first time Luo Binghe had been asked directly.

The demons all assumed and rushed to win his favor by presenting him with whatever they thought
he desired. Liu Mingyan’s cousin simply warned him, disinterested in the details. And Liu
Mingyan herself...

She wondered about it, he could tell. She was always watching him as she presented him with what
she thought he might need — reassurance and support, physical proof of her promise, knowledge
that his master had not been unaffected, a way to get answers. Always, she watched and waited to
see if it would help.

But even if no one else asked, Luo Binghe had been asking himself that same thing.

What did he want? What did he need?

What would make this raw, gaping hole in his chest stop hurting?
Why had he really come to confront Shen Qingqiu?

He didn’t know. Luo Binghe had been wondering and wondering, but even still he didn’t know the answer. He had thought that perhaps seeing his master again, speaking with him, would make something clear, but there was still no answer, no matter how much he pressed. His heart was still the same jumbled mess.

Having both asked questions and received no answers, Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu stared at each other with no way to advance. Even the low thrum of anger in Luo Binghe’s mind had faded to the familiar undercurrent of frustration that never quite went away.

This person, hanging in his grip, was never honest with him. Even back when Luo Binghe had tried to confront him about his feelings for Liu Qingge, Shen Qingqiu had refused to acknowledge them the entire time. So why would he be honest now?

Fine then, Luo Binghe thought suddenly. If he didn’t want to talk, he would just have to listen. This disciple had plenty to say.

...But before he could say anything at all, Shen Qingqiu’s eyes widened, focused on something over his shoulder, and he twisted in Luo Binghe’s grip. Until then, he had remained almost entirely passive, so Luo Binghe was taken off guard when he was suddenly shoved away, and his master’s robes slipped out of his grip.

They stumbled apart just in time, as a figure like a meteor crashed down between them.

It was Liu Qingge.

Luo Binghe reacted on instinct, parrying the Bai Zhan peak lord’s next strike with his bare hand. Cheng Luan flashed in a continuous stream of blows, making Luo Binghe take a step back even as his mind whirled.

Did she—

He cut off the thought before it fully formed. It wasn’t an ambush. Nothing about this setup made
sense as a trap. They had just miscalculated something, or luck hadn’t been on their side.

There was no reason to feel betrayed. Liu Mingyan had told him herself — there were choices that couldn’t be made. She couldn’t choose him over her brother, but that didn’t mean she chose her brother over him.

Shen Qingqiu had at first looked at Liu Qingge with relief. Naturally — he had been rescued. But as he watched their furious exchange of blows, his expression furrowed with unease and worry. Not for Liu Qingge, who remained firmly on the offensive, but precisely because Liu Qingge was attacking with the full intent to kill.

“Liu-shidi, wait! That’s enough!” he finally called out, as one of the spectral swords that flashed through the air managed to pass Luo Binghe’s guard and draw blood.

Even at the Endless Abyss, Shen Qingqiu at the very least hadn’t had the heart to kill his disciple.

Remembering that, and the uncertain, complicated feeling that thought brought, Luo Binghe took another hit. It didn’t matter, with his level of healing, but the sight of his blood agitated Shen Qingqiu further. Gathering himself, his master rushed in to physically stop his fellow peak lord.

“Liu-shidi! Enough!” Shen Qingqiu repeated, pulling on Liu Qingge’s arm stopping him in his tracks. “Let’s use this chance to escape!”

Liu Qingge did not allow himself to be pulled toward the exit, planting his feet and remaining immobile. But, unexpectedly, his hand clamped over Shen Qingqiu’s and his other arm went around his waist, pulling him closer. Yet at the same time, his attack continued — even without his hands to guide it, Cheng Luan hovered up, its tip gleaming as it pointed toward the enemy. His sharp, angry gaze didn’t waver from Luo Binghe as he bit out one word at a time.

“Escape? And let this thing continue deceiving you and Mingyan?” he snarled. “I won’t allow it!”

Cheng Luan flashed out, striking again and again. But its offensive power was naturally weakened when wielded like this, giving Luo Binghe the breathing room to regain his footing — and his composure.

The accusation was no surprise, and Luo Binghe’s attention was instead on Shen Qingqiu’s
reaction. Casually batting aside Cheng Luan, he watched.

Seeing the tide of battle begin to turn, Liu Qingge gritted his teeth and raised one hand in a seal. But before he could form his attack, Shen Qingqiu grabbed his hand. “Stop! Liu-shidi, you’ve misunderstood! That really is Luo Binghe!”

“Your disciple is dead! You saw it yourself!” Liu Qingge shouted.

He winced as his words echoed through the pagoda. It seemed even Bai Zhan’s War God had belatedly learned something about other people’s feelings.

Shen Qingqiu froze, staring at him, but Luo Binghe could tell that it wasn’t from — just? — pain. Something conflicted flashed in his eyes. Turning away, Liu Qingge had resumed his attack, an array of spirit blades forming and shooting toward Luo Binghe. That, finally, decided things for Shen Qingqiu.

“I didn’t!” he blurted. “I didn’t see it! That was a lie!”

It was too late to stop the attack, but Luo Binghe deflected the spectral swords easily. Although Liu Qingge had faltered in surprise, he didn’t take the opening, still watching.

“Liu-shidi, stop fighting him, that’s really Binghe!” Shen Qingqiu insisted. “Do you think your sister wouldn’t have checked? Liu Mingyan is smart and steady, she wouldn’t be fooled so easily!”

Liu Qingge’s lips thinned, and he shook his head. “Both of you care too much,” he declared, his resolve firming again. “That’s clearly a demon! And if he was your disciple, why would he not come to Cang Qiong? Why would he hide his survival? Why would he threaten you like that?”

There was no point in trying to hide his nature from Liu Qingge at this point. Straightening from his stance, Luo Binghe smiled mirthlessly. “Yes, Shizun,” he called out, “why would I do those things?”

‘Let’s see how you answer,’ he thought.
Not that he had any doubts about the outcome — Liu Qingge was a righteous cultivator who despised demons. He wasn’t like his sister, whose bond with Luo Binghe ran deep. In the end, he would naturally stand with his lover.

...He just didn’t understand why Shen Qingqiu was so obviously unsettled.

The outcome was obvious. There were no dangers to him here, so why...?

Had Liu Mingyan been right after all?

Was it really... guilt?

“Don’t speak!” Liu Qingge snapped at him.

Shen Qingqiu glanced quickly between them, his agitation obvious even though his expression had smoothed out into a rigid, cold mask. It was a face Luo Binghe recognized. How could he not, when it had haunted his nightmares for three years? Wearing that empty mask, Shen Qingqiu pulled away from Liu Qingge and took a step back, then another.

“Yes, he’s a demon,” he confirmed slowly. Each sentence came like a strike, one at a time. “Because Luo Binghe is a demon. His nature was revealed three years ago.

“Then, I pushed him down into the Endless Abyss.”

Liu Qingge’s expression blanked in confusion and disbelief.

“...You wouldn’t,” he said dumbly, staring at Shen Qingqiu as if he couldn’t understand why the man would lie to him so obviously and poorly.

Because everyone knew how much Shen Qingqiu had cared for his disciple. Everyone knew how much he had mourned. A man who could speak cordially even with demons and never pursued those that didn’t want a battle, how could he react like that? Who could imagine it?
Luo Binghe felt a surge of both vindication and renewed cold anger. But more than anything, he hated that he had to keep on wondering — why?

Why did Shizun always have to be like this, lying and hiding?

“I did,” Shen Qingqiu snapped.

And because Luo Binghe was watching him so closely, he thought he could see his sleeves shift as he clenched his hands beneath them. Nonetheless, Shen Qingqiu’s tone was clipped and almost unnaturally steady as he went on.

“I did. Do you understand now? I haven’t been deceived, and your sister is simply following her principles. This matter doesn’t concern you, so don’t... don’t involve yourself further.”

At that, Liu Qingge’s expression, which had been almost comically dumbfounded, finally righted itself in outrage. “No,” he declared, firm and annoyed. “Who knows what he’ll do to you?”

Right. Of course it was like that. There was nothing surprising about it — even if the person you loved had done wrong, who would just abandon them? Especially to a demon. A demon’s mercy didn’t exist to begin with, and Luo Binghe was, after all, a demon now.

It was just as he’d thought. There was no going back.

And if he was a demon, then why was he still holding back—?

The bloodlust suddenly thrumming through his every nerve and muscle made Luo Binghe’s vision wash in red and nearly white out. It didn’t matter if his opponents were two peak lords. He had the power to tear them apart, limb from limb, and his hands itched to do so. Then, all of these painful thoughts and doubts would finally disappear. All he needed to do was...

—Think clearly.

This was not his bloodlust at all.
The realization was followed by a blinding spike of pain, as if a blade had been driven between his eyes.

That damn sword had seized an opportunity and counterattacked again!

Luo Binghe gritted his teeth, scowling, and pushed it away. This urge to rend and kill was not his. No matter if he was standing against him, Liu Qingge wasn’t someone he hated. And even with Shizun, what Luo Binghe wanted was... was...

‘What do you really want?’

“Luo Binghe! That sword is—!”

Hearing Shen Qingqiu’s voice only made it worse.

Xin Mo rattled within its sheath, even as Luo Binghe pressed down its demonic energy. He wanted to reach up and hold it in place, but he was afraid that putting his hand on it, he would be pulled into drawing it, and then...

Something soft brushed against his cheek — the wildly swinging tassel.

“Luo-shixiong!”

Pure shock momentarily cut through the quagmire in his mind. Instinctively, Luo Binghe turned and stared at Liu Mingyan, who had appeared at the pagoda’s entrance.

“...You beat up your sister? Liu-shidi!” Shen Qingqiu hissed, scandalized.

His conclusion was the obvious one. There was blood on her sleeve, and down the front of her robes. She was holding her stomach with one arm, not quite able to straighten but doggedly insisting on moving forward.
As Luo Binghe took in her state, she took in the situation, her eyes sweeping over the scene. Her
grasp on Shui Se tightened and she began to lift it, readying herself to join the battle. There was no
doubt whose side she would be on, not if she had ended up in this state to begin with.

...Ah.

Suddenly, he remembered clearly. Even if he didn’t know what he wanted to do, he knew what he
couldn’t do no matter what. He absolutely couldn’t keep fighting with Liu Qingge there. Hadn’t he
been warned against exactly this kind of ‘going overboard?’ After all, these siblings were the same
kind of loyal to the core.

He couldn’t force Liu Mingyan to make that kind of choice.

Even though, like this, she had already chosen...

Ducking his head, Luo Binghe blinked quickly against the sudden stinging in his eyes. “Enough,”
he called out, when he was sure his voice would remain steady. “This is pointless. If Shizun has no
intention of being honest with me, there’s no point in wasting time here. Liu-shimei, let’s go.”

“Wait! Mingyan!” Liu Qingge shouted.

Luo Binghe flashed across the distance between them and reappeared at Liu Mingyan’s side. When
she only shook her head and turned away from her brother, he carefully grasped her around the
waist. Ideally, they could have retreated instantly with Xin Mo, but his control over it was
something he didn’t want to chance just yet. So this method would have to do.

Holding her carefully, he moved them both in a swift retreat.

~.~.~

They didn’t go too far — only to the other side of the gorge where the Nine Heavens Divine
Pagoda was located. Setting Liu Mingyan back on her feet, Luo Binghe drew away.

“Are you alright?” he asked.
Liu Mingyan shook her head again. “It’s a light wound.”

Naturally, her brother wouldn’t have injured her seriously. However, her physical state wasn’t what he had been asking about, so he only waited.

After a moment, Liu Mingyan sighed. “It’s fine. I expected this much. I already made my decision... I’m sorry that this was all I could do. I wanted...” Her voice caught, and she drew a sharp breath, turning away quickly. “I wanted to do more than this for you. But I’m always this useless —”

“No!” Luo Binghe blurted out. “No, you’ve already done so much, and I, I really don’t know how I could ever repay you, so...”

Liu Mingyan huffed quietly, her voice thankfully a little less stuffed up — less tearful. “What repay?” she said gruffly, sounding very much like her brother. “You are my friend. Debts and dues have no place between close companions.” That sounded like something she had been told and repeated many times. It suited her Liu clan.

...It was easy for her to say.

But to Luo Binghe, this kind of support felt as heavy as a mountain.

“Even so, I’m... truly grateful,” he said quietly. “Just you being here is already more than I could have wished for.”

Liu Mingyan’s shoulders rose and fell as she sighed. “But is it enough?” she wondered, looking back over her shoulder at him.

How could he say it wasn’t when seeing the troubled, unhappy slant of her eyebrows and the furrow between them? For the usually calm, controlled Liu Mingyan to make this kind of expression, how long had she been worrying in silence?

Luo Binghe smiled. “Of course,” he said smoothly.
Naturally, it was a lie.

And Liu Mingyan knew it too. However, she didn’t press. “Then... let’s go home,” she said instead.

Back to Huo Hong Valley. Luo Binghe couldn’t help jolting slightly. “Is that alright?” he wondered. “Your brother...”

“Hmph. Let’s see him come and make trouble,” Liu Mingyan said, her expression furrowing in irritation. “We haven’t done anything wrong!” Under her breath, she muttered, “I can’t believe he just assumed I got charmed by a demon. What cultivation level does he think I’m at...”

Liu Qingge had assumed the same thing of Shen Qingqiu, a peak lord in late Core Formation, but Luo Binghe had no intention of defending him. Carefully keeping the amusement off his face, he said, “Alright, then let’s go.”

He had regained his equilibrium enough that drawing Xin Mo no longer worried him, and with one stroke, a portal had opened to the outskirts of the Liu clan estate.

As they stepped through, Luo Binghe maintained a placid, calm facade. But his heart twisted unpleasantly.

Yes, they hadn’t done anything wrong. And he would make sure it remained that way. Even if there weren’t debts and dues between them, Luo Binghe couldn’t repay Liu Mingyan by dragging her into a conflict with her brother or, worse, with the cultivation world itself. Harboring a demon could still be defended, in this situation. But harming a Cang Qiong peak lord would be a different matter.

What was the point, when he couldn’t even say that it was what he wanted?

What did he want, in the end, from Shen Qingqiu?

And if he couldn’t receive it...
Would they have to sever this bond between them after all?
Chapter 26: It’s Love, conclusion

Shen Qingqiu let out a heavy breath as Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan quickly retreated. Finally, this messy confrontation had ended.

Although he considered himself an adaptable person, there had been far too many twists and turns.

Luo Binghe had returned from the Endless Abyss two years ahead of schedule. Deviating even further from his canon route, he had gone to Liu Mingyan instead of joining Huan Hua Palace. Rather than begin a plan to drag Shen Qingqiu’s name through the mud in secret, he arranged to meet with him in this way...

Rushing back from the demon realm, but neither smiling and pretending nor attacking and destroying, what was Luo Binghe after?

And then, there was Liu Qingge.

Liu Qingge...

Encountering him again was almost as nerve wracking as Luo Binghe’s return. After all, Shen Qingqiu still had no idea how to face him.

Originally, six years ago, he had simply wanted to pull in Liu Qingge and potentially use him to stall the blackened Luo Binghe, when his disciple inevitably began his vengeful warpath. Of course, no one could defeat the protagonist, not even Bai Zhan’s War God, but even a few minutes could be enough time for Shen Qingqiu to make an escape. And since Liu Qingge was the brother of Luo Binghe’s wife (one of them, the best one), he would probably even make it out alive.

Ironically, that aspect had gone according to plan. Liu Qingge had indeed arrived to put himself between Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu, and even managed to temporarily drive back the protagonist.
Except that, things weren’t that simple anymore.

If it was just a matter of Madam Meiyin’s supposed fortune telling, Shen Qingqiu would have ignored it, writing it off as a lie or even an unheard of mistake. But then, the nightmare Google Translate voice had followed up—

[Liu Qingge’s feelings towards you have deepened, +100 points. Congratulations on realization of feelings, stage 2! Please continue to advance to mutual confession to properly complete the Secret Route!]

Fuck your secret route! And fuck your points too! Weren’t you supposed to be mostly shut down to save power while your main character was away?

This was...

Once he was alone, back then, Shen Qingqiu had buried his face in hands and refused to move for a very long time. His cheeks, his ears, his entire body seemed to burn with overwhelming embarrassment. He was a grown man, and yet a simple realization had reduced him to this state.

...No, there was nothing simple about it.

He absolutely couldn’t acknowledge it.

Shen Qingqiu had already made his plans. The Sun and Moon Dew Flower Seeds had already been planted and nourished. Soon — although perhaps not soon enough, damn this protagonist’s overachieving — the plant body would be ready. Shen Qingqiu would die, and Shen Yuan would begin a new life far away from Luo Binghe, Cang Qiong, and Liu Qingge as well.

Whatever he felt, whatever Liu Qingge felt, it was better not to even give it a name, because the connection between ‘Shen Qingqiu’ and ‘Liu Qingge’ would soon be completely severed.

And put like that, the best option was to distance himself from Liu Qingge.
That was what Shen Qingqiu had decided and the reason he had made every effort to avoid Liu Qingge since that disastrous hunt.

It had been the right decision, he was more certain than ever after this fiasco.

If Liu Qingge had assumed they were being deceived by an enemy, it was understandable that he would attack even Liu Mingyan for her own good. But seeing how far he had been willing to go against Luo Binghe... Even being the brother of a — the? — female lead might not be enough to protect him.

Those that supported a scum villain wouldn’t have a good end.

Whatever end Shen Qingqiu faced as a result of this stupid plot and his scumbag fate, he didn’t want to see Liu Qingge dragged down with him.

...Fortunately, that matter should be resolved now.

Now that he had told Liu Qingge the truth, a rift would be created between them. How could anyone support a cruel and malicious master who threw his own disciple into hell? Especially a righteous man like Liu Qingge, who would doubtlessly be disgusted. Things would be tense in Cang Qiong until it was time for him to be locked away in Huan Hua Palace’s water prison, but the sect leader had protected Shen Qingqiu for a long time already no matter how many promising disciples the original goods ruined, so it would probably—

He was dragged out of his thoughts when Liu Qingge let out a short, sharp breath and turned to stride toward him.

Ah, here it came. Hopefully, Great Master Liu wouldn’t hit him too hard...

A hand closed around his, and—

—Pulled?

Yes. Turning away, Liu Qingge began to pull him toward the exit.
Shen Qingqiu instinctively dug in his heels and tried to tug his hand free, but Liu Qingge’s grip was immovable. “Liu-shidi, what are you doing?” he protested.

“Leaving,” Liu Qingge said.

“Then go,” Shen Qingqiu shot back. “I still have something to do here. There’s no need to accompany me.” Both of them knew this was a useless excuse. The entire matter had obviously been arranged by Liu Mingyan to let Luo Binghe confront him.

Liu Qingge huffed as he glanced back over his shoulder. “I’m not letting you run off this time.” Before Shen Qingqiu could say anything, he added in a heavy, dark tone, “We need to talk.”

...Those four words were never a good thing!

Haha, Liu-shidi, was that the right kind of phrase? After all, these two old men were not actually... actually...

Even internally, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t continue making mocking remarks. He didn’t protest further as Liu Qingge dragged him away.

~.~.~

Liu Qingge, it turned out, was completely serious about not letting go. They even rode Cheng Luan together and then walked into an inn still holding hands. The innkeeper, the servants and the other guests all clearly assumed certain things about their relationship, especially since the innkeeper immediately asked, “Room for two?”

“Yes,” Liu Qingge said, nodding.

Well, they were only going to talk...

At least like this, Liu Qingge probably didn’t plan on fighting him.
Once he had led the way into the relatively small, plain room, Liu Qingge kicked the door shut and locked it. Then, putting up a silencing array, he turned to face Shen Qingqiu. His expression was unreadable. And what he asked, when he finally opened his mouth, was...

“This is why you said nothing good could come for someone like you?”

...Great Master Liu, is this really what you want to say?

Shen Qingqiu had indeed said something of the sort at Madam Meiyin’s lair. He had been... frustrated and panicking as he realized... realized... a few things. What he had meant was that nothing good could come from entering a relationship when he was already a dead man walking, all planned and settled to end ‘Shen Qingqiu’s’ life to escape into the plant body.

So in a way, yes, this had been why he’d said that. But if he answered ‘yes,’ he had a feeling he would be misunderstood.

Remaining silent... was also misunderstood.

“You...” Coming to his own conclusions, Liu Qingge shook his head. “You’re so stupid.”

Shen Qingqiu choked. “E... excuse me?!”

“You’re a fool,” Liu Qingge said, unmoved by his outrage.

At least call him a scummy asshole! This was completely unfair and unwarranted!

Caught up in being insulted, Shen Qingqiu was too slow to react when Liu Qingge stepped up to him and reached out. Shock shot through him like a lightning bolt when a warm, steady hand rested against his cheek and tilted his face slightly upward.

Upward to meet Liu Qingge as he leaned in.
This was...

This was—!

A kiss. Liu Qingge kissed him.

It was completely different from Duxian-Er’s ‘kiss,’ just a simple press of lips against his own. But it left him just as helpless to resist. So this was how Master Liu kissed? Firm and steady, but not rough at all, just like he'd thought...

Liu Qingge who had never thought of taking a cultivation partner and claimed he didn't want one. Liu Qingge who had taken a dozen attempts to stop flushing and stammering when declaring their fake relationship. Liu Qingge who was ‘deeply in love’ with him. Liu Qingge whom Shen Qingqiu also probably...

By the time Shen Qingqiu remembered that, regardless of whether he wanted to or not, resisting was what he needed to do, Liu Qingge had pulled away and watched him closely.

“Liu Qingge!” Shen Qingqiu protested. “Do you still not understand? What I did—”

“You don't understand. It's already too late to cut everything between us,” Liu Qingge said. “Even if you committed a wrong, I will not turn away from you.”

This person—!! Fine!

Drawing on his every negative impression from that distant time when he was just a reader, Shen Qingqiu curled his lips in his best approximation of the original's nasty sneer.

“I should have expected no less,” he said mockingly. “How many times has Cang Qiong looked away already? One more disciple is nothing that can't be overlooked. In the end, all your posturing about your righteousness is nothing but a farce—”

...He was sure he's gotten the tone exactly right. So why did Liu Qingge look entirely unmoved, without a trace of anger or indignation?
“Stupid,” Liu Qingge repeated. “It’s not the same as before. I know how much you grieved, like you lost your soul. Even taking the blame willingly... I know what kind of man you are now.”

The kind of man he was now? What kind?

The kind that pushed a child into unimaginable suffering for his own survival?

The kind that then planned to fake death and run away from the consequences?

Even though he habitually kept his expression blank, Liu Qingge seemed to see something that made him huff in annoyance. “If you regret it, then do something about it,” he declared. His face softened just slightly. “I will help you.”

Ah, if only. But the blackened protagonist never accepted apologies or compromises. All accounts would be settled without forgiveness, and all things owed to Luo Binghe would be repaid in blood. That was the inescapable rule of Proud Immortal Demon Way.

“Liu-shidi...” Shen Qingqiu sighed, unable to keep on fighting, “it’s not possible. How could any apology be enough? Some things can't be pardoned.”

“Try,” Liu Qingge said flatly. “If it matters to you this much, then at least try. If he won’t accept, then we’ll fight.”

...There was no point in arguing this with him. “This... doesn’t involve you,” Shen Qingqiu switched approaches. “So—”

“Stupid,” Liu Qingge repeated again. Closing his eyes for a moment, he sighed. “You don’t need to accept. But I won’t leave.”

Accept...

Accept his feelings.
Shen Qingqiu flushed, and suddenly felt unable to continue looking at Liu Qingge. The other man hadn’t moved back at all, he realized. They were still standing nearly chest to chest, and Liu Qingge’s hand still rested against his neck, thumb on his cheek. ...Shen Qingqiu hadn’t moved away either. He swallowed heavily.

Who was stupid? This man was clearly the stupidest. How much clearer did Shen Qingqiu need to be? And yet Liu Qingge insisted on throwing in his lot with him. This stupid, stupid, loyal, beautiful, amazing man...

This was the man that Shen Qingqiu also...

...

...loved.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah——

It was too much. This stupid man! It was all because of this stupid man!

What was he supposed to do? With everything that Liu Qingge was, how else could he possibly end up? Who wouldn’t fall in love with him?! It was all just Liu Qingge’s fault for being like this!

Fine! Fine!! If that’s how it was!

Surging forward, Shen Qingqiu closed the small distance still between them. His lips clumsily pressed against Liu Qingge’s, who didn’t have the decency to be shocked for more than a moment before responding. He tilted his head, changing the angle, and opened his mouth slightly. A warm, wet tongue brushed against Shen Qingqiu’s lips.

Liu Qingge’s hand had slid to his nape, tangling in his hair, and pressed him closer. His other arm had gone around his waist, holding him steady as he nearly swayed on his feet.
Shen Qingqiu could only clutch at the white fabric of the other’s sleeves, making a truly pathetic little sound.

This! This! This bastard!

What the hell?! Was he using that horrible woman’s “combat technique” as a reference?! How many times had she made out with him anyway... aaaah!!

It was still clumsy, as expected of two virgins, but even this was enough to completely overwhelm Shen Qingqiu. He melted into the kiss completely, his face burning and his head swimming.

[Congratulations!]

Shen Qingqiu choked.

With a stifled yelp, he threw himself out of Liu Qingge’s embrace and scuttled backwards all the way into a corner. To hide the expressions flying across his face, he spun around and faced the wall, while the System’s — Untimely! Unwanted! Unacceptable! — trilling continued.

[Congratulation! Congratulations!]

[For realization of feelings, stage 3, +200 points! Secret Route complete, +1000 points! Complexity of the role of “Shen Qingqiu,” +500 points!]

Th-there was even a little victory fanfare jingle.

Hahaha, well, at least there wasn’t a spring scene to top off this route. Given the genre of the source material, that was practically a miracle—

[Additional points will be awarded for accessing ‘bonus material,’ including first time—]

First time nothing! Go to hell!!
They had only just... only...

Ah.

Hm.

Tentatively, Shen Qingqiu glanced back over his shoulder. That reaction, freaking out and running away, had probably been... not good.

Was Liu Qingge upset? There had been no sign of him leaving at least.

Liu Qingge had indeed not left. Instead, he had sat down on the bed — and was in the process of disrobing. “What are you doing?” Shen Qingqiu demanded, aghast. He couldn’t possibly be expecting to do *that* right away, right? He couldn’t, right?! He didn’t want that bonus content! .......yet?

“It’s late,” Liu Qingge said calmly. “We can return tomorrow.”

...He just planned to sleep. That was fine. That was fine...

Having finished taking off his outer layers and even unbound his hair, Liu Qingge pulled back the blankets. Looking at Shen Qingqiu still standing motionless in the corner, he said, “You too, hurry up and sleep.”

“There’s only one bed,” Shen Qingqiu pointed out dumbly.

“So?”

So?! True, it wasn’t the first time, but this was different! The situation was completely different! After all, now they were— were— The point was, it was completely different!
As expected, Liu Qingge was a muscle-bound blockhead who had cultivated his golden core all the way up to his brain, leaving no room for romance or even common sense. Shen Qingqiu gave up.

Turning to face the wall again, he dropped down and began to meditate.

~.~.~

He woke up the next morning with a sore neck and a blanket draped over him.

Liu Qingge shot him a particularly annoying look that screamed ‘I told you so.’ “Next time,” he said, “just sleep with me.”

...He took it back! Shen Qingqiu wanted to take it all back! System, get him off this stupid man’s route—!!

~.~.~

Chapter End Notes

The End. ....I’m kidding, there’s one more arc.
When they returned to Cang Qiong, Liu Qingge didn’t say anything about Luo Binghe. Shen Qingqiu didn’t say anything either.

Telling Liu Qingge had been unexpectedly difficult, and he had only been able to force the words out in that pressing situation, to stop Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe from continuing to fight. He didn’t think he could make himself say it again in front of the others. It would be only the rightful consequences of his actions, but imagining their cold, contemptuous expressions as they looked down on him...

To say that it was also for Luo Binghe’s sake would not be just an excuse either. Being part demon was no small matter. Liu Mingyan and even Liu Qingge might have accepted it, but Shen Qingqiu could not vouch for the reactions of the other peak lords, much less the sect as a whole or the entire cultivation world.

So the entire encounter went unspoken.

What Liu Qingge did say was this:

“We’ve become cultivation partners,” he announced far, far too calmly.

Since two of them had stopped playing hooky, the Cang Qiong peak lords had gathered for a meeting. Unfortunately, the items on the agenda were destined to go unaddressed as the meeting hall first descended into stunned silence, then — complete chaos.

“Figured it out finally?” Qi Qingqi burst into uproarious laughter. “Wei-shixiong, pay up!”

“Yes, yes,” Wei Qingwei agreed, his smile a little pained. It must have been a big bet. “Congratulations!”

“Wait, you mean like for real this time?” Shang Qinghua wondered, staring at his fellow
transmigrator in confusion. “But that’s, er...”

“Let’s have a toast to that!” the Zui Xian peak lord proposed, already waving around several jugs of alcohol.

Shen Qingqiu was aghast.

Everyone had known? They bet on them? Liu Qingge just said it! Everyone knew!

“...I’m going into seclusion,” he muttered, covering his face. “For a decade. A century!”

Yue Qingyuan, instead of calling the meeting back to order, looked at the pair with a strange, awkward expression. As Shen Qingqiu writhed in embarrassment, ignored the congratulations and good-natured mocking heaped on him, and glared at the unmoved Liu Qingge, the sect leader slowly managed a small, crooked smile and turned away.

But still, his fingertips shook as he reached for his cup of tea, and he remained silent, regardless of his duties.

So the chaos continued.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Qi Qingqi spoke up, grinning. “How do we know it’s for real this time? Are you sure you’re not lying again? You should prove it!”

Several others called out in agreement. Shen Qingqiu glared at all of them, but it seemed to have no effect. In this generation, the position of Qing Jing peak lord would never regain its authority. “Qi-shimei, don’t get carried away,” Shen Qingqiu ordered through gritted teeth, but Qi Qingqi only grinned unrepentantly, intent on milking this for all it was worth.

“How?” Liu Qingge asked shortly.

“We’re not doing it,” Shen Qingqiu rejected without waiting for an answer. This was clearly going along with her whims!
Qi Qingqi ignored him, turning to Liu Qingge instead. “How about a kiss?” she suggested with a sly smile Shen Qingqiu recognized all too well. It was the kind of smile his sister would wear while she read her filthy novels, snickering at some improbable ass insertion.

The peak lord of Xian Shu was actually this kind of rotten woman!

Liu Qingge remained silent for a long moment. It was subtle, but there was a faint redness at the tips of his ears. Now he was getting embarrassed? When he looked at Shen Qingqiu, he received a flat glare. It was only because the traditional seating arrangement put Qing Jing and Bai Zhan far from each other that Shen Qingqiu hadn’t already beaten him across the head. The fan clutched in his hand was trembling and creaking with barely restrained violence.

No matter how lacking in emotional intelligence, even Liu Qingge understood the signs.

“No,” he said, turning back to Qi Qingqi.

Her lips stretched into a wide smirk, and Shen Qingqiu knew without a doubt that the next word out of her mouth would be ‘whipped.’ Did he, he wondered, have enough respectability left to stop himself from throwing his tea cup at her?

Well...

So, the chaos continued.

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Nothing at all got accomplished during the meeting, which was finally adjourned after breaking out into a minor brawl. Shooting some more dirty looks to his departing, gossiping coworkers, Shen Qingqiu tried to search out Liu Qingge, fully intent on upbraiding him about just announcing things without warning him first. And also about giving rotten women the slightest opening. Shen Yuan knew where that kind of thing led — to being shirtless and tied up! Or, worse, crossdressing and tied up! (Art reference, his ass! You call that art?!) However, he found himself unexpectedly dragged out of the meeting hall before he could reunite
with his... his... uh. Hm. ...With Liu Qingge.

The one holding on to his arm with a steely grip and pulling him along, while also noticeably hiding behind him, was none other than Shang Qinghua.

“We need to talk,” the An Ding peak lord said tersely, his frown at odds with the prey animal way his eyes darted around.

He was right. They had a lot to talk about.

Of course, they had to start with the gossip.

“You and Liu Qingge? Liu Qingge? Why?” Shang Qinghua demanded, once they were alone. “Cucumber bro, did you decide you didn’t want to risk dying a virgin twice? There’s better ways! Ways that won’t leave the rest of us to deal with the War God in mourning and carrying a grudge against Bing-ge!”

“Not die a—! I’m not you!” Shen Qingqiu hissed in return.

Although they were technically ‘alone,’ they had huddled together just in case, leaning forward until they were almost nose to nose. Shang Qinghua wasn’t exactly wrong in his assumptions, but Shen Qingqiu had no intention of admitting that.

He sighed. “I’m not going to die,” he said instead. “At least, I don’t intend to. That’s why...”

He wasn’t going to intentionally break Liu Qingge’s heart. He wasn’t... He wouldn’t do that again.

“And how’s that going to work?” Shang Qinghua wondered, raising an eyebrow — or at least trying. It didn’t look quite right, since both of them edged up together, lopsidedly. “You don’t want to use the plan anymore? But when Luo Binghe returns...”

“He’s already back,” Shen Qingqiu told him.
Whatever Shang Qinghua had been about to say cut off with an undignified squeak. His face twisted itself through an impressive series of very contortions before finally settling into ‘deep thinking’ — which made him look a bit constipated.

“He must have skipped the three demon sisters of fate arc,” he muttered to himself. “And maybe...? Or maybe it was....? Hm...”

“He went to Liu Mingyan when he returned,” Shen Qingqiu went on. “Apparently, he’s actually been living in Huo Hong Valley. I can’t tell whether he joined Huan Hua Palace or not. He told her everything that happened, so she helped him confront me. It was....” He sighed again. “I don’t know. He’s different. Maybe there’s a chance he’ll accept something aside from removing all my limbs and leaving me to die.”

“I dunno, that sounds like a crazy gamble,” Shang Qinghua said. “You wanna keep the backup plan going? But the plant body isn’t ready yet. If he’s already back...”

“With the butterfly effect, there’s no guarantee it’ll even go down in Huayue City. And without the soul transfer arrays, who knows if it’ll even work right,” Shen Qingqiu said, frowning. “Just... look after it, and let’s see how it goes.”

“It’s your hide,” Shang Qinghua acknowledged, shrugging.

Shen Qingqiu did not appreciate the reminder, and he sent his co-conspirator off with a glare. It wasn’t as if his gut wasn’t churning uneasily at the thought of throwing himself on the blackened protagonist’s previously non-existent mercy with only Liu Mingyan’s righteous influence and Liu Qingge’s support to help him.

Come to think of it, Liu Mingyan had been a driving force in condemning the original goods in the prime timeline — she had blamed him for her brother’s death. Now, Shen Qingqiu, transmigrator version, having saved her brother and become his... his... close to him, was depending on her influence to keep himself alive instead.

This world had turned into a very strange place, a real mirror verse.

But wait. This world was the one where Liu Qingge was alive. Unless everything went completely against reason, it would also be the world where Cang Qiong wasn’t wiped out. Liu Mingyan wasn’t grieving and vengeful, Ning Yingying had grown into a reliable young woman, even Ming
Fan had become a good senior brother who took care of Qing Jing. It wasn’t a “darker” version in any sense, and there wasn’t a single bad goatee in sight.

In fact... didn’t this all make Proud Immortal Demon Way the ‘mirror verse’ in this scenario?

Was there really a chance that Luo Binghe, too, was a ‘lighter’ version after all?

He wanted to believe that.

But regardless, Shen Qingqiu had already decided to bet on that possibility. Heaving another sigh, he turned to head back and look for Liu Qingge — both to chew him out... and to ask for advice about how to even begin making peace with their maybe black, maybe gray protagonist.

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After the ultimately unresolved confrontation with his master, Luo Binghe found himself at loose ends.

When he had finally headed back to the human realm, he’d had a plan... of sorts. He had been determined to prove that he was no lesser than a human being, that he could become a great righteous cultivator — that Shen Qingqiu had been wrong. And then...

Naturally, he hadn’t known what would come ‘then.’

But unexpectedly, he had instead met Liu Mingyan.

And without any need to prove anything, she told him that Luo Binghe had done nothing wrong, that Shen Qingqiu had made a mistake and needed to answer for it.

His master was wrong. Luo Binghe had nothing to prove.

Bringing him right back to that ‘then.’ Now, with everything that had happened, what did he want from Shen Qingqiu? And what did he want for himself? Before, his future had been laid out simply
and clearly — protect his master, their peak and their sect. There had been no need to doubt or worry because there was no other path Luo Binghe could possibly desire. But that path was impossible now.

Liu Mingyan had suggested, though not very confidently, bringing the matter to Cang Qiong as a whole. But not only was that unlikely to go in their favor, Luo Binghe wasn’t even sure he wanted to return.

Oh, there was certainly at least some part of him that wanted to go back to the way things had been, when he had his master’s love and care. To go back to the peaceful days at Qing Jing, in the bamboo house. He wanted his master to smile at him, to speak to him kindly, to let him close again. He even wanted to see Ning Yingying and the other disciples again.

But if Shen Qingqiu actually turned around and acted as if nothing had happened... Luo Binghe suspected his own reaction would be indignant, furious, and even violent.

So what did he want, in the end?

...Revenge?

That was what Liu Qingge had assumed. Thinking about it, Luo Binghe supposed that was what Shen Qingqiu assumed as well and the reason he had asked that question in the pagoda.

Were they right?

It didn’t really matter, in a way. Taking revenge on Shen Qingqiu would require going through his lover, and Luo Binghe wasn’t willing to pit Liu Mingyan against her brother.

He didn’t know what he wanted. But most likely, he wouldn’t get it.

And yet, he had to find a way to keep on living.

It left a bitter taste in his mouth, and a lethargic sense of unwillingness.
He felt... he didn’t want to do anything. Should he return to the demon realm? There was nothing he wanted there, either, but at least he’d have the distraction of constant attempts on his life. Should he join another sect? He would just end up having to constantly guard against being discovered as a demon.

With nothing better to do, Luo Binghe ended up following Liu Mingyan back to Huo Hong Valley.

With nothing to do at all, he ended up going on hunts with her impressive collection of relatives and relations, who came in exactly three flavors — stoic and always ready to fight, boisterous and always ready to fight, and Liu Mingchuan, the future clan head, who acted patient but was also always ready to fight when you got down to it.

Even though Luo Binghe’s attention could only be said to be about half present on the hunts, he was more than powerful enough to complete them without trouble.

...Trouble with the monsters, in any case.

“Luo-xiong! Help me!”

A boy a few years younger than Luo Binghe darted behind him.

“Luo-xiong, move.”

A girl about the same age approached with an air of violence.

Looking between them, Luo Binghe weighed the situation — and smoothly stepped aside.

“Luo-xiong!” the boy wailed, before yelping as the girl nailed him across the head. It was the kind of blow that would break a normal human’s neck and not a love tap even by cultivator standards. These two, despite being siblings, really didn’t get along, and this was at least the third time she’d hit him on this hunt alone. The girl’s expression didn’t change at all in the process, reminding Luo Binghe sharply of Liu Qingge. They had probably learned it from the same elders.
Vaguely, he tried to remember who exactly they were and what their deal was. It didn’t come to him, and he gave up after a moment.

There was more wailing and squawking, but Luo Binghe turned away indifferently. He wasn’t their babysitter, after all. In fact, since he had always been the most junior disciple at Qing Jing, his nurturing instincts were not particularly well developed.

Instead, he kept a somewhat distracted watch over their surroundings. The human realm was very safe, compared to the demon realm, much less the Endless Abyss, and their mission had already been concluded, but a habit of constant vigilance had been trained into him through the last three years.

Luo Binghe’s eyes narrowed slightly as he noticed someone approaching.

However, he didn’t bother raising his guard or even warning the Liu children — he knew this visitor.

Unfortunately.

Internally, he sighed. Why did they have to keep coming back? Hadn’t he already refused clearly?

The person who finally appeared around the bend in the forest path was Qin Wanyue, precisely the Huan Hua Palace disciple Luo Binghe had saved during the Immortal Sword Conference. He had frankly expected to never see her again after that. And yet for some reason, she had already appeared in front of him several times.

Her expression brightened, and she beamed as she caught sight of him. “Luo-shixiong!” she called out.

Her appearance made the Liu siblings break off their argument — and for some reason move to flank Luo Binghe like guard dogs, nearly glowering.

...Although Luo Binghe didn’t know this, the Liu clan as a whole was largely aware of his gossip-worthy situation, but since he was the ‘Luo-shixiong’ that Liu Mingyan brought back, they naturally supported him against any outsiders. Especially outsiders who were this persistently nosy.
“Luo-shixiong, it’s been too long,” Qin Wangyue said as she made her way over. She looked like wanted to take her hand in his, as she had done in the past, but Luo Binghe had strategically folded his arms.

He was tempted to say, ‘Not really,’ but decided to hold his peace, only nodding in acknowledgement.

The first time they ran into each other was probably a genuine coincidence. Although Luo Binghe hadn’t made his survival and return known, he hadn’t done much to hide it either, so it was perhaps unsurprising that someone would recognize him.

Back then, Qin Wanyue had stared at him in shock, before her wide eyes welled up with tears. “Luo-shixiong, is it really you?” she sobbed. “It’s a miracle!”

Liu Mingyan, who had been with him on that hunt, had shot him a particularly droll look. “Serial seducer,” she pronounced primly, when Luo Binghe finally managed to extricate himself.

Unfair and unwarranted. He hadn’t done anything to ‘seduce’ her.

When he protested this, Liu Mingyan shot him another, assessing look. “Really a beauty to bring down nations,” she said, shaking her head. “Want a veil too?”

“No,” Luo Binghe had said firmly.

He had the feeling that he had perhaps been too hasty in refusing.

Because not only did Qin Wanyue seek him out again, but she had even invited him back to Huan Hua Palace sect.

If Luo Binghe had intended to follow his original plan, this would have been quite convenient. As it was, it quickly became mildly irritating — since she didn’t give up. She even managed to
Refusing the leader of the second strongest sect would be an insult. Luo Binghe didn’t care too much himself, but if the old man decided to spread his anger to the Liu clan, who he knew were sheltering Luo Binghe... With a less than pleased mood, he had come to Huan Hua Palace.

The old palace master had talked about his mother.

His ‘mother,’ the woman who had given birth to him and died without leaving Luo Binghe a single memory of her face.

Her name had been Su Xiyan, and she had been Huan Hua Palace’s previous head disciple.

Luo Binghe looked just like her, it seemed, and that was why her old master was willing to overlook even his unclean blood to welcome him into Huan Hua Palace.

Well, that hadn’t been stated, but it was all too clearly implied. There was no doubt that the old palace master knew exactly who Su Xiyan had been involved with. There was also no doubt that he hated Heavenly Demons with every fiber of his being.

...Maybe he had become greedy and spoiled, but Luo Binghe didn’t want to just be magnanimously pardoned for daring to be born with half his being dirtied by the blood of a demon. He hadn’t done anything wrong. He wanted...

He still didn't know. But it wasn’t joining Huan Hua Palace, he was increasingly certain.

“There are still things I need to settle. I am not ready to commit to a new sect or a new master,” he had excused himself.

Somehow, that was still not sufficient to make them give up.

Facing Qin Wanyue yet again, Luo Binghe said, “What a surprise to run into you here, Miss Qin.” His tone was neutral, his expression just unassuming enough to be misinterpreted as open. On
either side of him, he could sense the Liu children struggling to keep their scorn hidden.

They were probably failing, but Qin Wanyue only smiled and blushed demurely. “Actually, I was looking for you, Luo-shixiong,” she said.

...If she admitted it, there had to be an actual reason this time.

“There’s a situation that has come up, and we think Luo-shixiong’s expertise would be a great help,” she explained. “You see, there’s a plague in Jinlan City...”

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When Luo Binghe returned to the Liu estate and its crimson-leafed trees, Liu Mingyan was with Duanmu Yin. The two women broke off their conversation as they caught sight of him and, as expected, Duanmu Yin squeaked and darted behind Liu Mingyan.

Luo Binghe’s mouth twitched slightly. He suddenly felt very tired. At least demonesses had been direct in what they wanted from him.

“Please don’t mind me, I’ll come back later,” he said, holding up a hand to forestall any comment. Then, turning on his heel, he retreated quickly.

Once his figure had disappeared, Liu Mingyan nudged Duanmu Yin and shot her a meaningful look. Blushing fiercely, Duanmu Ying looked away.

Even with her veil, it was clear that Liu Mingyan was smirking, just from the way her eyes squinted, pleased and mischievous. “So that’s why...” she started.

“...not,” Duanmu Yin mumbled, sulking. “...need, so... helping.”

Liu Mingyan’s teasing demeanor softened. “Yes, yes,” she agreed, chuckling, “our Yin-jie has the heart of a righteous young hero, always ready to help those in need. We’re blessed by your kindness!”
Her friend’s sulk only deepened as Liu Mingyan sketched a respectful bow with cupped hands. But in truth, she was only half-joking. As always, it seemed her own power was insufficient, so Duanmu Yin’s kindness was the only thing she could rely on.

If they were lucky, perhaps it wouldn’t become a problem. After all, Liu Binghe hadn’t said anything. Maybe he really did have it all under control.

But after everything, she wasn’t willing to rely on just luck.

Noticing her brooding thoughts, Duanmu Yin tentatively reached out and patted Liu Mingyan twice on the shoulder — then quickly snatched her hand back as if burnt. She fidgeted for a moment before her demeanor grew serious... and startlingly confident.

“Its power is reduced, compared to Tian Xing itself,” she said quietly but without any waver in her voice, “but it should still be effective. Remember that it will only work once, so it is a temporary measure.”

Liu Mingyan nodded, lifting the hand she had instinctively hidden in the folds of her robes when Luo Binghe appeared. Held carefully between her fingers was an ornate golden talisman of obvious quality and power. Its design was a clan secret of the Duanmu family, and refining it had taken Duanmu Yin a considerable effort, not to mention the cost of the rare, high grade materials.

To create something like this simply because it might be of help to them, Duanmu Yin indeed had a pure-hearted, heroic character, which would make her a strong family head in the future. With her strong morals and dutiful nature, it was a role she was suited for. That was why her older sister hadn’t hesitated to leave it to her.

Tucking the talisman away carefully, Liu Mingyan smiled. “I can probably get him to make you dinner,” she said. “Are you sure you don’t want to...?”

Duanmu Yin’s calm expression melted away, and she shot Liu Mingyan a tearful, betrayed look. Liu Mingyan’s smile only widened as she imagined Luo Binghe’s own betrayed look if she suggested such a thing.

Things still hadn’t been resolved, but he had finally begun to grow a little less tense and wary, and a little more like the boy she had known at Cang Qiong. She wouldn’t let that be undone.
No matter what, this time she would protect him.

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Chapter 28: Reunion, again

A terrible plague had broken out in Jinlan City. This was the situation Qin Wanyue relayed to Luo Binghe. Zhao Hua, Tian Yi, and also her Huan Hua Palace had sent people to investigate, but none had returned.

Although Qin Wanyue wasn’t aware of the reason, the old palace master had unexpectedly suggested that Luo Binghe, a cultivator of unclear status and allegiance, could accompany the next group to be dispatched, which Qin Wanyue herself would be part of. So, due to her connection to him, she had come to deliver the request.

Given Luo Binghe’s bloodline, a plague would have no effect on him. Not only would he be immune himself, he might potentially be able to even cure others by transferring the illness to himself. So inviting him was logical.

It just didn’t line up with his impression of the old palace master.

Huan Hua Palace was well-known as the most militant, most anti-demon of the great sects. They had been the most driven and unrelenting in the last war, before Luo Binghe’s birth, and they had maintained that stance without compromise. Their old palace master was certainly the same.

The old man hated demons, especially Heavenly Demons. Despite his every effort to maintain an amiable, welcoming facade, he couldn’t hide his distaste every time the subject of Luo Binghe’s father was even slightly involved.

Turning around and tacitly acknowledging that cursed blood as useful...

It was possible. But it made Luo Binghe suspicious.

The fact that he suspected some hidden game made him determined to accept. Why run, demure and put it off? If someone was plotting against him, he would uncover their plans and drag them into the open — and bring an end to them, without fail.
The one in charge of Huan Hua Palace’s group this time was their head disciple, Gongyi Xiao. At the gathering point, he greeted Luo Binghe with respect and a surprising deference, which Luo Binghe returned only coolly. On their first meeting, Gongyi Xiao had made the unfortunate mistake of bringing up Shen Qingqiu, leaving a chilly atmosphere between them.

Nonetheless, Luo Binghe deferred to him without fuss, and the party set out into the sealed city.

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Of the previous team dispatched by Huan Hua Palace, only two had survived. Several had succumbed to the plague over time — a gruesome end, as their flesh gradually rotted away until only bones remained. However, most had perished by attempting to leave the city. Once they had traveled a certain distance away, the so-called plague devoured them almost immediately.

When one of the survivors pulled back the black cloth wrapped around their body and showed the decay on their arm, where the muscles had thinned until bone could be seen, Qin Wanyue gasped and clung to Luo Binghe’s sleeve. “Wh... what is it, Luo-shixiong?” she wondered.

“I can’t tell from just these symptoms,” Luo Binghe answered indifferently. “There are many things that cause the flesh to rot. But reacting like that to distance from the city...”

He glanced at Gongyi Xiao, checking his reaction.

“It could still be a natural phenomenon,” Gongyi Xiao said pensively. Although he had also paled at the sight and the story behind it, he kept a firm grip on his composure. “There could be something in the city, in the air or in the water, that conversely keeps the symptoms from manifesting in full.”

Luo Binghe tilted his head in acknowledgement.

It could also be something completely unnatural, like an array used to control this supposed disease, or some innate quality that linked it back to its originator.

“Did you find any leads about the origin?” Gongyi Xiao asked, frowning.
The two surviving disciples exchanged a look, their wan, gaunt faces hard to read past the ever-present misery. “...Yes,” one of them finally admitted. “We think... it started in the pleasure quarter. Even when we arrived, there were skeletons there already, so they must have contacted it very early.”

“There’s start there,” Gongyi Xiao decided.

For some reason, he and the rest of the newly arrived group turned to look at Luo Binghe for his reaction.

Thinking back on it, they had been doing that to some extent all along, when the group took a hidden path into the city. Luo Binghe hadn’t noticed it at the time, since he was used to demons deferring to him as well. But wasn’t it strange? He was an outsider. What did his opinion matter, compared to their head disciple?

What exactly had that old man been telling them about him?

None of this growing paranoia showed on Luo Binghe’s face. “I will stay with the group as well, if it’s not a problem,” he said blandly.

“Of course not! I feel much safer with you here, Luo-shixiong,” Qin Wanyue assured him, smiling.

Shaking her off and avoiding the strangely intent attention of the others, Luo Binghe took up the rear guard as they moved through the almost entirely deserted city toward the red light district — or rather, what remained of it. While most of Jinlan’s streets had at least a few people still hurrying on their way, all swathed in their protective black cloth to slow the plague’s effects, the red light district was entirely empty of life.

...Human life.

Luo Binghe’s eyes narrowed as he focused his senses, confirming what he had suspected. He could feel it, a weak demonic presence in the vicinity.

It was watching him.
But before he could decide how to deal with it, the presence drew back and disappeared.

They had arrived at the flower house the two surviving disciples believed had been the origin, a once lively building that now stood completely desolate. No one seemed willing to be the first one in, and the group milled around for a few moments, instinctively huddling together.

“All right, let’s split up,” Gongyi Xiao decided. “One group to investigate the origin, one to scout the area. Young Master Luo, if I might trouble you to look after the ones staying here...”

His senses were stronger, so he would have the best chance of finding something while scouting, but Luo Binghe didn’t protest. “That’s fine,” he agreed. After all, there was still a chance Gongyi Xiao had a hidden reason for dividing the group like this.

Leaving Gongyi Xiao and the others chosen for scouting outside, Luo Binghe took the lead of those heading into the abandoned brothel.

Inside, everything was covered in a fine layer of dust. The tables and chairs in the main hall on the first floor had been overturned and left lying around haphazardly, several of the formerly luxurious and ornate curtains ripped down and trampled on the floor. The Huan Hua disciples slowly scattered, investigating the private rooms on either side. Through the open doors, Luo Binghe caught a few glimpses of skeletons lying on the beds — former ladies of the house, all succumbed to the plague.

“They were already like that a few days after we arrived,” one of the surviving disciples explained in a hushed whisper. “As long as you stay in the city, the disease takes more than a month to completely devour your flesh, so that’s why we thought this must have been one of the first places affected.”

Luo Binghe nodded thoughtfully.

It wasn’t surprising. The spread of real illnesses aside, pleasure houses were places where many people could come and go, and concealing your identity wasn’t notable. It would be easy to start something in one.

“Let’s check the other floors,” Luo Binghe suggested.
Halfway up the stairs, he paused for a moment. The demonic presence had returned, and it was quickly approaching. Hiding a thin, grim smile, he climbed the next step.

The demon burst in just after the last of their group had made their way into the second floor corridor. As it flung itself bodily through the windows and landed inside among the flying rubble, the Huan Hua disciples yelled and scattered. In the chaos, Luo Binghe calmly noted the way the demon’s dark hooded head turned slightly toward him first.

But the one it attacked was instead Qin Wanyue, who had rushed to his side, clinging.

She screamed, jerking away in surprise. At the last moment, Luo Binghe stepped in front of her and batted the demon aside with casual ease.

Unexpectedly, it made no move to defend against his strike. It only reached out and managed to drag its claws across his arm, leaving behind a long tear in his sleeve and a few drops of blood. Turning his arm over, Luo Binghe stared consideringly down at wound. As expected, there had been a poison, though he had let it be neutralized without thinking much. But it would be better to slow his healing rate for now, to avoid arousing suspicion...

“Ah, Luo-shixiong, because of me...” Qin Wanyue fretted, wringing her hands.

“It’s fine,” Luo Binghe said in a perfunctory way. Nudging the body slightly to unravel some of the black layers, he looked at the bright red skin. “So it’s a sower.”

With the danger so swiftly resolved, the others began to crowd around them, and a wave of chatter rose up, filling the hallway.

“You recognize it?”

“As expected of Sir Luo!”

“What is it? What’s a sower?”

Luo Binghe paused before he could begin to answer, turning his attention back to the stairway.
There was some kind of commotion as someone made their way up — two people, both cultivators, judging by their footsteps. And one of them was... ah.

Faintly, he felt a twinge of pain in the back of his mind.

Naturally, he recognized those footsteps. He recognized that presence. How could he not?

When Shen Qingqiu stepped into the second floor corridor, he stopped and stared in surprise. His eyes flickered between Luo Binghe, the body on the floor, and the Huan Hua disciples.

The Huan Hua Palace disciples stared back. No, they glared in return, their excited chatter cutting off abruptly and several even reaching for their weapons. Qin Wanyue tugged at his sleeve, and for the first time, moved to put herself in front of Luo Binghe.

...What exactly was this attitude?

Gossip between disciples could distort things into truly wild stories, Luo Binghe knew this. But to take this kind of attitude against a peak lord of Cang Qiong, it was too much. Just what kind of story had they spread about him in their sect?

Shen Qingqiu’s expression smoothed out into an readable mask, and he made his way into the corridor. Gongyi Xiao followed him up. As Luo Binghe had suspected, the two of them knew each other in some fashion. In this situation, it only added to his suspicions.

Since three of the four great sects had sent someone to investigate, it stood to reason that Cang Qiong would too. But how convenient that it should be Luo Binghe’s master, when he himself was specifically invited to participate. And for them to run into each other like this... it couldn’t be just a coincidence.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe greeted. “You are the one sent here?”

“Mu-shidi and Liu-shidi are here as well,” Shen Qingqiu replied. Hesitating slightly, he asked, “And you were sent by Huan Hua Palace?”
“Not exactly. The palace master requested my assistance in this matter,” Luo Binghe said. “I could hardly refuse a great elder.”

Which was to say that he hadn’t joined Huan Hua Palace itself. For some reason, Shen Qingqiu looked relieved at this. “I see. I didn’t realize Luo Binghe is familiar with the old master,” he said. Behind him, Gongyi Xiao hid a guilty look and shot several scolding expressions at the other disciples.

“Luo-shixiong is always welcome at Huan Hua Palace,” Qin Wanyue spoke up with surprising aggressiveness. She, along with several others, was glaring openly at Shen Qingqiu, who only cleared his throat awkwardly and looked at the demon’s body on the ground.

“It’s a sower,” he said.

“Sir Luo already said so,” someone muttered uncharitably.

This atmosphere... was getting on Luo Binghe’s nerves.

What kind of nonsense had they decided among themselves? What had they been told? Not the truth, obviously, and in the end, it was none of their concern. They were just outsiders, who had no place to involve themselves in the relationship between master and disciple.

His headache was slowly growing stronger.

If this situation continued, it could become a problem. It was time to make an exit.

“Everything I know was taught by Shizun,” Luo Binghe demurred, his cold tone in contrast to his soft words. Pulling away from Qin Wanyue and the others, he turned to the body. “Shizun most likely wants to bring it back to Mu...shishu to study, right? I’ll carry it.”

Carelessly lifting the sower’s body with one hand, he headed toward the staircase before anyone could try to stop him. After only a moment, Shen Qingqiu followed him down and out of the building.
“We’re staying at the Gold Weapon Shop on that side,” he said quietly, catching up to Luo Binghe and falling into step with him.

Even the dead stillness and deathly pall outside were better than the forced, unnatural aggressiveness from Huan Hua Palace, although a different kind of tension quickly settled between them. Luo Binghe could feel his master looking at him and quickly glancing away, fidgeting uncertainly with his fan.

“Were you infected?” Shen Qingqiu asked suddenly, looking at the small wound on his hand.

“Shizun knows it wouldn’t matter either way,” Luo Binghe pointed out. He frowned slightly. “What about you?”

He didn’t miss the faint twitch of his master’s right hand. Without thinking, he reached out and grasped it, and smoothed his thumb over the red spots that had appeared across the back of it.

...What was he doing?

Quickly, he dropped Shen Qingqiu’s hand and turned away to focus on the deserted road ahead. He could hear his master let out a heavy breath next to him.

It must have been so hard not to flinch when being touched by a filthy demon.

They had been interacting with surprising ease, if not with the same closeness as before. But that thought, angry and sharp, almost made Luo Binghe stumble as he was painfully reminded that it wasn’t the same as before at all. They weren’t really master and disciple anymore.

What were they? ...Enemies? Was there really nothing else?

“I...” Shen Qingqiu cleared his throat, “I want to speak with you, tonight.”

Without waiting for a response, he sped up his footsteps and rushed ahead.
Luo Binghe stared after him, momentarily stumbling to a halt.

The Gold Weapon Shop had already appeared ahead of them, and Shen Qingqiu quickly darted inside. When Luo Binghe followed him in, all he found was a number of civilians tied up in the courtyard and Mu Qingfang prodding at them, surrounded by an array of ominous instruments. The Qian Cao peak lord didn’t even spare him a glance when he delivered the sower’s body.

“Good, good, good,” Mu Qingfang muttered under his breath. “I’ll start preparing the medicine right away. Focus on capturing all the sowers, so it doesn’t spread further.”

...Had he mistaken Luo Binghe for Liu Qingge, or did he just not care about this disciple’s sudden resurrection?

Luo Binghe gave up. “Yes, Mu-shishu,” he said obediently. But before heading out, he added, “Don’t let your guard down.”

After all, someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to cause this disaster and to pull all the necessary actors inside. Once the sowers were caught and the medicine was ready, it would be time for the climax — whatever that entailed.

Naturally, Luo Binghe would be ready.

Or so he wanted to say, but in truth the matter of these circumstances and their climax was far from his mind. All he could think about was that ‘tonight.’

Even he didn’t know if he felt anticipation or dread, or something else entirely.

~.~.~
Notes: I feel almost ashamed. Almost.

Chapter 29: Two to One

After returning, Shen Qingqiu had explained in detail the nature and properties of the demons that had caused the supposed plague.

Every time Liu Qingge tried to ask about his wayward disciple instead, Shen Qingqiu started talking louder and faster. Finally, after a few tries, Liu Qingge snorted and subsided.

“—However, there’s no record of sowers having any ability that would quickly kill the infected if they left a certain area,” Shen Qingqiu said, once even his impressive knowledge had run dry. “It might be a new power they developed, but it could also be that there is someone aiding them.”

“A mastermind?” Liu Qingge surmised, his eyes narrowing.

“At the very least, there should be some demon lord that they’re planning to ‘supply’ this harvest to,” Shen Qingqiu said. “But it might go deeper. We don’t know how far their abilities extend now, so be especially careful not to be infected.”

He said it very seriously, his eyebrows drawing together as he waved his fan as if to admonish Liu Qingge.

Liu Qingge stared at him silently for a moment. It was a surprisingly pleasing image, and his expression softened unintentionally. “I will,” he agreed. Reaching out, he grasped Shen Qingqiu’s hand in his. It was warm and very agreeable.

The other man immediately went stiff.
But he didn’t pull away, just like he hadn’t actually denied it when Liu Qingge announced that they had become cultivation partners for real.

...Not... that they had done any dual cultivation so far. Liu Qingge felt a telltale sticky flush at just the thought of it.

To be perfectly honest, he had absolutely no idea how to proceed. There were things he knew, which he had determinedly acknowledged and accepted — that he cared for Shen Qingqiu to an extent that went beyond anything he had ever felt before, he liked being with him and wanted to be with him for centuries to come, he wanted to support Shen Qingqiu in every matter, whether small or life changing... That being close to him and touching him was pleasant in a way he’d never considered before. And so was kissing him.

But knowing those things didn’t tell him what to do next, and it was equally obvious that Shen Qingqiu was just as oblivious. No, probably more oblivious... Liu Qingge wished he could at least ask his sister, but she was still angry with him, despite having already chewed him out thoroughly.

So for now, all Liu Qingge could do was stay by Shen Qingqiu’s side and... hold his hand. That seemed to be alright. He wasn’t sure why, but he had a feeling he’d get hit if he tried to kiss him again.

Then again, it wasn’t like he was afraid of getting hit...

“Mm... yes. You do that,” Shen Qingqiu agreed awkwardly, and reached up to stiffly pat Liu Qingge’s hand where it held his own. His hands lingered, clasping Liu Qingge’s, as he drifted off into thought. “See if you can take any alive,” he instructed. “I’ll speak with the Zhao Hua group and set up a place to contain them.”

Alive for interrogation. Liu Qingge nodded, even though he felt a little annoyed at the prospect. Sowers were weak but dangerous to handle, so this would add to the difficulty.

Shen Qingqiu frowned slightly. “I’ll try to join the hunt too, but I have something else to do tonight,” he said.

“Going to see him?” Liu Qingge guessed.
Grimacing, Shen Qingqiu nodded.

Although Liu Qingge had been the one to push for taking action on the complicated issue that was Luo Binghe, that had been purely because nothing would be settled otherwise. In truth, he didn’t feel confident about it either. Liu Mingyan had insisted that her friend was still himself and would not act excessively, but she was hardly in any position to be unbiased. Shen Qingqiu had been right — this was not a simple thing that could be forgiven easily. If his former disciple lashed out...

“Wait for me, I’ll go with you,” Liu Qingge said.

Shen Qingqiu smiled wryly. “I don’t think that would help,” he said. “It might even be the opposite. It’s fine. I think... there might be a chance.” He didn’t look like his entirely believed that.

Fine. Liu Qingge would just follow him in secret.

But before attending to personal matters, both of them had duties to fulfill. The lives of all those still in the city were on the line. It was hardly the first time Liu Qingge hunted with those stakes, so he knew better than to let himself become agitated or impatient.

That was good, because the remaining sowers were proving frustratingly elusive.

Their demonic energy and even their overall presence was so weak that Liu Qingge couldn’t reliably pick them out from among the human residents. Wrapped up in black cloth and defensively hunched over, the plague-ridden humans and the sowers looked the same, even when he passed them in the street. He spent the rest of the day just to identify one, only for it to lead him on a merry chase across the city, constantly ducking through narrow winding alleys where Liu Qingge’s superior speed was severely hampered.

Finally, he was sure he had it cornered. The alley it had turned into was a dead end. Cheng Luan in hand, Liu Qingge dashed around the corner—

Only to find that another had already claimed his prey.

Standing over the sower’s body, Luo Binghe turned to look at Liu Qingge with a blank, unreadable expression.
“Greetings to Liu...shishu,” he said after a moment. However, there was not a hint of deference to an elder in his tone, expression or posture, making Liu Qingge snort quietly.

With the silence and their tense standoff broken, he sheathed Cheng Luan and crossed his arms. “Take them alive,” he curtly relayed the instructions he’d received.

If it had been anyone else, that would have been the end and Liu Qingge would have simply turned around and left. But with this person... There were many unresolved matters regarding him, and regarding people Liu Qingge cared deeply for.

“Does Liu-shishu have something to say to me?” Luo Binghe prompted, seeing him dither about.

He wanted to say something, certainly. But Liu Qingge knew he wasn’t skilled with words. Speaking could just make it worse, instead of helping, and it wasn’t his place, to begin with. He didn’t miss the way Luo Binghe still stood ready to fight at any moment, something in his cool gaze assessing and distrustful.

But... not wrathful or malicious. Just like Liu Mingyan said.

Glaring for a moment longer, Liu Qingge finally said, “Don’t upset Mingyan. Or see what I do to you.”

“Your cousin already gave me that warning,” Luo Binghe shot back, unimpressed. However, when Liu Qingge huffed in annoyance and turned to walk away, he frowned and called out, “Is that all?”

Liu Qingge glanced back over his shoulder. “What else?”

“Shizun invited me to meet tonight, to talk.”

“Yes,” Liu Qingge agreed — he already knew this.

There was a long silence.

It took Liu Qingge a moment to place the words, said in a pointed tone, but he remembered eventually. His sister had also reminded him of this ill thought out comment of his several times. Liu Qingge sighed in his heart.

Fortunately, he had gained experience in this kind of uncomfortable interaction.

“I spoke rashly,” he said, “I apologize.”

His tone was somewhat dull and rote. This was, after all, not Duanmu Yao, a young woman he had watched grow up and for whom he felt at least some sense of responsibility and even general attachment. Being repeatedly berated by Liu Mingyan had also soured Liu Qingge’s mood on the matter. It was true, he’d gotten carried away in the heat of the moment, unable to entirely dismiss the mindset that he had been facing a demon who deceived his loved ones. Did she need to get that angry though...?

Regardless of Liu Qingge’s lacking sincerity, this response was the last thing Luo Binghe expected. He stared, before crossing his arms and looking away — trying to cover it up with a cool, indifferent air that said, ‘I certainly never acted foolishly a moment ago.’

It resembled his master, and Liu Qingge finally softened slightly.

This person was, after all, his sister’s friend and Shen Qingqiu’s disciple.

“Want to hit me?” Liu Qingge offered.

Luo Binghe was left speechless again, even more obviously this time. Wide-eyed, he looked much younger, like the disciple he had been at Qing Jing. Lips pressed together, he quickly shook his head — on reflex, it seemed.

Was it because fighting it out didn’t actually help? That seemed difficult to credit, but Duanmu Yao also hadn’t been happy afterwards.
...By that measure, did that mean this brat wouldn’t try violence on Shen Qingqiu either?

Well, it didn’t matter. Even if he did try it, Liu Qingge would stop him.

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No matter what Liu Mingyan said and no matter how Luo Binghe acted in other matters, Liu Qingge didn’t entirely believe in his mercy or capacity for forgiveness. It wasn’t even a matter of his demonic blood. Perfectly human men and women had committed atrocities in the name of revenge, often for slights far lesser than betrayal and years of suffering.

Shen Qingqiu had suffered too, but was that any consolation? Could those feelings be weighed against each other and considered repaid?

In the heat of the moment, who was to say that Luo Binghe wouldn’t be swept away by his emotions and lash out?

Liu Qingge had seen this as a problem mostly because he wasn’t sure whether Shen Qingqiu would properly defend himself. The man’s mindset, in regard to this disciple of his, was a complete mess.

That was why Liu Qingge had decided he would just have to protect him himself.

This had seemed like a simple, easy solution to the problem. But now, he couldn’t help a creeping feeling that he had, perhaps, been arrogant in taking that for granted.

Luo Binghe had become strong. Inhumanly strong.

When Liu Qingge managed to finally find and capture another sower, and drag it over to the enclosure Shen Qingqiu had arranged in the main city plaza, there was already a similar red-skinned demon inside.

As he threw his own quarry into the array and turned to go, Liu Qingge was brought up short — by
the arrival of Luo Binghe, a third sower slack but alive in his grasp. This city... was too small, for them to be running into one other again. They eyed each other for a moment, the same prickling tension as before beginning to build.

The sower he was dragging along wasn’t slack because he had knocked it unconscious, the way Liu Qingge had, but rather from instinctive, primal terror and obedience ingrained in its blood at the demonic aura Luo Binghe was emitting. It didn’t carry far, but Lui Qingge could feel it now that they were standing this close.

It wasn’t the aura of just any demon, but of a high ranking, ancient-blooded noble one.

In regard to demon saints or even those permitted to have ‘Lang’ in their names, Liu Qingge had fought and defeated several — numerous ones, even. However, when it came to the highest authority of the demon realm, those that were called ‘Jun,’ even he wouldn’t have good odds. Only cultivators in the Nascent Soul stage would be able to approach equal footing with them, and not always even then.

Without fighting Luo Binghe directly, Liu Qingge could not judge accurately the exact nature of his demon blood. But it was not of a weak line.

Luo Binghe’s lips twitched. “Greetings to Liu-shishu,” he repeated wryly, making his way past, toward the containment array. Throwing the third sower in with the other two, he smiled and said, “There should be three more left. I’ll take care of two and leave one to Liu-shishu. Is that agreeable?”

Two to one. His point was obvious.

“Do you want to fight?” Liu Qingge asked bluntly.


Liu Qingge didn’t understand either, because he had never understood what was going through Shen Qingqiu’s head, on any subject. Another thing he didn’t understand was why Luo Binghe felt this had something to do with him.
Liu Qingge also didn’t really care.

What mattered was that two to one because four to two. When he next returned to the containment enclosure, there were already five sowers there. With his second catch, that made all six.

Turning on his heel, he rushed back to the weapons shop.

Luo Binghe was... waiting outside next to the doors, his arms crossed. The same cold scorn and suspicion flashed through his eyes as he watched Liu Qingge land in front of the store building and approach. However, he didn’t move.

“Shizun isn’t here,” he said, still watching Liu Qingge’s reaction.

Liu Qingge blinked in surprise. But Shen Qingqiu had said he would speak with Luo Binghe tonight, and Luo Binghe was here. There was nothing to do but wait.

Slowly making his way over, he leaned against the wall on the opposite of the doors from Luo Binghe and settled down to just that.

After several long moments of intense scrutiny, Luo Binghe did the same.

It had already been well after dark by the time they finished dealing with the sowers, and the night only grew colder and darker. There were no lights anywhere along the streets, no lanterns and no passersby. It truly felt like a ghost town. Even the two men waiting like guardian dogs by the doors made no movements no matter how long they stood for.

Liu Qingge only realized just how long it had really been when Mu Qingfang burst out from his makeshift cellar laboratory. Although working through a day and a night was not nearly enough to drive a cultivator of their level to exhaustion, his appearance was dishevelled from focusing entirely on his work. In his arms was a large container.

“I’ve finished refining enough pills for the surviving residents,” Mu Qingfang said, when he spotted Liu Qingge and headed over. “I’ll have the city lord gather the people and start distributing them at dawn. Have the sowers been caught?”
“Should be all of them,” Liu Qingge confirmed. He glanced at Luo Binghe.

“I circled the city a few times. There aren’t any more,” he confirmed.

Mu Qingfang nodded, somewhat distractedly. He didn’t even spare this mysteriously resurrected disciple a look — did he not recognize him...? “Good, good,” he said. “Then we can reopen the city soon.”

He didn’t stay to talk any further, heading off to do just as he’d said. However, he hadn’t claimed the matter would be resolved, with good reason. The mastermind Shen Qingqiu had surmised to be behind this remained unknown. But interrogating the sowers to their master’s existence could be done after they regrouped with the forces that had stayed behind outside Jinlan.

“Shizun hasn’t returned,” Luo Binghe noted, looking at Liu Qingge again.

Liu Qingge’s lips thinned, and he nodded. However, regardless of what Luo Binghe was probably trying to imply, he had no idea where Shen Qingqiu might have gone.

Leaving was possible, but difficult, not to mention that Shen Qingqiu had told them both that he would come to speak with Luo Binghe. Neither of them had seen him while hunting the sowers. He hadn’t been with Mu Qingfang betiher.

But there was no trace of a strong demonic presence in the city. Nor was there anyone else here on the level of a peak lord. Even if Without a Cure acted up suddenly, Shen Qingqiu was too skilled to be left helpless, and he would have called for help if he needed it.

...Did he get lost?

“Going to look for him?” Liu Qingge asked.

Luo Binghe stared at him as if expecting Shen Qingqiu to emerge from his sleeves. Liu Qingge stared back, waiting. Finally, Luo Binghe looked away. “It’s still tonight. I’ll wait,” he muttered, resuming his dog guardian stance at the weapon shop doors.
In silence, they waited.

~.~.~

Shen Qingqiu returned near dawn.

Coming down the street, he came to a stop as he caught sight of the waiting pair and stared first in surprise, then in something like annoyance. Sighing, he covered his face with one hand and muttered, “You were waiting here?”

Luo Binghe’s expression was both confused and indignant. “Yes! Shizun said you’d speak with me tonight, of course I came to look for you,” he protested.

“Did you get lost?” Liu Qingge asked.

“No,” Shen Qingqiu said shortly, dropping his hand to shook him a look. “I went to where Huan Hua Palace is staying. They wouldn’t tell me anything, so I thought you were out hunting and waited...”

So in other words, they had all waited in the wrong place and missed each other for the entire night.

Liu Qingge snorted.

How stupid.

But he couldn’t blame anyone. In fact, he felt a bit chagrined. He hadn’t expected Shen Qingqiu to be proactive enough to actually go looking for his disciple.

“...Forget it,” Shen Qingqiu sighed. “It’s almost morning. Let’s focus on resolving things here. And after that, I’ll... come to Huo Hong Valley. You’re still living there, right?”

“Ah, yes...” Luo Binghe, who had been left somewhat lost at this ridiculous development, agreed
awkwardly. The tension that had been steadily building and even the cold suspicion he had carried from the start finally eased slightly, and his face softened into something almost like a tentative smile as he looked at Shen Qingqiu. “Then, I’ll be waiting for Shizun...?”

His master’s expression toward him was still unreadable. But it too seemed to have lightened.

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Chapter 30: The Enemy is His Fiancee, round 3

They didn’t get much time to rest, in the end. Not long after dawn, thunderous cheering echoed across the city, drawing them, along with everyone else, to the main city square.

Now that the sowers had been captured and medicine had been provided for the infected, the plague could be considered resolved, and the city gates that had been tightly shut for two months were finally opened. The surviving citizens wept in relief and bitter joy, clinging to each other.

However, even in the midst of celebration, the crowds parted in awe and overflowing gratitude when the cultivators who had been standing by outside the city arrived. Among them were even the leaders of the great sect, including their own sect leader. Separating from the Huan Hua Palace master and the head cultivators of Tian Yi and Zhao Hua, Yue Qingyuan smiled as he made his way over to Shen Qingqiu, Liu Qingge and Mu Qingfang, who had returned from distributing the pills.

“Well done,” their sect leader praised. “To handle the matter so swiftly and cleanly is truly a credit to Cang Qiong. You’ve worked hard.”

“Well, I imagine two of you did,” Qi Qingqi added, smirking at Shen Qingqiu.

She wasn’t wrong, so he only smiled wryly and shrugged. While Liu Qingge had helped capture the sowers and Mu Qingfang toiled through the night, Shen Qingqiu had...

As he remembered that humiliating disaster of a night wasted, his expression twitched and his reflexively drifted toward where Luo Binghe was standing with the Huan Hua Palace group. Or rather, he was standing near them, his black clothing in stark contrast to their gold and white, but his entire demeanor conveyed a sense of distance and disinterest. Even Qin Wanyue, who seemed to be fussing over him, perhaps asking where he had been all night, was ignored.
Shen Qingqiu looked away just as quickly, before Qi Qingqi could notice and follow the direction of his gaze. He still hasn’t told the other peak lords about Luo Binghe’s return, after all, and unlike Mu Qingfang, she would recognize him easily.

As he swept his eyes over the crowd as a cover, he noticed that he hadn’t been the only one watching Luo Binghe. The old palace master expression, looking at his disciple’s son, was strange and almost... anticipatory.

Unexpectedly, when the old man glanced away, his eyes met Shen Qingqiu’s, and his expression went frigid.

The entire Huan Hua Palace really did have it out for him, and he had no idea why.

Turning back to his own sect’s representatives, Shen Qingqiu said, “There’s something I need to tell you.” He paused, lips twisting unhappily. “It’s about—”

—Luo Binghe, he had been about to say, but a loud commotion among the crowd drowned out his voice.

It was the lord of Jinlan City, dressed in mourning clothes and surrounded by his reduced retinue. He made his way forward to the gathered cultivators and dropped to kneel, full of reverence. His entourage followed suit, and so did many of the gathered residents.

“We cannot ever repay your grace in saving our insignificant city from these monsters!” the lord proclaimed. “Our lives are yours, great immortals!”

Cheers and blessings of gratitude from the crowd thundered across the city square.

The sect leaders and the older cultivators with them received the adulation gracefully, but the younger disciples were obviously moved by the scale and depth of this outpouring. Being thanked by a few families or even a small village was one thing, but being treated as saviors so publicly felt... big. Even Shen Qingqiu couldn’t deny that it left his heart pounding — even if, as stated, he hadn’t done much to contribute.
Just being part of something like this, for a normal person like him who had never planned to achieve much with his life, was an overwhelming experience.

Without thinking much, he leaned slightly to the side and let his shoulder brush against Liu Qingge’s. Liu Qingge did the same, and their arms pressed together lightly, warm and solid.

He was smiling, he realized, and quickly held up his fan to hide the expression.

But as some of the clamor and cheering began to die down, something that had been drowned out began to emerge — the malicious curses and jeering of the six captured sowers. Or rather, five of them, as one only cowered in the corner of the well-guarded array.

“Be silent!” one of the Zhao Hua monks surrounding the containment formation snapped, a sharp flash of killing intent lacing his words.

The sowers hissed but subsided. However, a certain unease had spread through the crowd at the reminder of their existence.

“What will be done with those monsters?” one of the people in the city lord’s entourage wondered.

Shen Qingqiu still wanted to interrogate them. There was a good chance they wouldn’t reveal anything, and it was even possible there was no particular scheme at work, but it would nag at him if they didn’t even try. So for now, he decided to try scaring them a little.

“Fire would be safest,” he spoke up, raising his voice enough to carry across the square. “It’s best to completely burn away the poison in their bodies.”

It was a somewhat horrifying suggestion, since his tone and phrasing implied burning them alive, rather than just how to clean up the bodies afterwards. There was a ripple through the crowd and even through the gathered cultivators, several turning to look at Shen Qingqiu with if not disapproval, then at least unease.

But the feelings of the citizens flowed in the opposite direction. They had suffered too much in the last two months, and all they felt was a flash of surprise before a feeling of satisfaction settled in.
“Burn them!” someone shouted in agreement.

“Burn them!”

“Burn! Burn!”

The monks guarding the containment area shifted uneasily, afraid that the crows might just try to storm the array and carry out this sentence immediately. Behind them, the sowers bared their small fangs, showing no fear or weakness even in the face of this cruel threat. Only that same smallest one was cowering and weeping, hiding behind the others.

Its little body trembled more and more fiercely as the situation escalated, until it suddenly went rigid, reaching its limit.

It leaped up and slammed itself into the edge of the barrier.

“Immortal Master Shen, don’t let them burn me to death!” it pleaded desperately, red skin flushing an even brighter shade. “I beg you, Immortal Master Shen, please save me!”

...It knew his name?

Among cultivators, Xiu Ya Sword Shen Qingqiu was famous enough to be generally recognized on sight, in large part due to his position as the second highest authority of the strong sect, Cang Qiong. However, that was among human cultivators. Demon information networks were rather lacking among the lower echelons, and the nobles were too arrogant to care about any human experts.

How could this insignificant demon single Shen Qingqiu out of a crowd? And even if he had been the one who had just spoken, why? Why not someone who at least looked sympathetic?

The little sower continued to pound against the array, wailing. “All we did was listen to your instructions! You never said we’d be burned alive!”
What?

Shen Qingqiu’s expression went blank in complete befuddlement.

In the ringing silence following the little sower’s exclamation, the atmosphere swiftly began to turn freezing. The joyous feelings vanished, and all the anger and resentment that had been broiling beneath suddenly turned toward Shen Qingqiu.

This was... obviously a setup. Shen Qingqiu was the one who’d asked to have them caught alive and thus able to blab about his supposed evil plans, so wouldn’t that be too stupid on his part? Who could believe this kind of random accusation?

...In this ‘average IQ 40’ setting?

Everyone.

“Master Shen! Explain this!” Huan Hua’s old palace master thundered, turning a truly fearsome glare onto Shen Qingqiu.

Around him, numerous other voices rose in disjointed support.

“Ridiculous!” Liu Qingge bit out, taking half a step forward as if to put himself between Shen Qingqiu and the crowd. The expressions on the rest of Cang Qiong’s delegation had also become cold.

“Going this far from just a few words from a demon really is ridiculous,” Qi Qingqi agreed, her playful air long since gone. “Those things can never be trusted!”

Although he appreciated the support, Shen Qingqiu wished she’d phrased it differently. Recently, he’d found himself quite sensitive to prejudice against demonkind. The reason was watching the entire spectacle with an unreadable expression, when Shen Qingqiu couldn’t help sneaking a glance at him.
“It’s not just that thing’s words!” one of the Huan Hua Palace disciples shot back. He faltered as Qi Qingqi and Liu Qingge turned their glares on him, but with the rest of his group murmuring their support, he pressed on, “Yesterday, we happened to see that there were marks from the sowers’ infection on Elder Shen’s arm. But today those marks are gone! It’s too soon for the medicine to have worked, so how is that possible?”

“What?” Liu Qingge demanded, turning to shoot Shen Qingqiu a sharp look.

“You clearly saw wrong,” Shen Qingqiu answered the disciple calmly, waving the fan in his cursed right hand, which was indeed free of any marks.

They hadn’t seen wrong, of course. He had been infected, but Luo Binghe had removed the poison. So had that been in preparation for this...?

...No.

With an effort of will, Shen Qingqiu didn’t look at his wayward disciple.

It was true, destroying Shen Qingqiu’s reputation had been masterminded by Luo Binghe in the novel. It hadn’t even been hard, with how much hate the original goods had aggroed through his various scummy deeds, but given Bing-ge’s methods and ways, coming up with false charges was entirely possible as well.

...For the original Luo Binghe.

But what part of that applied here? Looking at everything, what kind of convoluted game would Shen Qingqiu have to assume this Luo Binghe here and now was playing?

Confronting Shen Qingqiu and not even hiding his anger, never even joining Huan Hua Palace and treating them coldly, patiently waiting all night just because Shen Qingqiu promised to come speak with him... It was all just too messy for the ever smooth and manipulative Bing-ge.

This child was certainly furious and betrayed, and Shen Qingqiu still wasn’t sure he wouldn’t flip out and rip off a few limbs. But all of that had been put on display from the start.
To have circled back around to blackening Shen Qingqiu’s reputation through some great scheme was probably...

It was just the Great God of Recycling Plot Lines again, wasn’t it?

Raising his fan a little higher, Shen Qingqiu quickly hid the sudden relieved smile he hadn’t quite been able to repress.

It was just the plot moving itself along. And hadn’t Shen Qingqiu prepared for that? He had avoided all the hateful acts of the original, so all the plot could rely on was weak false accusations. Something like that, he could naturally overcome with just a bit of dramatic struggle.

Snapping his fan shut, he cleared his expression into neutrality and raised his chin proudly. “These accusations are baseless. I have done nothing to be ashamed of, and I have nothing to hide,” he said calmly.

...He shouldn’t have said that.

Too much! It was just the relief making him too bold! Quickly, take back those clearly flag-raising words!

“Really?” Huan Hua’s old palace master said. “That’s quite different from what I heard.”

Unfortunately, it was too late.

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t believe he had walked into this kind of trap face-first. As an experienced novel reader, he felt vaguely ashamed.

“In fact, if one cares to look, there are many things Master Shen has concealed over the years,” the old master went on. Shen Qingqiu hadn’t imagined it before — the old man’s expression toward him was filled with enmity, although he still couldn’t guess the cause. “Previously, the eldest young miss of the Duanmu Family uncovered quite a number of troubling incidents, when she investigated for Master Liu’s sake.”
That same Master Liu was clearly not even a little grateful. His entire being radiated nearly murderous intent.

Calm down, Shen Qingqiu tried to convey as he tugged surreptitiously on his sleeve.

To his surprise, it actually worked — somewhat. Glancing at him, Liu Qingge frowned but visibly reined in his temper. Thankfully hidden by the folds of their clothing, his knuckles brushed against Shen Qingqiu’s.

—That’s the opposite of helpful, Great Master Liu! Don’t flirt in public! ...That makes it really hard to keep a straight face!

“She didn’t bring it up, so why are you?” Liu Qingge said coldly, turning back to Huan Hua’s old master and the others assembled behind him.

“I won’t speculate on the private matters regarding Master Liu’s former engagement,” the old palace master said, full of implication, “but there are some things that can’t be overlooked. Instances of foul play and underhanded means, countless talented disciples leaving the sect with their cultivation ruined — or even dead... With matters going unaddressed so long, it will begin to reflect on all of Cang Qiong.”

Unlike the business with the sowers, these accusations were completely fair and real. However, they were also old news and not enough to actually do more than give others cause to sneer at Shen Qingqiu.

Feeling the same, Qi Qingqi snorted loudly and pointedly. “Oh? Then show us one person who suffered these underhanded means or improper teaching,” she said. “This is all just rumors and hearsay!”

Fighting outside threats, as long as you won, no one could complain about your means, and no one within Cang Qiong would admit a complaint about the original Shen Qingqiu’s admittedly dirty fighting among their ranks. As for how he handled his disciples, cultivation was always a dangerous path, and the original goods had at least kept himself to subtle means of sabotage. ...Aside from the beatings, but in this kind of setting, even that was permissible for a master.

And of course, his current disciples would willing and happily lie for their master, claiming he had never so much as given them a sharp look, must less raised a hand against them.
“Then what would Elder Qi call ordering a teenage boy to fight against a demonic sect elder with hundreds of years of experience and armor bristling with poisoned spikes?” Qin Wanyue burst out. “Is that considered proper teaching among Cang Qiong?”

...Except that one! That was one disciple who did not have good feelings about the current Shen Qingqiu at all!

Since Qin Wanyue was standing next to Luo Binghe, everyone’s eyes naturally fell on them both. Internally, Shen Qingqiu winced. He could feel the jolt of surprise that passed through Qi Qingqi and even Yue Qingyuan, as they recognized his supposedly deceased disciple.

“Luo Binghe?” Qi Qingqi exclaimed in surprise, heedless of the ripple of surprise that passed through the gathered cultivators. “It’s really you? But weren’t you killed? Since you’re alive, why didn’t you return to Qing Jing Peak? Your master has been—”

Actually, his master had recently returned to normal, if now with a slight change in relationship status. Realizing this, Qi Qingqi seemed to make her own correlations, and her eyes narrowed as she glanced at Shen Qingqiu.

“Yes, that’s quite a puzzling point,” Huan Hua’s old master persisted. “He clearly didn’t die, so why claim he did? And why would this upright, skilled disciple choose not to return to his dear master?”

No, the most puzzling point was why this old man had it out for Shen Qingqiu.

This was the thing Shen Qingqiu most couldn’t understand. The attitude of the Huan Hua Palace disciples seemed clear now — they had just mirrored their master, or perhaps had even been instigated on purpose. But why did the old palace master take this kind of severe stance? For just Luo Binghe’s sake? Just what kind of misunderstanding did they need to cause this, when Luo Binghe seemed completely disinterested in Huan Hua Palace?

Especially when Luo Binghe himself didn’t appreciate this efforts in the least. Something irritated and impatient flashed through his expression, and he finally spoke up... taking the opposite side than what Shen Qingqiu might have expected.

“I fell into the Endless Abyss,” Luo Binghe said abruptly, cutting through the old palace master’s
momentum and any rebuttal Cang Qiong might have made. He looked around slowly, taking in everyone’s reactions as they hung on to his words. “So it’s only natural that Shizun assumed I had perished.”

It was a simple and clean explanation that absolved Shen Qingqiu of any implications regarding his fate.

Anyone who thought about it more deeply could even come up with a number of speculative possibilities why he hadn’t returned to his sect. Unfortunately, they were generally not very favorable for Luo Binghe.

Shen Qingqiu sighed quietly.

Well. One good turn deserved another.

“He already let me know that he had survived. Liu-shidi and Liu Mingyan as well,” Shen Qingqiu said. “Naturally, he is free to return to Qing Jing anytime he wishes. However... with his current level, I have nothing left to teach him. It would be fair to say his level of cultivation already exceeds mine.”

Of course! He was, after all, the protagonist!

The protagonist was staring at Shen Qingqiu with a look he couldn’t entirely read but which made him want to pat Luo Binghe on the head, the way he used, going ‘there, there.’ Without thinking, Shen Qingqiu smiled. Luo Binghe looked away quickly.

If there were still some points of doubt left — for example, why Shen Qingqiu didn’t mention his disciple’s survival to anyone else — there no longer seemed room to bring them up.

The atmosphere as a whole had changed, the momentum of the accusations broken.

Sensing the same thing, Yue Qingyuan stepped forward. “If there is someone who wishes to raise accusations against Shen-shidi, then we will certainly give them full attention,” he said. “But we will also not allow his name to be—”
“That name—” a female voice suddenly rang out, quick and sharp, “Begging Sect Leader Yue’s pardon, but that name is... Shen Jiu, isn’t it? That person was originally called Shen Jiu, wasn’t he?”

Yue Qingyuan faltered obviously, and in this opening the woman who had spoken stepped forward.

It was Qiu Haitang.

Of course it was.

Thinking about, Shen Qingqiu should have expected her. With every other possible accusation piling up on him, how could the God of Plotlines forget this key witness? Long in the past, Shen Qingqiu had vaguely thought about how to deal with her when she inevitably appeared, and his decision had been simply to refuse to acknowledge that he knew her. In the end, she had nothing but her word...

That word she had was ‘fiancée.’

And ‘massacre.’ And ‘notorious criminal master, Wu Yanzi.’

Shen Yuan, when reading Proud Immortal Demon Way, had noted the depth of detail in her story with some interest. To bring up so many unique points, it felt like these things would surely be revisited in the future. Arguably, this kind of flat scummy character didn’t deserve this much relevance though...

Now—

He didn’t want her to say them. He didn’t want to stand there and keep a blank face while those things were put out there. Because once it was said, once it was heard — no one would forget it. He... didn’t want...

He didn’t want Liu Qingge to remember that he had hated Shen Qingqiu. He didn’t want him to remember why.
The feeling of refusal and irreconciliation pressed against his chest.

“And you might be? I’m afraid I don’t recognize this madam,” Shen Qingqiu said, striking back even without waiting for her attack.

Qiu Haitang paled in fury at his blatant lie, her lips pressed firmly together until they went white.

It wasn’t fair to her, of course.

But how was it fair to him?

The things he had caused himself, his own actions, he would take full responsibility for. Living this life, he would do that. But why did he have to shoulder things he didn’t even know the truth about?

“There’s no recognizing me? Don’t lie, you beast in human form!” Qiu Haitang spat. “This face... no matter how different you look now, I would never mistake this face! You’ve climbed up so high, and now you’re just trying to hide what kind of thing you used to be!”

“Being blindly accused three times in one day, I seem to have quite a rare fortune today,” Shen Qingqiu snapped, by every measure clearly losing his temper.

The crowd murmured uneasily, unsure of what side to take. Those who protested were always seen as guilty. But it would hardly be surprising even for an innocent man to reach the limit of his tolerance after being talked about in this rude, hateful way.

“Yes, it’s quite an interesting coincidence,” Qi Qingqi agreed, looking at Qiu Haitang without patience.

It really was unfair to her, who had raised a genuine accusation, and she naturally refused to back down. Her cheeks flushed with anger and indignation, and her hand dropped to the hilt of her sword.

“I know what you’re implying, but I’ve spoken no lies! I swear it on the ruins of my family’s
home!” Qiu Haitang protested hotly. “How many years have I searched for him? How could I forget? After all, this sanctimonious man and I were childhood sweethearts... I’m his fiancee!”

Next to him, Liu Qingge jerked in surprise.

Shen Qingqiu gritted his teeth. “What nonsense! I’ve never been engaged!”

“You’ll say you’ve never been a slave either! Or purchased and freed by my Qiu family!” Qiu Haitang said. She lifted her chin, glaring down at him. “Or massacred them with the help of that heinous criminal, Wu Yanzi!”

That name was like a bludgeon. Even the ordinary citizens recognized it immediately, their previous ambivalence taking a turn against Shen Qingqiu. Even though Wu Yanzi had been missing for two decades, his infamy still persisted. That was how widespread and notorious his crimes had been.

Even Cang Qiong’s group wavered, uncertainty passing through their expressions.

It was all a great deal to take in, after all.

Only Yue Qingyuan remained unmoved. If anything, his expression had smoothed out into complete calm and even disinterest, as if this matter had become too ludicrous to even entertain. Ah, Sect Leader, this level of bias is really...

“Does Miss Qiu have any evidence behind those claims?” he said.

“That...” His sheer indifference momentarily made Qiu Haitang hesitate, but she rallied quickly. “Does Sect Leader Yue have evidence against them? Does anyone? None of you know who he was or what he did before age fifteen!”

They didn’t, of course. Everything about Shen Qingqiu’s past before joining Cang Qiong was unknown.

“That’s right, there are just too many things we don’t know,” Huan Hua’s old master agreed,
stepping up to support Qiu Haitang. “Sect Leader Yue, Cang Qiong’s loyalty among your peak lords is famous. But loyalty should not mean blind protection. Right and wrong must be separated clearly, and treated appropriately.”

Yue Qingyuan’s expression didn’t change as he looked at the old palace master. “Your meaning is?”

“We must investigate fully,” the old master said. “The four sects will determine the truth. And in the meantime, it would be best to have Shen Qingqiu placed in Huan Hua Palace’s custody. With all due respect to Sect Leader Yue, it is the only way we can be sure there will be no... unexpected mishaps due to personal affairs.”

So, he was going to prison. There really was no avoiding the long arm of the Plot God.

Shen Qingqiu struggled with himself for a moment, then forced himself to accept it. His shoulders slumped slightly, as the tension drained out of him.

At least he had been able to stop Qui Haitang from dramatically retelling the entire miserable story as she pleased and made his rejection of it all clear. Like this, it was at least somewhat unclear and opinions were more or less divided, right...?

He glanced at Liu Qingge.

Liu Qingge had been looking at him, his brows furrowed deeply. At the sight of that frown, Shen Qingqiu’s stomach dropped and his breath hitched for a moment.

He must have made some expression, because that furrow between Liu Qingge’s brows deepend even further and he scowled. His hand clamped around Shen Qingqiu’s, and he dragged him back sharply—

—and stepped in front of him, leaving only the view of Liu Qingge’s broad back as he put himself between between the other sects and Shen Qingqiu.

“He’s not going,” Liu Qingge said without a hint of compromise.
Until then, no matter what kinds of accusations or insinuations were thrown around, only Qiu Haitang had ever seemed on the verge of violence, and even then Shen Qingqiu had not responded. But all of a sudden, the tone of the confrontation changed, and the air brimmed with the threat of bloodshed.

The old palace master’s expression was thunderous as he looked down on Liu Qingge. “Peak Lord Liu! Remember your position!” he snapped, with full weight of his disapproval as an elder and a sect leader. “Is this how Cang Qiong conducts itself?”

Liu Qingge was unaffected. His only response was to draw Cheng Luan, the blade gleaming with his sharp intent.

In response, the Huan Hua Palace disciples drew their swords as well and quickly moved to array themselves against them.

“How did he manage to receive this level of loyalty?”

Shen Qingqiu didn’t know. Even if it was just Cang Qiong’s nature to stand together against outsiders, it really was...

Too much!

Way too much!

While Huan Hua Palace marshalled their forces, the cultivators from Tian Yi Outlook, Zhao Hua Temple and the smaller sects that had gathered to help Jinlan City were trapped in the middle, caught between taking a side and at least protecting the civilians, who were quickly fleeing the city squared that looked ready to become a battleground.
Was a war between sects going to break out just like that? Just over known scumbag Shen Qingqiu?

Desperately, he glanced at his last hope for a voice of reason.

...He shouldn’t have hoped. Yue Qingyuan had never had anything like ‘reason’ when applied to Shen Qingqiu, and that was still true. Their sect leader’s expression was firm as he stepped forward and said, “Liu-shidi is right. Shen Qingqiu will not go with you.”

Even though his tone remained even, it was not due to any possibility of negotiation. Without waiting or the slightest bit of hesitation, Yue Qingyuan laid a hand on the hilt of his sword and drew it enough to reveal a sliver of the gleaming white blade.

The effect was instantaneous — and oppressive.

In the novel, Xuan Su’s power had been described as being able to go against even a descendant of Heavenly Demon blood. Put in other words, Yue Qingyuan had been likely the only character who could fight the adult Luo Binghe on equal footing. That was why Bing-ge had ultimately resorted to an underhanded trick, leading to the sect leader’s canon death.

Put in other words, Yue Qingyuan fighting was like Luo Binghe fighting — earthshaking and destructive.

Not just the powerless civilians, even weaker cultivators wouldn’t need to live anymore.

This was it, Shen Qingqiu realized. Supporting a scum villain was like paving your own path of destruction. And for everything Cang Qiong had given him, he at least couldn’t repay them with that.

He gave Liu Qingge’s hand a squeeze, and let go. Stepping quickly around him before Liu Qingge could stop him — and before he could think better of it — Shen Qingqiu threw Xiu Ya onto the ground in front of Huan Hua’s old palace master.

“Enough. There’s no need for this,” he declared — sounding pretty cool, he thought. “I will come
willingly.”

...Seeing the cruel, satisfied look on the old master’s face, Shen Qingqiu regretted it already.

~.~.~
Notes: SQQ goes to jail, does not pass go. Jail is where this loser belongs. Jail him!!

~.~.~

Chapter 31: I regret

With the deus ex plot out in full force, there had been no escaping it, Shen Qingqiu tried to tell himself. Going to prison was inevitable. He could at least take the chance to earn himself some character points by going willingly.

[Complexity of the role of “Shen Qingqiu” +30 points.]

The System agreed. Its mechanical voice sounded a little mocking, in his opinion.

Neither Liu Qingge nor Yue Qingyuan had been pleased or willing, of course, but both resheathed their swords in the end. They could only watch as Huan Hua’s old palace master picked up Xiu Ya and, with a smug, satisfied air, jerked his head toward his disciples.

The tension finally broke. Quiet murmurs rose up like small waves, but no one dared to speak loudly, only huddling together in small groups, shaken and unsure.

Liu Qingge’s lips were pressed together firmly and unhappily as he spun to glare at Shen Qingqiu. “Don’t go,” he demanded, his tone clipped and full of emotion.

Shen Qingqiu shook his head. “There’s no helping it. I’m not letting everyone fight it out like this,” he said. “Just... I didn’t collude with demons.” He blurted it out without meaning to. “And I wouldn’t kill an entire family. I...”

He wouldn’t, but Shen Qingqiu did. Qiu Haitang had been pulled into the protective circle of several Huan Hua Palace disciples, and Qin Wanyue comforted her as she now began to cry quietly.
There was proof and evidence. Shen Qingqiu had done that, and he had ruined numerous disciples, just as the old palace master said. The peak lords themselves had seen it, even. So why did they...?

“I know,” Liu Qingge said. And, without the slightest regard to all the hundreds if not thousands of people watching, stepped closer. His hand rested on Shen Qingqiu’s arm.

For a moment, Shen Qingqiu was sure he was going to kiss him.

He... might have started to lean in.

Maybe Liu Qingge would have, but the Cang Qiong group around them, politely looking away as if they weren’t just filing away all this juicy gossip, shifted and reluctantly began to part — making way for Gongyi Xiao and several of his fellow disciples. In his hands was a very familiar red cord.

Huan Hua’s head disciple faltered as Liu Qingge turned a murderous glare on him.

Gathering himself and pretending he didn’t feel any disappointment, Shen Qingqiu patted his arm and stepped forward. He held out his hands.

“Elder Shen...” Gongyi Xiao cleared his throat, instinctively cringing away from Liu Qingge’s general direction. “Please excuse me. I’m sure the truth will come to light soon, and Elder Shen will be exonerated. We will treat Elder Shen with the utmost respect until then.”

Well, he probably would, but he would be the only one. The disciples behind him were glaring at Shen Qingqiu as if was the second coming of the Infernal Lord, the bloodiest demon sovereign in recorded history.

Unfair. At worst, he was only a petty scumbag. He didn’t deserve this level of hate!

While Gongyi Xiao carefully secured the Immortal Binding Cable around Shen Qingqiu, tight enough to hold but no tighter lest he incur the wrath of the watching Liu Qingge, the sect leaders haggled over when his trial would take place — or rather, how long he would be imprisoned.
Sneaking glances at this somewhat undignified display, Shen Qingqiu felt like he should have perhaps heroically submitted to the full month as well and maybe earned some more ‘points.’ But the truth was that he really, really didn’t want to be in the Water Prison longer than necessary. With Huan Hua Palace’s attitude toward him, it would not end with just being stashed in some corner and forgotten in isolation.

Since arriving in this world, Shen Yuan had been injured, of course, sometimes even quite seriously. He had been poisoned and hurt in a variety of ways. But recalling the things described to have occurred in the Water Prison in the original...

When the decision was finally made, he had to take a moment to steel his nerves.

He wasn’t alone in that, either.

Qi Qingqi had folded her arms tightly, as if to stop herself from doing something rash, and she was visibly grinding her teeth. Mu Qingfang and Shang Qinghua both looked worried, in their very different ways. Yue Qingyuan’s expression was flat and almost frighteningly empty. And Liu Qingge...

“I’m going with you,” he said suddenly.

He had already been hovering the whole time, refusing to take even half a step back, and now that Shen Qingqiu was about to be led away by Huan Hua Palace, he still tried to follow. His expression, though furrowed and undeniably angry, showed an almost painful helplessness.

“It’s fine, Liu-shidi,” Shen Qingqiu assured him quickly. “I’ll see you in a week.”

Liu Qingge’s lips thinned. “One week,” he said.

After that, his tone said, he would tear the Water Prison apart. He really would too — Shen Qingqiu thought, smothering an unexpected smile.

As he was pulled away, he managed to catch one last glimpse of Liu Qingge, before the Huan Hua Palace disciples closed ranks. Shen Qingqiu thought that maybe he regretted not leaning in a little more, a little faster. He was already a criminal being taken away to prison, what was the point of being embarrassed?
He regretted not talking to Luo Binghe the night before too, no matter how late it had been.

Strangely, when he looked around, he couldn’t see any sign of his disciple’s black-clad figure. In the commotion, Luo Binghe had disappeared.

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Shen Qingqiu did not expect that he would only be in prison for a few hours before receiving a visitor.

He had closed his eyes to meditate, feeling somewhat more bored than uneasy by then, and when he opened them, there was a dark figure standing opposite him on the stone platform.

“Luo Binghe?” Shen Qingqiu blurted out.

No one was supposed to be able to come without a waist pass... No, wait. More importantly, the surrounding waterfall of corrosive liquid hadn’t stopped for a moment, so how could he have gotten in?

...Dream realm. Right.

It was a needlessly realistic dream too. There was absolutely no need to leave him tied up just like he was in reality. He had long since taken a seat, leaving him now bound and looking up at Luo Binghe’s tall figure. It should have been a worrying, uncomfortable situation. But... somehow, Shen Qingqiu found himself less concerned than he would have expected.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe greeted him. “Since you’re unable to come to Huo Hong Valley like we decided, I came to see you instead.”

Shen Qingqiu smiled wryly. “I did promise,” he agreed.

And then he stopped.
He had no idea how to continue.

He had definitely planned out what to say, before. Several options, even. So why was it that now he couldn’t remember a single one of them? Why was nothing at all coming to mind?

Luo Binghe watched him squirm, looking everywhere except at his disciple, opening his mouth and shutting it again soundlessly, without any readable expression. He didn’t look angry. But he didn’t look anything else either. Then, finally, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, as if he had come to a decision.

“Shizun asked me what I wanted,” he said. “Do you remember?”

“...I do,” Shen Qingqiu said.

“What I want,” Luo Binghe said slowly, looking him in the eye without wavering, “is for you to be honest with me. Even just this once.”

It was an accusation, really. I didn’t lie to you! Shen Qingqiu wanted to protest. Really, I didn’t lie! Except that, of course, his entire existence as ‘Shen Qingqiu’ was a lie. It took an effort of will not to look away.

There must have been something in his expression. Seeing it, Luo Binghe’s face shifted slightly. “I’ll only ask one question,” he said. “Shizun, please answer it this time.

“Do you regret it?”

It was this question again. This had been precisely what Luo Binghe asked when they were first reunited at the Nine Heavens Divine Pagoda. And back then, he had answered...

“Does it make a difference, if I do or if I don’t?” Shen Qingqiu asked again in return.

He still didn’t know how to answer. What was he supposed to say? What was he supposed to
Did he regret not disobeying the System? But he would have just been killed as a result. Even if he suffered for three years, at least Luo Binghe had been guaranteed to survive and come out stronger on the other side.

Did he regret not looking for some alternative? But what alternative could there be? This was the story of Proud Immortal Demon Way, and Luo Binghe’s rise as a demon lord and obtaining Xin Mo were key parts of it. The System had gone as far as doubling the already insurmountable point penalty when he hesitated for a moment. The message had been clear — no deviation would have been allowed.

What was he supposed to regret?

What was he supposed to say?

“Why is it always this question?” Shen Qingqiu bit out, his tone carrying a rare sharpness. He wondered if he sounded as bitter as he felt. “It doesn’t change anything either way. It can’t be undone, so what does it matter?”

“It matters to me!” Luo Binghe burst out, loud enough to make Shen Qingqiu jump slightly. They stared at each other for a moment, before Luo Binghe breathed out sharply, reining himself in. “It matters to me,” he repeated, still harsh and cutting. “Shizun, you’re always like this, you always hide the truth and refuse to answer... So just this once — be honest with me!”

Shen Qingqiu’s bound hands clenched.

What could he say to that?

When he looked up again, Luo Binghe’s expression had become brittle. Even as he tried to maintain his hard, angry facade, the desperate plea in his eyes, the pained furrow between his brows, the shimmer of tears was impossible to miss.

This was what he wanted. What he desperately needed to know, for some reason.
Didn’t Shen Qingqiu owe him at least that much?

“Of course... Of course I regret it,” he forced out, one word at a time. His teeth ached, grinding together. “I regret it to death! How could I not regret it!”

It didn’t matter if he didn’t even know what he could have done differently or what he was supposed to regret. Because he did regret all of it. He hated that it had happened, that he hadn’t done something better, somehow. He regretted it to death.

There was only one other thing he could think to say, now that he had started speaking. He himself couldn’t believe it would help or matter, but it was the only advice Liu Qingge had given him, when Shen Qingqiu had discussed it all with him.

‘If you were wrong, apologize.’ Ah, Great Master Liu, not all of us are as strong as you...

“Binghe...” Shen Qingqiu said helplessly, “I’m sorry.”

Luo Binghe stared at him, his face wiped of expression.

The silence stretched from one long moment into another, seemingly for eternity. Even the sound of the acid waterfall had disappeared, and the details of the dream had long blurred into deep vague shadows around the edges. But the kind of fear Shen Qingqiu felt was completely different from what he had expected.

Not cold, limb-trembling terror for his life, but a small, inescapable dread twisting his insides — the fear that, just as he’d always thought, there was no hope he’d be forgiven.

...He wanted to be forgiven. He hadn’t even realized it.

Then, abruptly, Luo Binghe’s shoulders hitched.

His expression crumbled. And, to Shen Qingqiu’s mounting horror, tears began to stream down his cheeks.
“Shizun...” he cried. But he didn’t look relieved or glad. He looked frustrated and very, very hurt, as if all they had done was tear open a wound that hadn’t healed.

He took a step back, and then another, and ducked his head as if he couldn’t bear to let Shen Qingqiu see his face any longer. Around them, the dream realm trembled. And, as Luo Binghe spun around and fled, it collapsed completely.

Stupid!

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

The thought repeated in Shen Qingqiu’s mind as he opened his eyes, back in the real water prison. The sound of the acid waterfall beating down around the stone platform drowned out the harsh curse he bit off — at himself.

It was just as he’d always known. Those kinds of words really were completely pointless.

But the anger drained away quickly, leaving only a bone-deep exhaustion. There was already nothing more he could do.

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Inside a small room at an inn in Huayue City, Luo Binghe opened his eyes and stared up at the darkened ceiling. His expression didn’t change, but tears silently dripped from the corners of his eyes. With a shuddering breath, he threw his arm over his face and ignored the furious pounding in his head.

“Shizun...” he repeated, his voice choked with emotion.

He hadn’t known what to expect. He still hadn’t even known what he really wanted. But just a few words from Shen Qingqiu had somehow managed to unravel his composure completely.
Even after everything, even when he thought he would have to give it up, the bond between master and disciple remained this strong.

He didn’t want to lose it. More than anything, that was why Luo Binghe had struggled so much to obtain a nebulous *something* from Shen Qingqiu, he realized finally. But... what was he supposed to do now? Could he really just forget everything that had happened? The crushing pain of betrayal, three years of struggle through hell, the dark anger and doubts that were always gnawing at him, the distrust and cold calculation that had now become instinctive and ingrained...

Could he really just let it go? Could he really just accept that it had happened and... forgive?

No. The refusal was like a hot blade digging between his eyes and into his mind.

Grimacing, Luo Binghe turned his head slightly to look at Xin Mo, where he had left the sword propped up against the wall. Liu Mingyan’s tassel swayed slightly, hanging from the tip of the hilt.

He pushed it down and, closing his eyes, turned away.

Instead, his hand drifted up to rest lightly against the jade Guanyin under his shirt. Just feeling its familiar shape under his fingertips made his heart calm and the tension in his body ease.

...He could. He could forgive.

He still had a human heart that knew how to love. For everyone who had loved him, for his mother and Liu Mingyan and even Shen Qingqiu himself, he wouldn’t give that up.

He just... needed a little time, until it hurt a little less.

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His Underhanded Means

Chapter 32: His Underhanded Means

Once he had made his decision, Luo Binghe couldn’t sit still.

Although he had previously spent a good while idling listlessly around Huo Hong Valley, that had been an unnatural state for him, brought about by the extreme disarray in his heart — unable to accept any course of action and unable to let go either.

Now, even if his heart hadn’t settled, that uncertainty had already been wiped away, and Luo Binghe began to think.

...It was a bit vexing to realize in retrospect just how much he hadn’t been using his head.

The most immediate matter was Jinlan City.

He had been suspected from the start that something had been at work, and that little play after the sower plague was cured made it even more abundantly obvious.

Someone was targeting Shen Qingqiu. Quite possibly, everything in Jinlan City had been done for this purpose — the sowers, Huan Hua Palace’s accusations, Qiu Haitang’s timely appearance. They had even involved Luo Binghe to that end, and he had unintentionally contributed by healing the sower poison in Shen Qingqiu.

Shizun hadn’t mentioned it, even when accused. And then, he even said that he would welcome Luo Binghe back at Qing Jing, if he chose to return.

Whether he would return or not, Luo Binghe wasn’t ready to say. But casually turning the possibility over in his mind left a lazy smile on his face. It would be nice, he thought, to see Ning Yingying and even the other disciples again. It would be nice to see the bamboo groves and Shizun’s small house again, as something more than just a thief sneaking in. It would be nice to go home.
However, he wouldn’t go back without Shizun. And no matter his feelings on Shen Qingqiu, he wouldn’t stand anyone treating him like this either.

Luo Binghe was not a person anyone could casually cross.

He would get to the bottom of this plot, and make everyone involved pay dearly.

It was good to have something so simple to occupy himself with. Still smiling, Luo Binghe headed out with the first light of morning, intent on making certain inquiries.

The easiest target was Qiu Haitang, and that was where Luo Binghe intended to start. A little asking around was enough to find out that she had been given lodgings in Huayue City’s most luxurious inn, where she was to remain pending Shen Qingqiu’s public trial and her own testimony in it. For unspoken but clearly implied reasons, Huan Hua Palace went as far as to assign her a contingent of guards.

Luo Binghe slipped by them with barely an effort.

The small courtyard she had been given had several rooms and a garden, where Qiu Haitang had been taking a walk. When she stepped back inside and saw Luo Binghe sitting on an ornately carved couch, her expression flickered between the expected shock — and the equally expected attraction. It was something Luo Binghe had long since grown used to. Even though an unknown man had appeared in her rooms, Qiu Haitang didn’t raise the alarm, only glancing away and back coquettishly, a faint blush suffusing her cheeks.

“Ah... Young Master,” she said, “is there something I can do for you?”

Originally, Luo Binghe had intended to question her. But wasn’t there a simpler way?

“Young Master?” Qiu Haitang called out again. Belatedly, a sliver of suspicion flickered across her face.

Luo Binghe didn’t answer. He gestured carelessly — and Qiu Haitang toppled over, already unconscious. Closing his eyes, he followed her into the dream realm.
Without bothering to form a stable dreamscape, he began to flip backwards through her memories. Traveling to Huayue City, the confrontation at Jinlan, waiting outside Jinlan for the right time... as expected, her appearance there had been no coincidence. Someone had instigated and directed her, and that someone’s identity...

The flipbook of memories came to a stop.

An unknown room deep in Huan Hua Palace. Stepping inside, Qiu Haitang pulled down her hood once the servant who had guided her departed. There was only one other person in the room — the old palace master himself.

The memory was not too old, occurring some time after Luo Binghe had returned to the human world. Neither of the two lofty immortals looked much different from when he had last seen them, but the cold expression on the palace master’s face was completely unlike the welcoming facade he had always put on in front of Luo Binghe.

He skimmed quickly through the conversation, their voices fading in and out.

“...looking for someone to provide backing...”

“...destroy Shen Qingqiu...”

“...anything to see him burn...”

“...not even his sect leader...”

“...wait for the right time...”

The gist of it was simple. Qiu Haitang had indeed harbored a desperate wish for revenge against Shen Jiu and never stopped looking for a chance to move against him. However, by the time she found out his whereabouts, during Duanmu Yao’s investigations into his past, he was already a peak lord of Cang Qiong, and making accusations blindly would only lead to her being suppressed or even silenced. So she bided her time, until a stronger backer with an equal enmity appeared.
That backer was Huan Hua’s old palace master. He found her and instructed her to wait, then later come to Jinlan City, where everything was arranged to cast doubt on Shen Qingqiu and force him to submit to imprisonment and trial.

The question was why.

The palace master was a generation older than Shen Qingqiu and had been in power since before he even became a Qing Jing disciple. How could Shen Qingqiu have possibly managed to offend him to this extent? Luo Binghe had never even heard of any such incident. In fact, as far as he knew, Shen Qingqiu had never had any dealings with Huan Hua Palace at all.

It wasn’t a simply grudge either. Beyond this little play of accusations, it appeared likely that the old palace master had instigated the sowers as well, leading to the deaths of thousands in Jinlan and even a number of Huan Hua disciples as well.

“Why go this far?” Luo Binghe wondered, staring at the frozen, faded figures in the memory.

He had been speaking to himself, but there was a sharp answering harrumph. “Can’t you tell?” a dry, crackling voice snapped from all around him. “It’s because of you!”

Luo Binghe didn’t show any surprise. He had sensed the Dream Demon’s presence from the start. “Elder,” he greeted calmly. “What do you mean?”

“Hmph!” Dream Demon huffed again, even louder and more offended. “It’s this Elder, Elder thing! You and your obsession with that Xiu Ya Sword! Just some third rate human cultivator, and you won’t even look at anyone else! Who wouldn’t want to get rid of him?”

“Oh?” Luo Binghe said lowly.

He didn’t let off any killing intent, but his esteemed elder couldn’t miss the sense of menace that began to seep from him. The Dream Demon’s presence seemed to cringe away, and he coughed awkwardly.

It wasn’t as if the Dream Demon had never considered just ruining Shen Qingqiu’s mind and leaving him in an inescapable coma. He was simply prudent enough to know he would not only lose Luo Binghe as a student — and a host for his weakening consciousness — but also gain him
as a lifelong, unrelenting enemy.

“I look at other people,” Luo Binghe went on, choosing not to pursue the question of who might have wanted to be rid of Shen Qingqiu. “Like—”

“Yes, the girl, I know,” Elder Dream Demon groaned. “The one you still haven’t bedded! Even though she’s clearly into you! And such a beauty! I know that huge thing of yours works fine, so why are you like this...?”

Luo Binghe ignored the endless complaints with practiced ease. “You’re saying he staged all of this just to get me to join Huan Hua Palace?” he steered the conversation back to the original point. “I haven’t shown him anything worth going this far for.”

He had, after all, been fairly lowkey since his return to the human realm. Competent, but not outstanding. From the view of any observer, if he exceeded Huan Hua’s head disciple, it was only by the smallest margin.

Then, rather than his abilities, was it because of this face...?

“It doesn’t matter,” he decided finally, dismissing his speculations for the moment. “I’ll find out from him, one way or another. If he won’t say... this method is also quite convenient.”

“Finally, you understand the power of dream manipulation!” Elder Dream Demon muttered. Taking this as a peace offering of some sort, he subsided. He asked instead, “So what are you going to do about this woman?”

“In what sense?”

“Don’t play dumb. What are you going to do about her testimony against your precious master?” Elder Dream Demon said, irritated again. “Don’t pretend you’re going to just leave him, I know you better than that.”

Luo Binghe made a noncommittal sound. “Cang Qiong won’t let anything happen to him,” he said.
The sect leader would probably be entirely willing to go to war with Huan Hua Palace for Shen Qingqiu’s sake, to say nothing of Liu Qingge. And unlike the matter with Luo Binghe himself, Shen Qingqiu had made every effort to deny her accusations. He wasn’t going to be dragged down by guilt, if her story was even true in the first place.

It... was probably true, wasn’t it?

As true as anything involving Shen Qingqiu could be without his side of it, which he hid so unrelentingly. Luo Binghe felt a small wave of amusement, only slightly tinged with bitterness. But still, now he wondered...

“There’s not much point in checking her memories of it,” Elder Dream Demon said, guessing at least some of what Luo Binghe was thinking. “It’s about as she said. Well, what she remembers is. Let me tell you, she doesn’t know anything. How Xiu Ya Sword saw it is a whole different story. Humans get so twisted. A demon would never bother with this kind of thing!”

That was only a little accurate — most demons were too thick-headed and brutish to bother with any complex kind of cruelty, but the nobles or those that climbed up in the ranks were entirely capable of it.

However, that wasn’t the important point.

“You looked through Shizun’s memories?” Luo Binghe said, frowning.

“He didn’t even notice,” Elder Dream Demon hastened to assure him, though he was likely doing the non-corporeal equivalent of rolling his eyes. “There’s definitely something wrong with his head,” he added bluntly. “His memories from before a few years ago are damaged somehow... But you can still watch them, if you’re careful. ...Are you going to?”

There wasn’t much point in trying to intimidate him any further. Old as he was, the Dream Demon was far past changing his ways, regardless of how much killing intent or even outright — metaphysical — violence Luo Binghe directed his way.

Instead, he considered the elder’s question.

Did he want to see what happened to this Qiu family? It was a part of Shen Qingqiu’s past. Maybe
it could help him finally start to understand his master.

There were many things he didn't know about Shen Qingqiu, in fact. His childhood. How he had joined Cang Qiong. His own master, who had surely been as great an influence on him as he was on Luo Binghe. His strange connection to Yue Qingyuan. What was it, really, that made him change so much back then.

Some of them he wouldn’t be able to find out, since dream manipulation did not allow you to see the target’s thoughts directly. But even just having a few more pieces might let him at least guess...

If he started looking through Shen Qingqiu’s memories, Luo Binghe knew he wouldn’t be able to stop until he saw everything.

And his master, a private person who couldn’t even admit a simple thing like feeling regret until two confrontations, imprisonment, threats, and tears, would be horrified if he ever knew.

How would Luo Binghe even be able to face him, if he took those kinds of liberties with him?

Shen Qingqiu had already given him the honest answer Luo Binghe asked for. Luo Binghe had already accepted it. Everything else, he didn’t need, not really.

The past should just stay in the past.

“So the truth isn’t what Qiu Haitang thinks?” he mused, turning his attention to another matter. “Then I wonder how she would react if she knew the whole truth...”

The Dream Demon chuckled dryly. “Brat, this is why I like you,” he said generously. “Alright, since you don’t want to see it, then this master will give her a nice dream for you. You better appreciate it!”

Just this once, Luo Binghe was willing to let it go. “This disciple thanks the great elder for his magnanimity,” he played along, bowing with the appropriately deferential expression, “and for his many years of patient guidance. This disciple will always remember this favor.”
He really did have a great deal of gratitude toward Elder Dream Demon, which was a large reason why Luo Binghe still hadn’t ripped apart his non-corporeal essence for some ill-timed comment or violation of privacy.

The Dream Demon was silent for a moment. “You sucking up is just creepy,” he said finally.

Luo Binghe was smirking as he opened his eyes. Leaving Qiu Haitang in her suite’s sitting room, he left as he had come, completely undetected.

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Since it had been getting late in the day, Luo Binghe had returned to his own, far more modest lodgings.

Sitting on the bed, he had pulled off one boot and was in the middle of tugging at the other one, when the door to his room was kicked open with a bang.

Liu Mingyan stood in the doorway imperiously.

She looked particularly like her brother in that moment, and Luo Binghe felt suddenly tempted to go for the window. He also regretted taking the time to send her a message after leaving Jinlan. Maybe it would have taken her a little longer to come looking without it.

Liu Mingyan, unperturbed by the unenthusiastic reception, took a step inside and kicked the door closed again. “What happened,” she demanded, even sounding like Bai Zhan’s socially incapable peak lord.

The message he had sent her had perhaps been somewhat short — under ten words — but it hardly warranted this kind of treatment. He hadn’t even done anything wrong! Well, nothing Liu Mingyan wouldn’t support him on. Luo Binghe tried to convey this impression to her through a blank look, but she only frowned in return, her eyebrows slanting downward severely.

“You said ‘something happened’ and disappeared,” Liu Mingyan said. “And meanwhile my brother is going crazy. So is the rest of the sect.” She paused, and admitted, “I thought you’d run off to do something stupid.”
There was a long moment of silence. Then, Luo Binghe sighed.

“I went to talk to Shizun in a dream,” he said, his lips quirking up slightly.

He didn’t explain further. Her stance shifting into something less confrontational, Liu Mingyan studied him closely. “...Oh,” she said finally. She didn’t say else.

Making her way over, she dropped down onto the bed next to him. They sat together for a while. Liu Mingyan already understood the situation, after all. It had been exactly as she thought from the start — Shen Qingqiu had done something he bitterly regretted. And for Luo Binghe, the confirmation of that, that it had been a mistake, that he hadn’t done anything wrong, that Shizun was sorry, was what he’d needed all along. They had only just needed to finally talk to each other honestly, though it had taken some twists and turns.

She had been right all along. Suddenly, Luo Binghe couldn’t help smiling. If he had gone with his original plans, who knows how long he would have spent running around without finding out that Shen Qingqiu didn’t hate him. Would he have even been able to find out, if he had reappeared in such a suspicious way, given his master’s reticence?

How lucky that he had gone to Liu Mingyan first. How lucky that he had a friend like her.

“I’m going to wash up and sleep,” he said, as he pulled off his other boot. “Are you... joining me?”

Liu Mingyan, a single young woman who stormed into a single young man’s room, closed the door, sat on his bed and now watched him begin to tug off his outer layers, gave him a very flat look. Then, she elbowed him sharply between the ribs.

“No,” she said. Standing, she strode toward the door, only to pause and look back at him with narrowed eyes. “And, if you try leaving without me, see what I do to you.”

They had mutually agreed for her not to come to Jinlan, given the plague and the complicated situation with Huan Hua Palace. But it seemed she had been quite worried by the unexpected, unpredictable situation that had come about.
Luo Binghe managed to wait until she had slammed the door shut on her way out before beginning to laugh.

He really was very lucky.

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Down, Deeper

Notes: ...This is actually the third to last chapter which kicks off the finale, even though it doesn’t feel much like it? The endgame comes rather abruptly, sorry about that.

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Chapter 33: Down, Deeper

Over the next few days, word spread that Qiu Haitang had withdrawn her accusations against Shen Qingqiu. For no discernable reason, she had woken up in tears and nearly senseless with hysteria, and then fled Huayue City despite all efforts by Huan Hua Palace to calm her.

When the rumors reached them, Liu Mingyan turned to shoot him a flat look, but Luo Binghe only held up his hands, looking wrongly accused.

It really hadn’t been him!

...He just knew all about it and even suggested it.

“Maybe she realized she had the wrong person all along?” he said blandly.

Liu Mingyan huffed quietly, making her veil flutter. However, she had no interest in continuing that topic. “That seems to be as much reaction as there will be. Is it time to make a move?” she asked instead.

He had explained to her what he found out about the situation in Jinlan City, about the Huan Hua palace master arranging for Qiu Haitang to appear and pile her accusations on top of his and the sowers’ to drag down Shen Qingqiu. He had also explained what he assumed of the old master’s motivations, and his intent to find out the truth.

But first, they had waited to see Qiu Haitang’s reaction and what the old palace master would do once his best witness was no longer viable.
There... did not seem to be a reaction.

Had the old man run out of cards to play? Or was he that confident in what he already had? There were only a few days left until the agreed upon week of investigation was over and the public trial took place.

“He never leaves the palace, and their arrays are strong,” Luo Binghe admitted. “I can’t reach his dreams through them. It was one thing with Shizun — there’s already a strong connection between us, and he didn’t resist. But the old man is a different matter. I’ll have to be closer.”

In a few more years, even this wouldn’t be a problem, but Luo Binghe had... not precisely prioritized the Dream Demon’s teachings in the last three years. They had been useless in the Endless Abyss, and unlike with humans, it was fairly common for higher ranking demons to have some resistance to dream manipulation, making it simpler for Luo Binghe to focus on defeating them in combat directly.

-reaching Shen Qingqiu in the Water Prison had already been somewhat uncertain. If it had been anyone except his master, it would not have been possible at all.

Well, that was fine. Perhaps before using that method, Luo Binghe would try speaking with the old man.

“Will he meet with us?” Liu Mingyan asked.

“Probably,” Luo Binghe said. “If not right away, I’ll say I’m finally willing to join his sect. That should be enough.”

He was pretty sure Liu Mingyan was internally rolling her eyes at how casually he resorted to lying. But she didn’t try to stop him, and that was as good as approval.

...Having a friend like him seemed to have had a somewhat unfortunate effect on her moral principles. Or at least her tolerance for all kinds of means.

~.*.*~
When they arrived at Huan Hua Palace, seeking an audience with the old palace master, they found another group already present for the same purpose.

A number of young men and women in the disciple uniforms of Qing Jing Peak were crowded around the palace’s main entrance. Most likely, no one from Cang Qiong was even allowed entry, given the current state of affairs between the two sects. There was little to be accomplished from coming, but there was likely also little else they could do while the peak lords frantically prepared to defend Shen Qingqiu at the public trial.

Well, there was a certain use even in creating a scene like this. All of these disciples, so clearly concerned for Shen Qingqiu... at the very least, it was hard to believe that the rumors of him as an abusive, cruel master could hold water. Even a small bit could help when it came to swaying opinion during the trial to come.

Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan approached unnoticed, but even from the back, Luo Binghe could recognize several of the disciples gathered. They were, after all, his old peakmates. Reaching out, he lightly placed a hand on the shoulder of the closest one and tugged him out of the way.

The disciple turned, mouth open and ready to protest. But the glimpse he caught of Luo Binghe’s profile as the two of them passed by made the words stick in his throat, and he only stared, wide-eyed.

As they pressed into the center of the crowd, there were even some Bai Zhan uniforms, making up the front row like a defensive wall facing the yellow Huan Hua group on the other side — or perhaps like the honor guard of the man who stood at the very heart of this disturbance.

Even from the back, Liu Qingge looked like he was barely restraining himself from violence.

“...truly sorry, Elder Liu, but our master is not available,” Gongyi Xiao was insisting, impressively holding his composure despite how he had paled under the killing aura he was being subjected to. “We are extremely busy preparing for the public trial, so the master will likely not be available until that time, and only he can grant your request. So please—”

“Not available?! You’ve got some guts!” Ming Fan proclaimed hotly, showing his way through the crowd to the front line. “The person you’re holding is our Cang Qiong’s Qing Jing Peak Lord! The person who came to see him is Bai Zhan’s Peak Lord! Where does your Huan Hua Palace have the right to stop him?”
There were mutterings of agreement from the other disciples, and the dangerous atmosphere only grew heavier. Several hands were obviously itching toward their swords.

“The matter Liu-shishu was dispatched to discuss with Shizun is related to the trial,” Ning Yingying said in a tone almost as diplomatic as Gongyi Xiao’s. However, even in her voice, there was a hard note. “The rest of us accompanied him out of concern for Shizun, but Liu-shishu received orders from the sect leader. Returning empty-handed...”

She trailed off meaningfully, having invoked even Yue Qingyuan’s influence.

Gongyi Xiao looked even more uncomfortable, if possible. “I truly don’t have the authority to give Elder Liu access to the Water Prison,” he repeated. “The palace master must be the one to grant it, and he’s not available...”

“That’s quite unfortunate,” Luo Binghe said, finally stepping forward to make his presence known.

A startled hush fell over all those present.

For a very long time, Luo Binghe had done his utmost to be as unnoticeable as possible — on the streets, at Qing Jing at first. Even after gaining Shen Qingqiu’s approval, he had habitually tried to remain lowkey. All he had wanted was his master’s approval, so what use did he have for the attention of others? He didn’t even enjoy it, despite being able to carry himself well under it.

But during his time in the demon realm, he had taken the opposite approach. He had made himself as prominent and riveting as possible, so that no one could ignore his presence. It hadn’t been hard. Apparently, that kind of aura came naturally to him.

Just with a few words, he could make himself the sole focus of the everyone in the vicinity. Even centuries-old demons had been unable to look away or speak out of turn.

He used that same ‘power’ now, instantly drawing every eye.

Stopping in front of Gongyi Xiao, Luo Binghe said, “I have a matter to discuss with the palace master as well.”
His eyes narrowed slightly, and Huan Hua’s head disciple jumped. “That... that is...” he stammered, momentarily flustered and unsure of how to respond.

Gongyi Xiao naturally was aware of how much importance the old palace master placed on Luo Binghe. And of course, his orders had been simply to refuse Cang Qiong even the basic acknowledgement of a meeting. But caught between these two matters, his only option was to outright contradict himself, and he didn’t have skin thick enough to do it so brazenly.

“...A-Luo?”

Ning Yingying’s voice was reedy as she suddenly spoke up in the silence.

“A-Luo, is that really you? You’re really alive?” She had heard about it from some of those that had returned from Jinlan City, but she had barely been able to believe it. Now, seeing her childhood friend again, alive, tears welled up in her eyes.

Luo Binghe glanced at her, keeping his expression cold and unreadable. Mentally, he apologized.

“I want to speak with the master regarding his offer,” he said, turning back to Gongyi Xiao.

The old palace master’s offer to join Huan Hua, of course.

That seemed to finally rearrange Gongyi Xiao’s priorities appropriately. “...Why don’t you come inside for now?” he offered. “Qin-shimei, please guide Young Master Luo in.”

The stares of every Cang Qiong disciple were burning against Luo Binghe’s back. Liu Qingge’s gaze was particularly heavy. However, Luo Binghe did not give any of them even the slightest bit of further acknowledgement.

As the Huan Hua Palace disciples parted their ranks to let him through and he took the first step forward, Liu Mingyan ducked behind his broad back. Momentarily out of sight, she caught her brother’s gaze and made an apologetic, pleading gesture, putting her hands together and bobbing her head.
Liu Qingge’s expression didn’t change, aside from a faint twitch of his eyebrow.

The rest of Cang Qiong’s group was not nearly as skilled at controlling themselves, and they stared at the pair with varying degrees of confusion and disbelief.

The next moment, Luo Binghe continued onward into Huan Hua Palace, and Liu Mingyan followed him, once more outwardly expressionless and nearly unnoticeable, like a silent ghost. Pointedly turning his head away with a scowl, Liu Qingge snorted.

“So your master has time for the likes of him?” he said coldly to Gongyi Xiao, who remained outside.

Any reply the head disciple might have made was muffled as the palace doors closed again, Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan safely inside.

“I’m so glad you understand now, Luo-shixiong!” Qin Wanyue said, beaming, as she guided them into the palace grounds. “You’ll see, our sect is the best place for you. And we’ll make sure that disgusting man pays for everything he’s done.”

To better avoid drawing attention and any questions about why she was also coming, Liu Mingyan had drifted over to his opposite side, almost completely hidden from Qin Wanyue’s sight. Luo Binghe could practically feel her radiating droll amusement and mocking, for all that her expression was completely indecipherable.

But for once, Qin Wanyue didn’t seem interested in trying to get closer. Her face closed off with anger as she spoke of Shen Qingqiu.

“He’s gone too far, colluding with demons,” she said, glowering. “So many of our brothers and sisters were killed by those monsters at the Immortal Alliance Conference, and he would actually aid them... It can’t be forgiven!”

Among the sects, Huan Hua Palace had born the highest casualty count three years ago, and her younger sister had been one of those killed. There was a deep hatred in Qin Wanyue’s eyes as she turned to Luo Binghe.
“For your sake too, Luo-shixiong,” she added. “I can’t imagine how much you must have suffered under him!”

It took an effort to keep his expression neutral.

Rather than Shen Qingqiu, the one she would have been better off hating was him, that very same sort of ‘monster’ walking right next to her.

Out of sight, Liu Mingyan placed a hand on his arm. It was only for a moment, before she drew away again, without once changing expression or even glancing at him. But the warmth of her fingers lingered, even through the fabric of his robe. It calmed the rising tide of his anger.

Qin Wanyue didn’t know anything. To begin with, she didn’t know the first thing about Luo Binghe, and she didn’t know anything about Shen Qingqiu except what her master had purposefully spread through his sect. From the start, her views didn’t matter to Luo Binghe. Reminding himself of that, he didn’t answer her, and the rest of the trip through the palace passed in silence.

“Please wait here, Luo-shixiong,” she said finally, directing them into a lavishly decorated room. She smiled again. “I really am glad. Welcome to Huan Hua Palace!”

Already accustomed to Luo Binghe’s coldness toward her, she didn’t wait for a reply and quickly departed.

Luo Binghe and Liu Mingyan exchanged a look. Step one was complete.

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They were not kept waiting long before the old palace master arrived, the same smile as always on his face as he warmly greeted Luo Binghe.

“I heard you’ve reconsidered,” he said. “It’s good that you understand now.”

Luo Binghe smiled thinly. “I never imagined his hypocrisy ran this deep. A beast to the core... no,
a monster.” He sneered for a moment, then forcefully calmed himself — or at least acted out those reactions. Internally, his thoughts were cold and calculating. “I hope,” he said, with a deep breath, “I have not missed my chance and the palace master’s offer is still open. This disciple can only apologize for not understanding the master’s wisdom sooner.”

The old palace master’s smile widened, before his attention slid to Liu Mingyan standing to the side.

“And this young miss?” he asked, even though he must have been well aware of her identity.

Liu Mingyan turned to look at him. “I made a promise to support Luo-shixiong,” she said without any particular intonation. “Our Liu clan does not make promises lightly, no matter the cost.”

Mentally apologizing, Luo Binghe reached out and placed his hand at the small of her back in an intimate gesture that held an obvious meaning. “I’m glad to have you by my side,” he said to her, smiling warmly.

Thankfully, Liu Mingyan didn’t jump or give them away. She shifted toward him just slightly, a subtle sense of giving in conveyed with just the tilt of her head and the angle of her stance — every inch a rigid, proper immortal maiden conceding without surrendering her dignity.

The gentle dark fall of her hair concealed her expression from the old master, but Luo Binghe could clearly see the dead stare she leveled at him.

She was going to strangle him after this. Or at the very least, tease him to death.

However, the ruse served its purpose. The old palace master’s gaze was approving as he regarded Liu Mingyan, finding her deference pleasing to eye. It was surprisingly difficult for Luo Binghe fight down the instinct to step between them, blocking her from the old man’s sight.

“My only regret is that I couldn’t make him suffer with my own hands,” he said instead, turning back to Huan Hua’s master. His tone was dark as his expression smoothed out, none of the warmth of before visible any longer. “I wanted to repay every indignity he put me through, one by one.”

For a cultivator of the old master’s level, it might have even been possible to resist Luo Binghe’s dream manipulation, so the goal was to make him to let down his guard as much as possible.
Playing along and telling him what he wanted to hear was part of that... although unfortunately, Luo Binghe wasn’t entirely sure what it was that he wanted to hear.

What did this man even want from him? Obedience? Loyalty? That didn’t seem to be it.

Instead, this coldness and vengefulness was somehow favorable to the palace master.

“You’re so much like her,” the old man chuckled. “Su Xiyan was like this too. That imperious, ruthless manner... she was just the same. She never forgave or compromised. It was always part of her beauty...”

Making his way over, the palace master placed his hands on Luo Binghe’s shoulders and gripped tightly while looking over his face over and over again, as if studying every feature. The sudden close contact made a shudder of disgust crawl up Luo Binghe’s spine, even as he kept his expression blank.

No, he needed to do more. What had this old man said before?

‘Your face is just the same. Except those eyes...’ And a flicker of disgust that couldn’t be hidden.

Closing his eyes, Luo Binghe did his best to imitate Liu Mingyan — a subtle deference without abasement, all the more intoxicating coming from someone of great personal pride. The palace master’s blunt, calloused fingers tightened, gripping his robes and digging into his shoulders, and almost inaudibly, his breath hitched in excitement.

“Just like her...” he repeated, pleased.

In his heart, Luo Binghe sneered.

Unnoticed by either of them, the hand Liu Mingyan had rested habitually on her sword clenched, and she had to take a long breath before she could force herself to stay still.

Step two, complete.
The old palace master finally stepped back, running his hands down Luo Binghe’s arms before drawing away with obvious reluctance. “Well,” he said, still smiling, “if it’s due repayment you want from that man, it is not impossible.”

Luo Binghe blinked, then schooled his expression into faint, hard-edged interest. “The palace master’s meaning is...?”

“Now that you’re to be a Huan Hua disciple, it’s only natural for you to see our water prison,” the old man said.

His implication was obvious. He would take Luo Binghe to see Shen Qingqiu, down in that miserable, empty cave. And he would... let him get his ‘due repayment’ from his old master. Even though the public trial was in only a few days, even though Luo Binghe could very well refuse to be satisfied with anything less than Shen Qingqiu’s life. What was this old bastard planning? Was it a test?

The calculations flashed through Luo Binghe’s mind rapidly, but his only outward reaction was a slight incline of his head in acknowledgement.

“Many thanks,” he said. “It is truly a great opportunity.”

He curled his lips in the faint approximation of a smile, dark and eager. There was an almost nauseating bitterness in his mouth.

“But your companion will have to remain here. It is a sect matter, after all,” the old palace master said, already striding toward the doors. “I trust that won’t be an issue.”

“Of course,” Luo Binghe agreed without sparing her a glance. Silently, Liu Mingyan nodded and fell back, letting them proceed without her. Even so, Luo Binghe was certain he could feel her gaze on his back, until the meeting hall’s doors shut between them.

Then, there was only him and the old palace master, making their way down strangely deserted corridors toward a stairway into the darkness.
Underground, the air was heavy and humid. Condensation gathered on the stones, worn smooth by centuries of use. The sound of their footsteps echoed down the stone passages. Once in a while, a cold wind would stir past them. Luo Binghe could just barely sense the energy of the formations they passed through, no doubt including Huan Hua Palace’s famous labyrinth array. Silently, he occupied himself with trying to strategize a way out, if a quick escape while under pursuit became necessary.

He was afraid that it could very well become necessary.

There was something heavy and uneasy pressing down on his heart and lungs. Something... wasn’t right.

Long after even Luo Binghe had lost count of the turns they had taken, they stopped in front of a huge stone cave. A waterfall of unknown liquid beat down just beyond the entrance. Based on the dream before, this was where Shen Qingqiu was imprisoned.

Feeling the old palace master’s gaze rest on him, Luo Binghe smirked, slow and harsh. “I’ve been waiting for this,” he said lowly. His attention seemed to remain fixed on the point behind the waterfall, full of hungry anticipation, and after a moment, the old master turned away, satisfied.

Perhaps this really was a trap after all. However, none of the formations in the water prison would be able to stop Xin Mo. And neither would the old man, Luo Binghe was almost entirely sure, even if his cultivation at least appeared to be higher than any peak lord barring Yue Qingyuan.

No, before fighting, he still needed to question him...

It was getting hard to remember that, his blood thrumming.

He had never intended to let off Huan Hua’s palace master, not after the old man tried to manipulate him, but there was an additional, cold certainty now. This person could not be allowed to live, lest he have another chance to hurt someone Luo Binghe cared about.

...Ah.
He was angry that Shizun had been imprisoned, wasn’t he? That his reputation had been smeared, that Shen Qingqiu’s well-being and even his life were being treated so dismissively, like just a bargaining chip.

Luo Binghe hadn’t quite acknowledged it before, too muddled in his own conflicting feelings. But thinking about it now, something took shape and settled into place in his mind.

Yes, this was just right. Since he and Shen Qingqiu had reconciled things between them, what better way to resume their relationship than supporting his master in his time of need? To begin with, this had all started because of Luo Binghe, so it was the least he could do. Why should Shen Qingqiu have to go through the humiliation of a public trial, when Luo Binghe could just present to him the head of their enemy, after ripping it off in front of him?

Unnoticed, the small, vicious smile on his face became genuine, and a red gleam flashed in his eyes. The tassel at the end of the unadorned longsword on his back swayed lightly.

The old palace master touched an area of the stone, and the corrosive waterfall quickly drained away, leaving a large chamber lit by sparse torches along the walls, the light of which reflected off a rippling dark lake. In the gloom, Luo Binghe could just make out a pale figure on the stone platform in the lake’s center.

With a mechanical sound of rolling gears, a path rose up.

The old master took the lead, and — wary of the trap he still expected to spring at any moment — Luo Binghe focused his attention on him. That was why he didn’t realize until they were already on the prisoner platform, coming to a stop in front of Shen Qingqiu.

Anticipating the next scene in the play and ready to play his part, Luo Binghe turned to look at his master.

His expression blanked. That was the only way he could still control himself.

Shen Qingqiu was still bound in the Immortal Cables, just like the dream before. But rather than kneeling, it was more accurate to say he was collapsed on the ground. And his state was...
His robes had been reduced to torn rags and stained a dark, ugly brown with dried blood. The wounds beneath were numerous, each one long and deep enough to still gleam wetly in the low, flickering light. Distantly, Luo Binghe noted that they had likely been made with a whip-like weapon. There was blood across the cracked stones too, mixing with the condensation into a dirty muck.

There was a roaring in Luo Binghe’s ears. He only remembered to blink when Shen Qingqiu finally stirred.

His master’s face was pale and sallow as he awkwardly pulled himself up onto his knees. Without the use of his cultivation, the blood loss from the wounds was not a minor matter. His movements were stiff and obviously pained, but there was still a certain dignity to his demeanor.

However, even his composure cracked when he looked up and met Luo Binghe’s blank gaze.

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu looked away quickly. “...So in the end, it’s not possible to escape destiny,” he murmured, his voice bitter and very tired. Closing his eyes, he let out a low breath.

He didn’t acknowledge them any further — didn’t acknowledge Luo Binghe any further.

This was... this was... just like the pagoda, the first time they reunited, wasn’t it? But hadn’t they struggled so much just to fix this? Hadn’t it finally been resolved?

Why did it come back to this?

Luo Binghe could barely hear his own thoughts anymore.

A heavy hand clapped down on his shoulder. “There’s no need to hold back,” the old palace master said, smiling. He held out a whip, covered in segmented iron and long spikes. Luo Binghe understood his meaning, suddenly.

There was never going to be a public trial. That’s why it didn’t matter whether there was a witness or not, whether anything could be proven or not. Why risk the trial not going his way? Why let someone else decide the punishment?
“Shen Qingqiu attempted to escape and was unfortunately killed... is that how it is?” Luo Binghe guessed.

“Truly unfortunate, what desperation to hide his crimes drove him to,” Huan Hua’s palace master agreed easily.

Luo Binghe couldn’t make out Shen Qingqiu’s reaction. His head was swimming with the scent of blood and rage, and his vision was full of red and black.

Woodenly, his arm lifted. But instead of accepting the whip, his hand closed around Xin Mo’s hilt.

He didn’t remember anything after that.

~.~.~
Waiting alone, Liu Mingyan only barely stopped herself from pacing.

Logically, there had been no particular need for her to come along from the start. While she was a strong cultivator, she wouldn’t be able to turn the tide if it came down to a battle. Neither did she have any skills that would help uncover the truth of the palace master’s conspiracy, and her presence only complicated things.

She just hadn’t wanted to let Luo Binghe go alone.

Even if he was much better now, he was still...

She wasn’t sure whether he realized it himself, but how could she miss it? The times when his mood would fluctuate too wildly. When his gaze would go cold and detached, as if he no longer felt anything at all. When he would stop and close his eyes against a sudden burst of pain. When his demonic energy would surge, agitated.

And all of it was always worse when the things he cared about were involved.

Her stomach had dropped when she heard about what had taken place in Jinlan City. Her brother was already frantic, and he was a calm person with strong self-control. What kind of state would Luo Binghe have ended up in, if he watched his master get hauled away to the Huan Hua Palace’s Water Prison? No matter what kind of falling out they had, he hadn’t stopped caring about Shen Qingqiu, even if he didn’t acknowledge it himself.

At least he had been lucid and in control enough to send a message, Liu Mingyan had told herself as she rushed to Huayue.

Fortunately, nothing had happened then.

But there was a reason her brother had been so beside himself. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe in
Shen Qingqiu’s ability to endure a week of hardship. It was because the Water Prison was infamous. Going in, you wouldn’t get off with simply being locked away. And with the palace master’s obvious bias...

Who knew what state Shen Qingqiu was in. Who could guess how Luo Binghe would react.

In this kind of situation, how could she let him go alone?

And yet, that was how it ended up anyway.

Her fists clenched, her entire body nearly vibrating with restless energy. Should she follow anyway? But she didn’t even know where to go, and it would ensure that their ruse came to a fruitless end...

Just as Liu Mingyan had almost made up her mind to give chase anyway, the door to the room where she had been left opened on its own.

Or rather, a young man in a Huan Hua disciple uniform opened it. Catching sight of Liu Mingyan, he paused, and the two of them studied each other. Liu Mingyan recognized him quickly — Gongyi Xiao, the head disciple who had placed second at that terrible Immortal Alliance Conference three years prior. It was obvious he recognized her as well. Politely, he inclined his head.

“Miss Liu,” he greeted. “The master and Luo Binghe are not here?”

“They went to the water prison,” Liu Mingyan said with seeming indifference.

A flash of something unhappy passed over his face. “To see Elder Shen?” he confirmed. “That...” He trailed off, frowning uneasily again.

It was possible there was someone watching them — her, especially. It was also possible there had been some spying arrays left behind. But Liu Mingyan no longer had the patience to worry about it or keep up the act.
“Yes,” she said shortly. “I want to follow them. Take me to the water prison.”

Gongyi Xiao wanted to ask, his lips parting before he thought better of it. “Unfortunately, I can’t do that,” he said instead. “I’ve tried to go see Elder Shen for days as well, but I’ve been forbidden from going down.”

He was the head disciple. If even he wasn’t allowed to see Shen Qingqiu, then...

There was no chance he was still in a good state.

Turning on her heel, Liu Mingyan didn’t waste any more time hesitating. She didn’t know the way, but she didn’t care. She’d just have to look on her own—

Except that, unexpectedly, the world... blinked.

“Girl,” the voice of an old man came from all around her. “Girl, you need to go and get that brat, right now. There’s no time!”

Even though she had never experienced it before, Liu Mingyan understood — this was the dream realm, and the one speaking had to be Elder Dream Demon. “Where?” she snapped without questioning further. For him to come seek her out, it had to be even worse than she’d imagined. Her own ill feeling was already completely overflowing.

The hallway around her twisted in an unnatural, nauseating way, and there was a sensation of moving with great speed down the passages of the palace building. Liu Mingyan concentrated on remembering what she was being shown, but before they could get further than the dark opening of the stairwell down, the dream abruptly shattered. Just before being thrown back into her body, Liu Mingyan heard Elder Dream Demon curse furiously.

She staggered as she came awake again. It had only been an instance, and Gongyi Xiao, still in the room behind her, hadn’t even had a chance to move yet.

However, it was already too late.
The entire palace shuddered as a powerful tremor rolled through the earth beneath. A choking, dark energy began to fill the air, unmistakably demonic and coming from somewhere underground. Just barely keeping her legs under her, Liu Mingyan took off running in the direction the Dream Demon had shown her.

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When he saw Luo Binghe standing over him, expression cold and unforgiving, Shen Qingqiu had been certain he was as good as dead. Do not pass go, do not collect 200...

No, wait.

He was already in jail.

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t think of another joke instead. His head was swimming from the blood loss, and it was only because of a cultivator’s superior physique that he was able to remain conscious at all. Or perhaps it was the painful, unforgiving realization that the plot couldn’t be changed after all that was making him light-headed.

All of that, and yet here they were...

There was still the Sun and Moon Dew Seed body, he comforted himself, closing eyes as he waited for Luo Binghe’s retribution. The conditions weren’t right for triggering the soul transfer arrays they’d set up, and without them, there was no telling if he would reach it, but there was still a chance. There was a chance. This wasn’t the end, he could still come back.

Just not to Cang Qiong. Not to being Shen Qingqiu.

‘Liu-shidi,’ he thought suddenly. ‘Liu Qingge, I...’

However, what hit him was not a blade, a whip, or a fist, but a wave of dark, demonic energy, so strong that it sent him flying. Shen Qingqiu had only an instance to wonder whether or not death by acid lake was better or worse than his other possible fates, before he slammed into the distant cavern wall with enough force to make his vision go dark. There was a terrifying, deafening roar in his ears. His consciousness fizzled and began to fade.
Just before passing out, he thought he caught a glimpse of Luo Binghe, Xin Mo drawn, lunging for the old palace master.

An unknown length of time later, voices pulled him back into awareness.

“...—shibo! Shen-shibo!”

“Elder Shen!”

Shen Qingqiu grimaced and squinted up at the pair leaning over him. It was Liu Mingyan and Gongyi Xiao.

One of them had cut the Immortal Binding Cables on him, and the renewed flow of his qi had already begun to take the edge off his injuries. Circulating it more quickly, Shen Qingqiu sat up gingerly. He had luckily landed on a ledge that ran around the acid lake, which had remained more or less intact — unlike the rest of the cavern, half of which he was shocked to see completely collapsed.

There was light coming from the massive hole in the ceiling, which had been blasted open all the way to the surface.

It couldn’t have been long since he’d been knocked unconscious. The air was still thick with demonic energy, and there were still tremors occasionally passing through the stone. Shen Qingqiu couldn’t imagine that the old palace master had managed to last against that kind power, which meant that Luo Binghe was likely...

Completely berserk under Xin Mo’s influence.

Shen Qingqiu’s stomach dropped, cold and nauseating.

“Where’s Binghe?” he demanded, forcing himself to his feet. He swayed slightly before Gongyi Xiao braced him.
“E-Elder Shen, your injuries...” Gongyi Xiao stammered, his eyes darting over Shen Qingqiu’s state. His usual composure was almost completely gone from the abrupt violence that had erupted across his sect’s grounds, and the understanding of what had happened — what had driven Luo Binghe into such a state.

Yes, the reason why Luo Binghe had lost control... Shen Qingqiu sighed to himself. That foolish child, going this far for his scum master.

He shouldn’t have doubted him.

“I don’t know,” Liu Mingyan answered his question in a clipped tone. They had come through the water prison directly there, but by the time they arrived, Luo Binghe had already been gone. Without wasting any more words, she turned away, Shui Se floating up in front of her. “I’m going to find him.”

“Wait!” Shen Qingqiu called out. “Take me too!”

There was no telling where the old palace master had put Xiu Ya after taking it at Jinlan City, so he had no choice but to hitch a ride. Though she radiated impatience, Liu Mingyan obediently waited as he jumped onto Shui Se behind her.

Gongyi Xiao, who had supporting Shen Qingqiu, automatically followed him for several steps, only to awkwardly come to a stop. “I... Elder Shen...” he stammered, “I don’t...” Normally, he could keep a cool head even during a crisis like the Immortal Alliance Conference three years prior. But now, he could barely tell up from down, his mind in disarray.

Shen Qingqiu looked down at him — they were already rising up, Liu Mingyan unwilling to wait. “Go make sure your disciples leave this place!” he called out. “Get everyone out of here!”

The last thing he saw before they entered the shaft up toward the surface and the view of the cavern disappeared was Gongyi Xiao hesitating, his expression deeply conflicted.

Shen Qingqiu could only hope he’d follow his orders. The last thing they needed was more people caught in the crossfire.

They ascended for what felt like an age. The water prison was several stories deep underground,
and it was a testament to Luo Binghe’s and Xin Mo’s power that he had been able to force his way out all the way to the surface. As they finally neared the opening, the sound of panicked shouts and screaming began to reach them, making Liu Mingyan tense and speed up.

When they finally burst out into the open air, the scene that greeted them was of complete pandemonium.

An entire courtyard and half of another had been blown open from below, leaving only a massive gaping hole downward. The rubble had rained down across the palace grounds, battering countless roofs with their previously shining tiles and caving no longer pristine walls. Dust and even smoke clogged the air — along with a thick miasma of demonic energy.

Another wave of the same malicious power suddenly swept out across the ruined palace grounds, making Shui Se bob unsteadily.

“Land!” Shen Qingqiu ordered, raising his voice over the clamor. “We’ll continue on foot!”

Liu Mingyan nodded — she had seen it too, the pillar of black qi that marked Luo Binghe’s location. That was where they needed to go.

He staggered slightly as they touched down. Liu Mingyan’s hand on his arm, supporting him, was almost painfully tight.

As they hurried in the direction of that pulsing dark energy, once in a while, they would catch a glimpse of a fleeing gold-robed disciple or, worse, the body of one trapped under the rubble. More waves of demonic power periodically rolled over the ruined palace grounds, growing stronger and stronger as they came closer to the source — to Luo Binghe.

The destruction also became even more pronounced as they approached. Buildings and paths were no longer distinguishable, the ground covered in a layer of rubble that left them jumping between perches more than running, and even the sky had taken on an ominous red color. The ringing of clashing swords echoed through the air. Occasionally, a new cloud of dust would rise up following an attack.

Someone was actually fighting Luo Binghe in that state?
When they finally reached the battlefield, Shen Qingqiu drew a sharp, startled breath.

Two figures were indeed locked in combat, surrounded by the destroyed remains of what had once been a beautiful courtyard.

Xin Mo pulsed in Luo Binghe’s hand, darting through the air with unnatural smoothness as it unerringly sought its target — his opponent’s throat, heart, lungs... It had already drawn blood, gleaming along its edge, and it wanted more. It almost appeared to move on its own, Luo Binghe only following behind it. The expression on his face was intoxicated and vacant, and more than a little crazed.

The one facing him... was Liu Qingge.

Shen Qingqiu’s instinctive reaction was to rush in and help. But before he had taken two steps, reason caught up with him, bringing him to a sharp halt.

Looking at the battle, he would only be in the way.

Even Liu Qingge, Bai Zhan’s famous War God, was only barely staying ahead of Xin Mo’s blade and the pulsing waves of demonic energy Luo Binghe carelessly flung at him. His robes were torn and stained with blood and dirt, and he had been forced to keep Cheng Luan in his hand lest his control over it end up disrupted. Both his physical and spiritual attacks were batted aside with negligent ease, leaving him on the defensive.

Shen Qingqiu had never seen him in such a miserable state or so pressed by an opponent. Liu Qingge’s bearing was too proud and unwavering to be called desperate, but the situation could not be described as anything else.

“Luo-shixiong!” Liu Mingyan called out before he could. “Luo-shixiong, stop!”

“Wait!” Shen Qingqiu shouted futilely after her, but Liu Mingyan had already taken off, rushing toward the struggling pair. Knowing Luo Binghe’s regenerative ability, she didn’t hesitate to lift Shui Se against him, and something golden flashed in her free hand as she closed the distance between them swiftly.

In a strange, unnatural motion, Luo Binghe tilted his head to look toward her. There was no
recognition in his eyes.

“Idiot! Get back—!” Liu Qingge yelled, racing to intercept his sister.

Xin Mo lifted. Its blade shone white as it came down, but the energy that enveloped it and flowed out like a wave was completely black.

Liu Qingge tackled her aside just in time, and the shockwave of the black surge flung them away into the rubble and clouds of dust. Forced to crouch and cover his head so as not be swept away as well, Shen Qingqiu lost sight of them.

When the ripping gale winds kicked up by Luo Binghe’s demonic energy finally, abruptly died, there was a deafening silence.Trying to ignore the slight trembling passing through his body, Shen Qingqiu gingerly lifted his head and peered out from behind the broken wall between him and Luo Binghe’s dark, pulsating form.

Luo Binghe started out across the destroyed remains of a palace garden around them, but when nothing followed to keep his attention, he slowly turned and began to walk away.

There was what had once been a pavillion in front of him. Without breaking his slow, unhurried gait, Luo Binghe lifted Xin Mo. Another wave of thick, black energy swept out, and when it broke apart, there was no longer any obstruction in Luo Binghe’s path. He continued onward, giving not a single outward reaction.

Shen Qingqiu closed his eyes and cursed bitterly in his heart.

When the pressure of Luo Binghe’s overflowing demonic energy had faded enough that he no longer felt like there was something running its claws against the back of his neck, Shen Qingqiu straightened enough to scurry over to the deep furrow that had been left in the place Liu Mingyan had been standing.

His mouth was painfully dry, but finally he managed to call out, his voice breaking slightly.

“L... Liu-shidi! Liu-shizhi!”
There had to be an answer. There had to be. What kind of shitty plot would take a sudden twist like this? Even if Qin Wanrong had been killed, Liu Mingyan was hardly on the same level! She was someone irreplaceable to Luo Binghe. And Liu Qingge was... was...

Maybe he wasn’t anyone to the novel’s story, just a man who had been sacrificed offscreen without a single appearance and now lived on despite his fate. But to Shen Qingqiu, he was incomparably important.

They weren’t people who could just die. Shen Qingqiu couldn’t accept it. He just couldn’t.

He couldn’t live, if it ended like this.

“Liu-shidi!” he yelled, his voice gaining strength in desperation. He spun around, frantically scanning the rubble for any sign of where the two siblings had fallen. “Liu Qingge!! Stop screwing around!”

There was no answer. A loose pebble clattered down among the broken stone and wood.

Then, a pile of rubble shifted. It shook and collapsed, revealing the dirty, bloodied back of a man, who slowly sat up and turned to look at Shen Qingqiu. Grime and blood were streaked across his face as well, but in that moment... Shen Qingqiu thought he looked as beautiful as ever. No, even more so. This was a face that could truly move the heavens.

After all, it was Liu Qingge.

“Hey,” Liu Qingge said finally.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t have the words to berate him.

“Liu-shidi!” he exclaimed, rushing over to his side. His hands fluttered uselessly, until Liu Qingge waved, indicating that he wasn’t seriously injured. Instead, Shen Qingqiu helped Liu Mingyan up from where she had been pressed down and shielded by her brother’s body.

Her veil had been torn away in the confusion, but more than her features, Shen Qingqiu noted her
stunned, shell-shocked expression.

“Luo-shixiong...” she murmured helplessly. “He... What happened?”

She turned to Shen Qingqiu with this question, begging for an explanation. He shook his head.

“His heart has been completely suppressed by that sword, Xin Mo,” Shen Qingqiu explained shortly. “He can’t recognize us.”

Xin Mo...

There was no end to the ways in which it had caused problems in Proud Immortal Demon Way. Everything from subtly affecting Luo Binghe’s mood and temper, to making him unspeakably horny at random, to causing every qi deviation under the sun, to debilitating headaches, to this — dragging him down into a completely unaware berserker state.

From reading Luo Binghe’s perspective in the novel, Shen Qingqiu knew that he had no awareness of anything that happened when he was like this. He very well could end up killing them and only realize it later, once he regained consciousness three counties away at the end of a path of destruction. ‘Killed by the protagonist on a rampage’ was in fact how the only love interest in all of Proud Immortal Demon Way to bite it had died, necessitating the entire arc about bringing her body to the Holy Mausoleum to resurrect her.

A protagonist with slightly fewer hangups about never again lacking the power to make anyone kneel before him would have decided that Xin Mo was more trouble than it was worth. But even with all the strength granted by his Heavenly Demon and his own prodigious talent, Bing-ge had never once even considered giving up his OP golden finger.

This damned thing, it would have been better if he’d never picked it up in the first place.

“Then the only option is to wake him up by force,” Liu Qingge judged.

But no matter how confident his tone, he couldn’t stop his expression from flickering. It was obvious that force wasn’t an option at all. Luo Binghe was stronger than him even normally, but in this state...
“We have to get that thing away from him,” Liu Mingyan said. “Then we can suppress them separately...”

That was easier said than done, to begin with, but it wouldn’t be enough on its own either. Just knocking Xin Mo out of his hand wouldn’t break the connection between it and Luo Binghe. And to wake him up, they would need to neutralize the overflowing demonic energy from both him and Xin Mo.

...That energy was quite far beyond anything a human cultivator would possess. Even if all three of them poured out all the qi they possessed, it wouldn’t be enough to quell Xin Mo and Luo Binghe in this state.

Shen Qingqiu knew this because it was one of the things that had been attempted the handful of times the Luo Binghe of the novel had ended up taken over. Even just dispersing Xin Mo’s normal disbalance would cripple the cultivation of whoever Bing-ge used, to say nothing of this uncontrolled frenzy. The only reason it had worked that one time back then was because the last priestess of the Ming Yue Temple had completely burned out her meridians, and she had already been noted as having a special, one of a kind constitution that gave her an incredibly vast qi sea.

Liu Qingge, Liu Mingyan, Shen Qingqiu... they were strong cultivators, but none of them possessed that kind of unique qualifications.

No, even if they did, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t have allowed those two to destroy their cultivation, not when it was so important to who they were, not when this was all because of him.

Because he had played straight into the old palace master’s hands. Because he hadn’t settled Shen Qingqiu’s crimes and debts. Because he had seen the signs of Xin Mo’s influence and known that Luo Binghe wasn’t using the usual methods to control it, and yet done nothing. Because he had pushed Luo Binghe into the Endless Abyss to obtain that wretched sword in the first place.

It was because of him, so it should be him who resolved this.

Just his cultivation wouldn’t be enough. But even if it took his life...

...Well, that didn’t have to be permanent, did it?
He still had one last card up his sleeve. He hadn’t imagined that it would come into play like this, but... it wasn’t bad.

It wasn’t bad. It would be alright.

“Leave Binghe to me,” Shen Qingqiu said suddenly, breaking off Liu Mingyan and Liu Qingge’s quiet, increasingly frantic argument. He blinked, steadying himself, as they turned to look at him with expressions of confusion and uncertainty. “I’ll take care of it.”

Now that he had made up his mind, Shen Qingqiu didn’t hesitate. Standing up before either of them could protest, he reached out with his senses to confirm the direction of the pulsing malevolent energy Luo Binghe was letting off.

“Alright,” Liu Mingyan agreed quickly, scrambling to her feet as well. “Then I will take care of the sword.”

Shen Qingqiu glanced at her — he didn’t know what she meant to do — but it didn’t really matter, and he nodded in agreement. Over his shoulder, he called back to Liu Qingge, “Liu-shidi, let’s—”

An iron grip clamped around his wrist and spun him around. Liu Qingge’s lips were pressed into a thin line, and a deep furrow had formed between his brows. He looked down at Shen Qingqiu with a tight, urgent expression, scanning his face for signs of... something. Something he had sensed just from Shen Qingqiu’s words or his tone, or his demeanor.

Even if Liu Qingge didn’t understand, he instinctively knew. And he was scared for Shen Qingqiu.


Turning his hand in Liu Qingge’s grip, he laced their fingers together. And, leaning in, pressed his lips to his cultivation partner’s. It could barely be called a kiss, but Shen Qingqiu’s ears burned with a furious flush of instinctive embarrassment. Even so, he was still smiling as he pulled away after only a moment.
This time, he didn’t want to regret anything.

When he drew back, Liu Qingge tried to follow. Their faces hovered so close their foreheads nearly touched, their warm breaths mingling. Squeezing Liu Qingge’s hand, Shen Qingqiu tugged at him to follow.

“Come on,” he said. “We need to go.”

A faint tremor passed through their joined hands. But finally, gritting his teeth, Liu Qingge stepped forward, and together they moved to join Liu Mingyan, waiting tensely nearby.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t notice the quick look the siblings exchanged, as the three of them hurried onward, down the path of destruction that had been left behind.

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Together, conclusion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Notes: Figuring out how to divide the previous chapter and this one drove me absolutely crazy. No matter how I look at it, there’s no optimal way to split some of these scenes. I’m also totally determined to end in 35 chapters, and not 36 (Sanren’s number) or 37 (Magic Kaito’s number). This is meaningless, but I just don’t want to have two stories with the same number of chapters, okay....

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Chapter 35: Together, conclusion

Luo Binghe hadn’t gone far, nor was he difficult to follow. With his mind clouded, he moved at a leisurely pace while razing anything that obstructed his path. Even just his presence alone caused destruction, as waves of powerful demonic energy continued to pulse off him intermittently. And if anyone approached, they would be instinctively struck down — just like the small group of Huan Hua cultivators whose mangled bodies they passed.

No matter what, they had to stop him before he reached Huayue City. Liu Mingyan and Liu Qingge had perhaps not noticed yet, but Shen Qingqiu knew that Luo Binghe was not wandering blindly. Xin Mo would always guide him toward the closest clustering of living beings, hungering for their blood. In the city, his power would cause even greater devastation.

And... Shen Qingqiu’s heart clenched imagining Luo Binghe’s reaction, when he regained consciousness.

After all, this was not the blackened protagonist who barely cared about the world around him or anyone in it who did not belong to him. Without a doubt, this was not something he would have wanted, nor was he callous enough to dismiss it.

When they finally approached their target, Shen Qingqiu couldn’t stop himself from staring in shock.

It had gotten worse. If he hadn’t known, he would not have guessed that the thing in front of them
was Luo Binghe. Thick black qi had cloaked him completely, hiding his features and even all but the general form of his figure. He was nothing but an upright formless dark mass, like a shadow that had stood up. Sensing their arrival, it turned slowly. Three points of red glowed in its ‘face’ and Xin Mo’s blade gleamed an eerie, translucent white as it began to rise.

Fluttering just short of being consumed, Liu Mingyan’s tassel hung from its hilt.

“I’ll get it away.” Liu Qingge said, and dashed forward with a burst of speed. He meant Xin Mo, Shen Qingqiu realized. After all, Liu Qingge had volunteered to separate Luo Binghe from his sword, in their supposed ‘plan.’

“Cut off his arm if you have to!” Liu Mingyan called out after him.

...Maiden Liu! Shen Qingqiu faltered momentarily. Sure, Luo Binghe could reattach limbs, which Liu Mingyan probably knew. But was it really alright for her to treat her love interest so callously...?

In his momentary hesitation, Liu Qingge had pulled ahead. It was a terrifying sight, as he seemed to rush directly into Xin Mo’s loose downward swing — and the swelling wave of dark energy around the sword. It crashed down like a toppling pillar, cutting a deep, wide swathe through the ruins and kicking up fierce gale winds. Even Liu Mingyan and Shen Qingqiu were forced to scatter in opposite directions to avoid being pulled in.

But at the last moment, Liu Qingge had stepped aside, letting it shoot past him. Just the wake of the blast tore the edges off his tattered robes and the ends of his hair.

He closed the remaining distance between him and the mass of black qi that was Luo Binghe, and Cheng Luan flashed through the air.

Luo Binghe’s movements had seemed slow and ponderous, but that was not actually the case. His reactions had not been dulled, and even his combat skills were completely intact. His free hand shot out, clamping down on Liu Qingge’s wrist and stopping his swing without any give. Liu Qingge winced, as the corrosive energy cloaking Luo Binghe immediately pierced through his skin and flesh, like acid.

With a sharp yank that nearly pulled Liu Qingge off his feet, Luo Binghe dragged him closer and lifted Xin Mo again.
However, that had been exactly what Liu Qingge was waiting for. Opening his hand, he let Cheng Luan fall, only to catch it with his free hand — and make a single, short slash through the air.

No normal attack would have any effect on Luo Binghe in this state. Very few things would, really, and anything that did injure him would be healed over within moments. How many times had Liu Qingge tried to attack him before Liu Mingyan and Shen Qingqiu arrived back then? So this single cut should not have made any difference.

But Liu Qingge hadn’t even aimed at Luo Binghe. Instead, his blade seamlessly severed the worn tassel at the end of Xin Mo’s hilt.

Luo Binghe should not have been able to remember its meaning. And perhaps he didn’t. Perhaps it was just a reflex. But whatever the reason, Luo Binghe let go of Liu Qingge and instinctively reached out to catch the tassel as it sailed through the air.

In that moment of distraction, as his free hand closed around the cord and the jade carving, Liu Qingge drove Cheng Luan through his opposite, right wrist and twisted.

No matter how incapable of feeling pain at the moment or how good his regeneration, Luo Binghe’s fingers slackened and let Xin Mo fall. Without bothering to pull Cheng Luan free, Liu Qingge slapped the cursed sword away and sent it flying.

The black qi around Luo Binghe surged, too quickly for Liu Qingge to do anything but brace himself.

Before it could be unleashed, Shen Qingqiu slammed bodily into his disciple, making him stagger a step backward. Putting himself between them, Shen Qingqiu grabbed hold of Luo Binghe. He winced at the sharp burn of the concentrated demonic energy that flowed over his arms and chest, into several of his wounds, but he refused to let go.

All that remained was to compress all the spiritual energy into his body, down to his core, and...

And...
A strong hand clasped his shoulder, and someone’s warmth pressed against his back. Glancing back over his shoulder, Shen Qingqiu hesitated. It was Liu Qingge. Of course, it was. In that moment, he had so many things he wanted to say, to reassure him — it will be alright, I will come back, just wait for me.

...I love you.

Those thoughts flashed across his face in a single instance of hesitation, and Liu Qingge’s brows furrowed seeing them. It really was just as he’d suspected.

And in the moment Shen Qingqiu wrestled himself, he took his chance.

Clear, steady, familiar qi flowed from Liu Qingge — but not to counteract the demonic energy overflowing from Luo Binghe. Instead, Liu Qingge’s qi seeped into Shen Qingqiu’s meridians, just as they had done so many times before, once a month year after year.

“Liu-shidi—?!”

Shen Qingqiu didn’t know what the effect might be, if he detonated his core while they were linked like this, their qi mixing and flowing freely between them. With a sudden flash of cold panic, he wasn’t even sure he could. His qi barely felt like it was under his control.

“I don’t know what you decided,” Liu Qingge said, leaning in to speak directly into Shen Qingqiu’s ear so that his words wouldn’t be lost in the demonic energy still washing over both of them in furious waves, “but I won’t let you go.”

But there was no other choice! Like this, they wouldn’t be able to stop Luo Binghe’s rampage! He was already struggling again, regaining his balance.

Holding Luo Binghe in this state was like holding a seven-claw liger. Every moment was on the verge of death, murderous intent and bloodlust as thick as the corrupted demonic energy covering him. No, it was like holding a cresting tsunami or a volcano on the verge of eruption, far beyond human power to halt. Shen Qingqiu’s heart was pounding frantically without pause, and his panic had reached a level where he could only acknowledge it with detachment, as if everything that was happening remained at a distance.
There wasn’t a choice. That was why he had to—!

And yet, without warning, Luo Binghe’s unmatched, inhuman power faltered.

Even his body slumped, the dark cloak of energy covering his entire form thinning and slipping away enough to finally reveal the features of the young man underneath.

It wasn’t gone, but—

What could have caused this? He had no idea. There wasn’t a time limit on this berserk mode, and he knew there was no returning or awakening from it from Luo Binghe’s side. This was completely unexpected, unprecedented, and impossible.

Shen Qingqiu might have dithered, trying to parse the how and why, but Liu Qingge didn’t.

Drawing forth all his spiritual energy, he finally poured it at the seething darkness exuding from Luo Binghe, and Shen Qingqiu followed suit instinctively.

They were both exhausted and wounded. But they were also both Peak Lords of Cang Qiong, and among the strongest ones at that. If they could just get Luo Binghe’s uncontrolled demonic energy to a certain level—!

“Binghe!” Shen Qingqiu called out, as Luo Binghe swayed, unsteady on his feet. The arms around him shifted, no longer holding him in place but simply holding him. “Don’t let it suppress your heart! Binghe, listen to me and— Wake! Up!!”

The cloak of black qi had faded enough that they could see Luo Binghe’s blank expression finally change, creasing in pain and uncertainty. He took a short, sharp breath and reached up blindly, grasping at Shen Qingqiu’s fluttering sleeve.

Liu Mingyan watched from the side worriedly, her lips pressed thin and pale. Pinned to the ground with one white boot, golden light from Duanmu Yin’s sealing talisman and dark demonic energy from Xin Mo twined and struggled. In truth, Duanmu Yin had severely underestimated Xin Mo’s power, believing that the talisman alone could repress it for some time, but Liu Mingyan stubbornly made up the difference with her own qi. She might not have achieved the levels of fame her brother boasted, but she was a powerful cultivator of rare talent, and she brought it all to bear.
Xin Mo, wide talisman wrapped around the place where its hilt and blade met, shook as if trying to lift itself. Snarling, Liu Mingyan lifted her foot — and brought it down again with a merciless stomp, the force of it cracking the ground beneath Xin Mo. Her qi blazed pure and white around her, like the corona of a star, as she poured out everything.

This time, she... no, they would definitely protect him!

Luo Binghe’s lips moved faintly. His eyes flickered and finally focused, the red glow in them and on his forehead dimming. “Shizun...” he murmured in a thick, unclear tone.

And, after a long struggle, passed out completely.

His full, limp weight dropped onto Shen Qingqiu, whose legs gave out as well, in both relief and exhaustion. Liu Qingge, who had been holding onto him tightly, didn’t try to prop them up and only lowered the three of them onto the ground. Letting out a surprisingly shaky breath that fluttered across the nape of Shen Qingqiu’s neck, he slipped an arm around his waist and dropped his forehead to rest on Shen Qingqiu’s shoulder.

It was slightly suffocating, being pressed by a man’s weight from both front and back, but Shen Qingqiu couldn’t find it in him to complain.

He couldn’t find the words to say anything, only clinging even tighter to Luo Binghe’s unconscious body.

It... it had really worked?

They really made it. Luo Binghe, Liu Qingge, Liu Mingyan, wrapping up Xin Mo in a spirit-cleaning shroud and additional seals in hurried, precise movements nearby... even Shen Qingqiu himself.

[Congratulations!]

The System chimed in agreement. Shen Qingqiu had to stifle a surprised, nearly hysterical snort.
Completing his character arc? But the story was still...

...Right, of course. After all, Shen Qingqiu was only a side character. He had ‘avoided death’ and changed his nature as just a scum villain — who heard of a scum villain with his own romance route? — but in the end, his story was only a secondary one, and it was Luo Binghe who was the undisputed protagonist, who would define the course of the world.

And now that Luo Binghe had grown into his full potential and overcome his newest trial, the master’s role had naturally ended. Not ended in death, though. Not by his own scum villain actions, or by the curse of a mentor. Somehow, he’d managed to survive.

‘Shen Qingqiu’ hadn’t died. Wouldn’t die.

He could keep this life, together with the people he had come to care so much for.

Wiggling a hand free and running it over his face, Shen Qingqiu realized he was laughing quietly.

They needed to go, he thought distantly. They couldn’t remain in the ruins, and they couldn’t afford to be found there. There was no telling what would happen to Luo Binghe if they did, and Shen Qingqiu’s own situation was tricky at best. They needed to leave, and quickly.

But for just a few moments, he decided to let himself feel an overpowering, overwhelming sense of relief. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head against Liu Qingge’s, on his shoulder.

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Between his wounds and using up almost all his qi, Shen Qingqiu remembered their rushed departure — escape, really — from Huan Hua Palace’s ruins only in bits and pieces. He had
already started to drift out of consciousness when Liu Mingyan pulled Luo Binghe out of his arms and draped his much larger form over her back. She was not a short woman, but the size difference between them was still quite big, and seeing her hauling him around so effortlessly made Shen Qingqiu smile before he passed out, distantly aware of Liu Qingge doing the same to him.

Fortunately, it seemed they didn’t run into anyone on the way out. Later, they heard about the chaos that had taken place — Gongyi Xiao indeed leading what disciples he could gather out of the palace grounds, many of their seniors refusing to listen to him and rushing back to their death, the dismembered pieces of their palace master that were found in the ruins...

The speculations about just what had taken place.

There had been so many powerful beings sealed in the Water Prison that it was impossible to guess just who or what had rampaged across the sect. Some of those things imprisoned down there Huan Hua Palace had never even admitted to, and there was almost no one from among their elders left to question. No matter how many parties the other sects sent out in search of this extremely powerful demon, there was no further sign of it.

Outside of their group, no one who had seen Luo Binghe had survived.

Shen Qingqiu felt a guilty sense of relief.

With the state of Huan Hua Palace, no one cared about his trial any longer either. Like this, there was nothing stopping all of them from returning to Cang Qiong after lying low for a bit—

Luo Binghe shook his head.

“That’s not possible,” he said. “Shizun, I... I can’t. I thought I could control Xin Mo, but it completely took me over. If it hadn’t been for Liu-shimei, Shizun and Liu-shishu, I would have probably been swallowed up and died just like its other wielders. I can’t return to Cang Qiong like this. I can’t stay here and risk everyone.”

“But that was because of the circumstances,” Shen Qingqiu said, frowning. “And maybe you’ll figure out how to control it better...”

Though he had no idea what method Luo Binghe could use. The canon ones were, well, lots of sex
and using others as sacrifices, crippling their cultivation. He didn’t particular want to see his disciple engage in either one, treating the lives of others so callously.

“I intend to,” Luo Binghe agreed.

There was an unexpected calm in his tone and expression, in his entire bearing. When he looked at Shen Qingqiu and smiled, somewhat wryly, there was none of the distance or pain that had been lingering between them since the Endless Abyss. There was none of the uncertainty and distrust that had made Luo Binghe’s gaze so frighteningly dark at times.

He knew now that he didn’t need to be afraid of losing the people he cared about, or cling to them desperately. They would always be there when he needed them. It was that confidence that changed his entire demeanor.

He really had grown. He wasn’t a disciple anymore, but a man worthy of being the hero of a story spanning three realms.

“I will do everything I can to master Xin Mo,” he went on, “but I’m not willing to risk everyone in Cang Qiong in case something goes wrong. I’m not willing to risk anyone. That’s why I’m going to return to the demon realm and train there.”

“That’s too much!” Liu Mingyan protested quickly, and Shen Qingqiu nodded in agreement. “Why can’t you just go deep in the mountains? There’s so many places without people. Even our clan has grounds…”

“If there’s any hint about how to control Xin Mo, it will be in the demon realm,” Luo Binghe disagreed. “Even though it’s been used by many cultivators, it’s a demonic weapon and it was forged by a demon. The demon realm is the only place I can look. And… I’ll feel better, training there instead of taking chances here.”

Even though Liu Mingyan and Shen Qingqiu wanted to protest further, he held up a hand to stop them.

“I have to go. If I lose control again and end up hurting you, I couldn’t live with myself,” he said. He smiled. “I’ll be alright. And I’ll be back. After all, I know I have you waiting for me.”
Shen Qingqiu still felt a stifling sense of reluctance, but with a heavy sigh, he leaned back. There was nothing in the demon realm that could endanger Luo Binghe at this point, not really. If he wanted to go and had made up his mind, there was no reason to stop him. “Alright,” he said finally. “As long as you know. You can come back anytime. Qing Jing Peak will always welcome you.” He hesitated and added, finally, “I’m proud of you.”

While Luo Binghe smiled in gratitude, Liu Mingyan shot him a frustrated look. However, even she had to subside when Liu Qingge, who had been standing silently to the side, laid a hand on her shoulder.

“He said he’ll come back,” he reminded her. Turning to Luo Binghe, he said bluntly, “And what if you can’t control it?”

“Then I’ll destroy it,” Luo Binghe said directly — as if he had already considered it. He probably had.

It was just that...

...Destroy Xin Mo?

Noticing the shocked glance Shen Qingqiu couldn’t quite hide, Luo Binghe explained, “If I can’t control it, there’s no reason to keep it. I can’t sever the connection with it, so destroying it is the only way.” He looked down, expression momentarily pensive. One hand drifted to brush over the tassel he had remade to hang from his belt instead. “It saved me and gave me the power I needed when I was at my lowest. But if that power would just threaten the people I love, I’ll throw it away without hesitation.”

Lifting his head, he said, “Five years. I’ll try for five years, and then I’ll return, even if it’s without Xin Mo.”

In the silence that followed, Liu Mingyan pursed her lips and pinned him with a piercing, demanding look. Luo Binghe met it without backing down and simply waited until, in the end, she gave a sharp, brusque nod.

“We’ll be waiting,” Liu Mingyan said, sounding very much like her brother.
She and Luo Binghe shared a long look, full of meaning that no one else could understand. Liu Mingyan’s expression finally softened, and Luo Binghe gazed back with a deep fondness.

Like that, there was no need to say anything else at all.

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They parted ways soon after — Luo Binghe to the boundary between realms, and the others back to Cang Qiong. It had already been a few days. The sect must have been beside themselves with worry, given the situation.

Since he didn’t have Xiü Ya, Shen Qingqiu could only ride on Cheng Luan with Liu Qingge. He didn’t mind — although he also didn’t miss the way Liu Mingyan rather obviously pulled ahead and gave them some space. So meddlesome, this younger sister.

....Ah, he was smiling again.

Chuckling to himself, he tightened his arms around Liu Qingge’s waist. Balancing two people on a single sword was a hassle, but somehow he didn’t mind that either.

“Worried?” Liu Qingge asked, unexpectedly. He didn’t look back at Shen Qingqiu, but from his profile, the faint furrow of his brows was visible.

“No,” Shen Qingqiu said.

He meant it. That disciple of his possessed unmatched talent and power. As long as his heart was strong, what could threaten him? And remembering Luo Binghe’s calm, steady demeanor, his happiness and his promise, Shen Qingqiu knew that the little lotus had managed to bloom against all adversity. He didn’t need his old master to worry about him.

Nor was he worried about himself — a thought that came a surprisingly distant second.

He had completed his role in the story. He had survived it somehow. The other things, like the accusations, his reputation, any doubts still cast on him, or even just the dangerous life of a
cultivator... He didn't feel afraid of any of it.

What was there to fear? After all, the Great Master Liu was with him, along with everyone who was waiting for them back at the sect. As long as you have someone by your side, you can overcome anything. He finally understood this feeling.

“No,” Shen Qingqiu repeated, “I’m alright. Everything is going to be just fine.”

There was a fine red flush climbing up Liu Qingge’s neck, and he had slightly stiffened in Shen Qingqiu’s hold. That flush only deepened as he doubtlessly felt the low, poorly smothered laughter rumbling in Shen Qingqiu’s chest pressed against his back.

...Come to think of it, even if their route had ended, there was still the ‘bonus content,’ wasn’t there?

Dual cultivation, huh?

Maybe there would be a manual, somewhere among Qing Jing’s endless books. Something they could ‘study’... together.

END

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Chapter End Notes

To confirm, yes, TLJ is still out there in a radish body, since SQQ and SQH kicked off that side plot. He and ZZL do show up with their usual plan in five years. Obviously, LBH and friends overcome this. But since all major character arcs have been closed off at this point, I don’t think there’s much purpose in continuing the story through a “part 3.”

This ride has finally come to an end! I will fully admit that the plot progression became a total mess and completely strayed from the original concept. There is endless LBH angst and the last arc barely even had liushen at all?? I got a little too much into the canon divergence aspect instead of the romance. What can I say, it
comes more naturally to me, hahaha

However, I hope that all of you still enjoyed this story, both for the plot and for the liushen. I’m thinking of doing some extras (in particular, and about how there’s a whole unused radish body, available for any Shen soul that might slip inside), so I welcome any suggestions!

Thank you again for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!