More Wishes

by Feynite

Summary

Bonus extra stories that take place in the same setting as 'I Wish You Were My Husband'. Recommended you read that first if you wanna understand what's going on!

First up - a person who dies is also a person who can be reborn.

Notes

Warning for mentions of animal death (non-graphic, non-violent). Because this installment covers a lot of chronological ground and Ben Ben is, in the end, just a normal doggie.
Slavers at the borderlands were a less common sight ever since Luo Binghe began instating certain reforms in the demon realm. But of course, 'less common' was different from 'totally eradicated'. There would always be those willing to overlook a law or break a rule if they thought they could get away with it, and the value of certain delicates had only gone up since they became much more difficult to acquire. So, even with the reduction in traffic, every so often Luo Binghe would get wind of a human cargo shipment and have someone intercept it. If he had the time or impatience, he'd do it himself.

Typically, slave shipments were women and children. Poor people, easily vanished from communities that already looked down upon or ignored them. Shen Qingqiu did his best to make arrangements for these matters, on his own end, if there was no one else to handle it. Most rescued slaves were given the option of getting a little money and food and then being set loose at the borderlands again, to make their own way - a lot took that option, even though it was risky, out of fear of having too many dealings with demons at all.

Some others, though, either needed or wanted more help. Making arrangements could be complicated. Becoming a servant at a human lord's was often a better prospect than the alternatives, and it was a place to sleep, food to eat, and an allowance to spend. Other than taking some money and seeing their own way, it was the second most popular option chosen by rescued slaves, but Shen Qingqiu's connections could only do so much to try and make it happen.

The third, least popular choice presented to people in dire straights was to remain at Luo Binghe's estate and be hired on there. Either the one in Hell or the estate in the human realm. They were always in need of human staff, but most of the rescued slaves shied away from such offers. Working for a demon simply frightened them too much, or came with too many negative associations.

Shen Qingqiu contemplated that matter as he stared down at the scruffy twelve-year-old who was the only survivor of a trafficking shipment that Luo Binghe had interfered with.

The other captives had all taken their own lives, in an effort to avoid the fate waiting for them when they arrived at the black market auction. This boy hadn’t. Binghe had found him still holding his length of chain, looking haunted and afraid, and had Zhuzhi-Lang bring him back straight away, while he carried on with rounding up the traffickers. The reptilian retainer had showed up not too long ago, and confessed a lack of workable knowledge on human children.
Shen Qingqiu had been expecting any number of unpleasant possibilities when he went to see the boy. Injuries, tears, trauma - that would all make sense, wouldn’t it?

But instead he found himself staring into a pair of dark eyes, and somehow feeling down to the marrow of his bones that he knew this child. Even though he had never seen him before in his life. 

The child had sharp features, far from ugly and surprisingly expressive. He was dressed in tatters, and his hair was in sore need of a comb, but apart from some bruises he didn’t appear to have any injuries. There was a keen spark of intelligence in his gaze. He looked back at Shen Qingqiu with something like envy and confusion, wariness and… maybe hope? At his side, his fists trembled as he kept them clenched tight.

“What’s your name?” Shen Qingqiu asked him, gently.

“...Bai Jiu,” the boy said.

A-Jiu.

Stiffening in surprise, Shen Qingqiu immediately did some mental math. Twelve. The boy was twelve years old. And the two of them looked nothing alike, but somehow, the instant the thought crossed his mind, he knew that it fit. Twelve years ago, the original goods had ‘died’ and Shen Yuan had taken over his body - taken over his life.

Technically speaking, the two of them had never met. It was a preposterous thought. Even more strange to be sure of it so quickly, over what could be a simple coincidence. And yet… he was already convinced.

That kind of certainty was nearly proof of a supernatural event on its own.

Tapping his fan against his hand, Shen Qingqiu made a spur-of-the-moment decision.

“A-Jiu, I am in need of a new apprentice,” he said. “How would you like to learn cultivation?”
The slave boy blinked. His eyes narrowed in suspicion.

But after a long, critical moment, he accepted the offer and bowed in thanks.

Bai Jiu’s master was a fool.

Every day, he became more certain of this assessment of the man. What sort of person took on a random slave boy as their cultivation apprentice? Cultivators were supposed to be fancy people from upright families, all full of themselves and lofty and well-connected. Not that he was complaining - this situation was like finding a rich idiot with overstuffed pockets in a busy marketplace, only even better.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t even make Bai Jiu serve him, most of the time. For the first few weeks, Bai Jiu had been certain to behave appropriately meek, ready to rush off and do everything requested of him, to get into this mark’s good graces. He wasn't normally much good at playing nice, but this time, he did his best. Except the man had only handed him a beginner’s cultivation manual, and then told him to make sure he cultivated every day, and then basically let him be. Or, no, he also usually insisted that Bai Jiu come and eat with him, unless he was eating with the lord. Even when he was eating with the lord, he’d come by after with food and cluck at him like some kind of worried chicken.

Bai Jiu had never not had to work to get a mark to part with things before. He didn’t know what to make of it, and that actually made him uneasy sometimes. Shen Qingqiu brought him food, and then took him to get fitted for ‘proper clothing’, and gave him a practice sword and started showing him some basic moves. It might have made sense if the man was a pervert. Bai Jiu hadn’t ever fallen in with a pervert, but having been born in a brothel, he knew a lot about them. Shen Qingqiu didn’t try any funny stuff, not even after the first few weeks, no matter how he dreaded and waited for the other shoe to drop.

Looking at the man always made him feel strange, all the same. The envy made sense - Shen Qingqiu was rich and pampered, even if he was married to a demon. Luo Binghe was a weird demon lord. He practically waited on his husband hand and foot, even though it should have obviously been the other way around. The gratitude he felt made Bai Jiu feel more wary - on the
one hand, it sort of made sense. His life was definitely better with warm clothes and hot meals and a roof over his head. But it wasn’t something he was prone to feeling, and anyway, it felt like it was… different, too. Like he was wounded and indebted at the same time, somehow.

He wondered if the man had sired any bastards…?

But they didn’t look alike, not remotely, and even when Bai Jiu stole some of the man’s blood to do a test he’d heard about, it all turned out negative. Much to his disappointment. That would have been an *explanation*. Guilt was something tangible, something he could use. This weird, unprompted ‘kindness’, on the other hand, felt like something that might go away as inexplicably as it had arrived.

Bai Jiu kept his guard up. He considered escaping, a few times, but… they were in hell. He wasn’t an idiot. Outside the walls were monsters and death, inside Shen Qingqiu’s courtyard, there was comfort and security. And information. He read the cultivation manual cover to cover, and then reviewed parts as he started to work his way through actually cultivating. Whenever he was busy with it, people left him be, so he did a lot of it. The only exception to the rule was Shen Qingqiu’s idiot dog, which would sometimes bound over and start trying to play with him, until Bai Jiu shooed it away.

Stupid animal. It would never have survived as a street dog, that was for certain. A person had to be *crafty* not to get themselves killed in the real world.

His place in the demonic realm didn’t feel very real to him, he decided, after a month. It was more like something out of a story. A story that didn’t make any sense. Who would have ever thought that hell could be pleasant? Wasn’t it supposed to full of screaming monsters and torture and weren’t people like Bai Jiu supposed to get flayed alive or eaten or something? He knew those dangers definitely existed, but they kept far away from Shen Qingqiu’s little corner of the world.

So far, anyway.

Bai Jiu wasn’t a fool, not like that man. Lord Luo Binghe might have promised his husband all sorts of things, but in the end, that person was still a demon lord. A red brand burned upon his brow, and he was strong. Bai Jiu had seen his strength when he carved into the slavers, and there wasn’t an ounce of hesitance in him to take a life. Inevitably, at some point, he’d get tired of pampering his pet, and then Shen Qingqiu would probably end up in a meat grinder or something. And wouldn’t that be trouble? Bai Jiu definitely wouldn’t stick around long enough to see it happen.
…Maybe he’d try and escape with Shen Qingqiu once the tides started to turn, though. He’d see the warning signs first, of course, since that man was such an idiot. But it’d be better to escape back to the human world with an accomplished cultivator, just in case they met any monsters along the way.

They weren’t bringing the dog. He’d already decided on that front.

“A-Jiu,” Shen Qingqiu called.

With a start, he pulled away from the stash of emergency supplies he’d be stuffing under his mattress, and hastily made his way to his room’s door.

“What?” he answered, not bothering with propriety. Sometimes he got scolded for it, but Shen Qingqiu’s scolding wasn’t even a little intimidating.

Today, the man just smiled at him.

“I have good news! My lord’s business in this realm has concluded for the season, so we are to return to the human realm by the end of the week,” he said.

Bai Jiu blinked, and then narrowed his eyes. Human realm?

“Lord Luo’s sending you back…?” he ventured. The man had definitely still seemed to be too firmly smitten with his dumb husband for that kind of thing yet. Shen Qingqiu chuckled.

“He’s coming with us, of course,” the man said. “Our estate in the human realm is very pleasant. I think you’ll like it. But you should make certain to pack up anything you want to take. The servants clean this place up top to bottom when we are gone, so, anything you leave behind could get misplaced.”

Shen Qingqiu’s gaze moved towards his mattress, and Bai Jiu’s heart jumped into his throat. But the man didn’t actually say anything. He just patted him on the shoulder, and then went to go ‘inquire after dinner’.
Letting out a breath, he took a minute to process things.

Lord Luo owned an estate in the human realm…?

Well. If nothing else, it would probably be easier to escape from there.

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Bai Jiu went for the eyes on the servant boy who’d said his name was stupid.

It wasn’t like he cared about his name, much. It was just something to be called. All the boys who worked for his old master had been numbered, it was easier to keep track of, and he’d been pretty young when that cruel old bastard bought him from the brothel. He didn’t even know if ‘Bai’ was actually his family name, or just some sound the man had spat out while looking down at him. But even so, it was the only name he had.

The servant boy screamed and kicked at him, and a few minutes later a pair of arms closed around Bai Jiu’s waist and hauled him off of his opponent.

He struggled, then went slack, and then glared up at Shen Qingqiu.

“I didn’t start it,” he insisted, before the servant boy could start blaming him. Of course, he’d barely gotten the sentence out before fingers were being pointed and the other kid was hamming up the little tiny scratch on his eyelid like it was the end of the world. If Bai Jiu had any bruises, he’d have counterattacked with the same move; but he was too good now, it was really hard to land a punch on him and he hadn’t let any through on purpose.

Shen Qingqiu sighed at him.
“Whoever started it, you’re both getting punished,” he said.

Bai Jiu did his very best to look betrayed.

“Master Shen’s always punishing this poor humble servant,” he protested.

Shen Qingqiu lightly flicked his forehead in reproach.

“Who’s always getting into trouble, then?” the man countered. Bai Jiu opened his mouth to protest further, but Shen Qingqiu cut him off. “Haven’t I told A-Jiu to come straight to me if he’s being picked on? Does that translate to ‘claw the other boy’s eyes out’ in your head?”

He swallowed back his words, and glared mulishly at the wall instead - doing his utmost to project an aura of having been Badly Wronged.

Shen Qingqiu just set him down, even so, and then assigned him the punishment of copying out one of his texts, before shooing him back to their courtyard to do that. Bai Jiu lingered long enough to confirm that the servant boy did get punished, too - helping with laundry, okay, that was kind of worse - before he sulked off to do as told.

When evening came around he made a fuss about his hands cramping from writing so many lines. Shen Qingqiu rolled his eyes at him, and then made him sit while he rubbed a foul-smelling balm into his hands. It felt warm, and it actually maybe did help his fingers feel better. Maybe. Lord Luo came over then, though, and Bai Jiu had to stop hamming it up - that crafty demon could always tell what he was up to, somehow.

It was probably some wicked cultivation technique.

“Brat,” Lord Luo said, and presumptuously messed his hair. Beast. “When was the last time you actually did a chore?”

“This servant is always at his master’s beck and call,” Bai Jiu balefully replied.

It wasn’t one of those days where Lord Luo felt like ‘helping out’ with his training, then - the
laps he had to run sometimes - because a minute later he was waved off. Grateful for the reprieve, he left Shen Qingqiu and Lord Luo alone to do their ‘married people stuff’, and headed out to the courtyard. No one else was around, so he went to go check his buried stash.

It was true, he probably could have run away by now. But Bai Jiu wasn’t stupid. Lord Luo was clearly still in love with his husband, and while that lasted, his prospects were better if he just stuck around and played this mark for all it was worth. He still kept an escape fund, anyways - buried deep enough that the dumb dog couldn’t dig it back up again.

Said dumb dog bounded over while Bai Jiu slipped a few coins from his allowance into the buried box. He held out a hand to stop the thing from falling into the hole, and grimaced as his fingers got covered in spit.

Pets were so pointless.

Picking up a nearby branch, Bai Jiu threw it, and watched in despair as the dog completely ignored it and instead settled onto his lap. He gave in and patted it a few times, just so that if anyone was watching they’d think he was a silly kid playing in the dirt with a dog, and then covered his stash back up again.

Shen Qingqiu’s home in the demon realm wasn’t too bad. Sometimes it was - ironically - more peaceful than being at the fancy estate in the human world. The human estate had human servants, with human expectations of things. With the demon servants, no one had a leg to stand on to call anyone else’s name ‘weird’, and being Shen Qingqiu’s apprentice was enough to keep them all from getting on his nerves. They were ugly and brutish, but so were a lot of humans. In the human realm, the atmosphere was better and it was easier to go out and do things, but everyone could tell he was some ‘pity case’ that Master Shen had taken on.

Bai Jiu would prove them wrong, though. He was good at cultivating, he'd already made breakthroughs. Eventually he’d be an expert at it, and then he’d make people eat their words whenever they said anything bad about him. Not only that, but Shen Qingqiu had even started making noises about getting him tutors for painting and music and anything else he might be interested in. By the time he was eighteen, Bai Jiu vowed, he’d be good at everything.

Just see who could look down their nose at him then. Let them try it. He’d cut their noses clean off for the offense!

“Cut their noses right off,” he muttered, patting the dog again.
Ben Ben whuffed in blind adoration.

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Lord Luo and Shen Qingqiu had been married for six years by the time Bai Jiu met them.

Four years later, Bai Jiu was sixteen. Old enough, by Shen Qingqiu’s reckoning, to start participating in cultivation world events. It was good timing, he supposed, because Lord Luo had been married to him for ten years by then. Ten years was just about when even the most patient people started falling out of love with their husbands, he was sure. Shen Qingqiu’s position was bound to get less stable - he waited for the day when Lord Luo would turn up with some sly succubus or pretty young cultivator on his arm, going ‘Husband has been spoiled for long enough’.

The fact that it hadn’t happened yet probably just meant that Lord Luo was picky. Sooner or later, Shen Qingqiu would get his heart broken. And when that happened, Bai Jiu’s position would be rockier, too. It was a good time to start considering other options. If nothing else, he could definitely do things that his soft-hearted master was too timid to pull off. Lord Luo’s future floozies would probably be lulled into a false sense of security by Shen Qingqiu’s softie nature. Bai Jiu would play nice, too, but only on the surface. No one would see him coming. Then he’d wreck their lives.

“What is A-Jiu glowering at my flowerbeds for?” his master asked.

Relieved that he’d already covered up his latest stash spot, Bai Jiu stood up and shrugged.

“I was just checking them for pests,” he said. “Some of the leaves looked chewed on.”

“Really?”

Shen Qingqiu came over to look. Bai Jiu resisted the urge to hastily dissuade him. That would be too obvious.
“It’s alright, though. It must have just been the way the light was hitting them,” he said, instead. “What can this servant do for Master Shen?”

‘Servant’. Pah! Just see how long he had to play at that for. He owed Shen Qingqiu some things, that was undeniable, but as soon as he’d repaid his favours he’d be on his own way. Once his training was done, if nothing else, Shen Qingqiu would have to greet him as an equal, and Bai Jiu wouldn’t have to put up with his nonsense nearly so often.

“This master wanted to speak to his student, actually, about the upcoming tournament,” Shen Qingqiu said. Motioning for Bai Jiu to follow him, he began walking one of his usual circuits through the estate. Bai Jiu fell into step alongside him, resisting the urge to make a snide comment. If it was about the tournament, then it might actually be important.

“Technically speaking, this will be your formal debut into the cultivation world,” Shen Qingqiu reminded him.

As if Bai Jiu could forget. Was this going to be some lecture on etiquette or something? He already knew well enough to play nicely…

“Since it’s that kind of occasion, this master his been thinking that A-Jiu should have a new name. One more suited to his station. The name ‘Shen’ does not carry many advantages, but what few it has, A-Jiu should claim a right to.”

Bai Jiu’s steps faltered in surprise.

Did he hear that right? His ears had to be failing him. Surely even Shen Qingqiu wasn’t dense enough to adopt him into his family!

“Master Shen? What are you saying?” he blurted, unable to bring himself to actually ask the question, in case he’d misunderstood. That would make a fool of him, no doubt.

“For cultivators who follow our techniques, the old sects would have given A-Jiu a first name with ‘Qing’ in it, once he reached the status of mastery,” Shen Qingqiu told him, utterly unruffled about the whole thing. “But that’s no longer necessary. A-Jiu doesn’t even need to accept a new name, if he’d prefer not to. However, having thought of it, this master would offer him the name Shen Jiu. For the time being. A-Jiu has not yet attained a master’s level, after all.”
This fool! He really was…?

Bai Jiu considered the matter carefully. If Shen Qingqiu was offended by his hesitance, he didn’t show it. After all, like the man said, the name ‘Shen’ didn’t carry a lot of weight. Except maybe by association with him, and all his power basically hinged on Lord Luo’s favour towards him. Which could change at any moment. Who wanted their claim to fame to be a single adopted relative who earned notoriety by marrying a demon lord?

But… he could always switch allegiances later on, if the opportunity came up. And the advantages of the name ‘Shen’ definitely outweighed the zero advantages he currently had.

“…Many thanks for Master Shen’s graciousness,” he finally said, and offered a salute. Trying to make it less stiff and resentful than usual.

Shen Qingqiu reached over and patted him on the shoulder.

“Don’t think I’m being generous,” he actually said, with uncommon seriousness. “This is only what you are truly due.”

Bai - no, Shen Jiu - hesitated again. But in the other man’s eyes, he didn’t see anything like trickery or contempt. No sign that this was a carrot he intended to yank away after the fact, or that it was something he anticipated Shen Jiu losing his ‘due’ towards after some failed performance or other. He looked… like he really believed his words.

Foolish man.

He was lucky enough to have found Shen Jiu, really. When that demon lord broke his heart, he surely wouldn’t have the first clue on what to do.
Shen Jiu attended three tournaments that year.

They were, in all honesty, a bit tedious. Much as he liked the chance to show off, he wasn’t popular with the other apprentices. Every time he participated, it seemed, some complaint or allegation would crop up.

So what if Shen Jiu shoved that other apprentice to take the kill shot? That girl’s aim was terrible, she was going to miss and then get gored anyway.

So what if he’d kicked up a lot of sand during the dueling matches? Why else would there be so much of it around, if the competitors weren’t supposed to use it?

So what if he’d won a survival challenge by finding a good place to hide and then reading a book for three hours? It wasn’t against the rules!

Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t even let him compete in any of the mixed events that involved adults, either, so some of the other apprentices looked down on him because they thought he must be too weak. It wasn’t his weakness - it was his master’s. The softhearted man was just too prone to worrying. But Shen Jiu couldn’t say that without slandering him, technically, and that was a pretty poor strategy. So instead he was just left to defend his skills by displaying them.

A lot of the other apprentices weren’t so tough. Their masters usually had more than one student, too.

“You’re like a handful of raffle tickets,” Shen Jiu sneered at a group of four, who all shared the same master. “Your master’s just waiting to see which of you might be any good, then she’ll dump the rest of you like garbage. A real master doesn’t need to take on a pile of trash to find the useful scraps.”

He hit a sore spot. Of course he did; he’d just told them the truth.

“Your master’s a good-for-nothing demon-fucking whore,” one of the boys countered, spitting. “Jumping houses to sleep with any rich cock that’ll take him.”
Shen Jiu sneered.

“Say that to him if you want to offend someone,” he replied, derisively. “Don’t take me for some good little slave who hops to defend the master at every random insult thrown his way.”

One of the girls laughed.

“Oh now I see it!” she said. “The disloyal whore of a master took on another disloyal whore for a student! What a perfect pair!”

A pain in his jaw alerted him to the fact that he was gritting his teeth too hard.

Well they’d just see what happened when the tournament started. A lot of accidents took place when there were monsters around, after all-

“Such foul language,” a calm, collected voice said, from not far behind him.

The tone of it was such that Shen Jiu almost expected to turn around and see Shen Qingqiu standing behind him. But as soon as he had thought, he knew it was wrong. The voice wasn’t the same. The apprentices across from him all paled as a stranger approached.

Shen Jiu didn’t recognize him. He hadn’t been involved with any of the events he’d participated in before, obviously. But the man was definitely a noble. It practically oozed from his entire countenance - he was a handsome immortal. Just like a lot of people at these events and conferences and tournaments. Not really remarkable in that respect, but as soon as he clapped eyes on him, Shen Jiu felt as though he’d been flung up into the sky. As though every ounce of purchase he had on the world around him had just been compromised.

It was unsettling. He fell silent, while the man walked straight past him, and leveled a disappointed look onto the four youths he’d been arguing with.

“Lord Yue!” one of them said. “We were just… defending your honour!”
‘Lord Yue’ pulled off a sincerely unconvinced look, as he settled a hand at his belt.

“If those are the weapons you would use to defend me, I think I would rather be insulted,” he said. “I’ll be having words with your master about your propensity for slandering your elders.”

A tremulous finger was pointed at Shen Jiu.

“He started it!”

“You were the ones who came over here looking for a fight! Four to one!” he protested, forgetting to look wronged and instead getting incensed.

“Enough!” Lord Yue said, sharply. The four other apprentices looked suitably cowed. “You should be preparing for the trials, if you still wish to compete. If not, I am certain that some work can be found for idle apprentices.”

The four took off as if he’d lit a fire under them at that suggestion. Shen Jiu should have left, too, but for some reason, his legs didn’t quite want to move yet. He hadn’t entirely taken his eyes off of Lord Yue this entire time. There was something…

He felt… like…

Maybe he had seen this person before?

That sort of thing didn’t ordinarily bother him so much.

After a minute, the lord’s gaze turned to regard him. His brows furrowed a little, and his movements stuttered. Like something had shocked him. It only lasted for a moment.

“What master does this junior serve?” he asked.

Shen Jiu finally managed to duck his head.
“Shen Qingqiu,” he answered.

Lord Yue seemed to startle again.

“Shen…” he began, oddly. Then he caught himself on something, and shook his head. “I see. Well, since it was four to one, this lord won’t say anything to him about it.”

“Many thanks.”

It was obvious that their interaction had concluded. Shen Jiu knew he should go and find Shen Qingqiu, and try to keep from attracting any more trouble before the bouts began. Lest this lord change his mind, or those other four return to incite something that would get them all kicked out. But again, for some reason, it took a lot of effort for him to get moving.

He felt as though Lord Yue was staring at him the entire time he left, too.

When he finally found Shen Qingqiu, his master was chatting with that Liu Qingge again. Shen Jiu rolled his eyes. Why did he bother? The man was like a brick wall.

Shen Jiu waited for a break in the conversation before he could safely interrupt. It took long enough for him to get slightly annoyed.

“Who’s Lord Yue?” he asked.

Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge both froze up, and then looked at him as though he’d just spat out a live bird or something. That was probably bad. Was he an enemy?

“Ah…” Shen Qingqiu replied, after an uncommonly long and awkward moment.

Liu Qingge seemed to reach some internal conclusion on his own, and stalked off. Good riddance.
“Why are you asking?” his master finally replied, and unfolded his fan.

Interesting.

He was anxious about this topic, then.

“I met him,” Shen Jiu admitted, and folded his arms. “Just briefly, some apprentices got into a fight and he intervened. Who is he?”

Shen Qingqiu regarded him strangely for a moment, and then sighed.

“Yue Qingyuan is one of the emperor’s most devoted subjects,” he said. “This master used to be married to him. Liu Qingge was also married to him, for some of the same time.”

Shen Jiu blinked.

Whatever answer he had been expecting, that was certainly not it.

*That* was Shen Qingqiu’s ex-husband? And also Liu Qingge’s? Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge had been married to the same lord at some point? *When?* And how did they both manage to divorce him without being socially ostracized into oblivion? No, wait, Shen Jiu could figure that part out on his own. Lord Luo, of course, was the answer for Shen Qingqiu, and Liu Qingge was from the Liu clan. One of the few noble families that could probably sway the emperor into granting a divorce, and then weather the storm of controversy over it.

That answered the question of Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge’s bizarre friendship, too, he supposed. Was Yue Qingyuan some kind of terrible person, that his husbands had ended up becoming friends who left him, rather than competitors who vied for his favour?

Or maybe he was just weak. That might fit better. Some weakling lord who couldn’t keep his own husbands in hand.

Those apprentices hadn’t seemed to think so, though… but then again, with fools like that, they were probably just cowardly around any elder with some clout to throw around.
“Master Shen, tell this servant the whole story,” he demanded.

Shen Qingqiu raised an eyebrow at him.

“Bossy,” he tsk’d. “What makes A-Jiu think it’s any of his business?”

Despite saying that, though, Shen Jiu didn’t even need to think of a good reason to pry before Shen Qingqiu caved.

“We can discuss it later,” he decided, with a pointed glance around.

Reminded that they were in a public venue, Shen Jiu reluctantly decided that was the best he was going to get, and resigned himself to feeling curious for the whole rest of the event. He didn’t see Yue Qingyuan again, either. Only, he overheard some other cultivators saying that the lord had retired early from the proceedings, for some unknown reason.

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The whole story on Yue Qingyuan was definitely an interesting one.

To Shen Jiu’s surprise, after regarding him solemnly for several long moments, Shen Qingqiu had told his tale with remarkably little editing. Or so he assumed. The man shared some pretty private-sounding details, so, once again Shen Jiu could only assume he was being foolishly softhearted and open about the entire thing.

When the tale was finished, Shen Jiu picked it over in his mind with a critical eye.
Twenty-six—almost twenty-seven—years ago, Shen Qingqiu had married a man who became a lord, who promised him exclusive love and devotion. When the clock had run out on that, then, he’d run off to be with another man who became a lord, who also promised him exclusive love and devotion. A man who used to be his apprentice. And now that it had been around ten years since Shen Qingqiu had married Lord Luo…

Shen Jiu narrowed his eyes.

He didn’t have any opportunities to become a lord himself, did he?

Well, the joke was on Shen Qingqiu if he thought that Shen Jiu would whisk him off and marry him exclusively as soon as Lord Luo got tired of him, or something. Even if he could become a nobleman, he wouldn’t be stupid enough to promise his husband exclusivity. That explained some of the weird insults he’d been subjected to over the years, though. Clearly, Shen Jiu wasn’t the only one who had noticed a potential pattern, and started theorizing.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed to fit in practical terms. It was interesting, he would grant. How did Shen Qingqiu imagine that Shen Jiu could ascend to the upper echelons of high society? Following along with such a plan might work to his benefit even if he ditched his master somewhere along the way.

But…

As he had those thoughts, he looked over to where Shen Qingqiu was peacefully staring into his empty teacup, and had to admit… it didn’t really fit.

Shen Jiu wasn’t an idiot. He could tell when people were playing him. And if there was any possible way for him to grasp more power, he would have already seen it himself. Besides, Shen Qingqiu was disgustingly in love with Lord Luo. Even when the demon broke his heart, he’d probably just weep a lot and not even try to leave the man. He put up with that insufferable dog too, didn’t he? And that blockhead Liu Qingge. Clearly, Shen Qingqiu was loyal to a fault.

Not like Shen Jiu. Shen Jiu was smart. There wasn’t anyone he wouldn’t sell out if he stood to gain from it, probably.

He just hadn’t had a lot of opportunities to gain from it, so he hadn’t tested it out much.
“What’s A-Jiu thinking?” Shen Qingqiu asked him.

Shen Jiu blinked, and then schooled his features into a more neutral expression.

“You’ve got a more sordid history than I thought, old man,” he said.

To his surprise, Shen Qingqiu chuckled.

“More than you know,” he said, under his breath.

“How?”

“Oh, just talking to myself. I don’t think I’ve ever had to explain the whole story to anyone before,” his master admitted. “But since A-Jiu is part of the family, he ought to know it.”

“You’ll have to tell your children someday, too,” Shen Jiu reasoned. “People talk.”

“That they do.”

Frowning a little, Shen Jiu folded his arms.

“If Master Shen wants some advice, he should consider the business of children sooner rather than later,” he opined, carefully. “Lord Luo’s had him for around ten years now, hasn’t he? A baby would secure my master’s marriage. Blood ties have more longevity than passion.”

To his surprise, Shen Qingqiu neither rebuffed the idea nor agreed. He just regarded Shen Jiu thoughtfully for several minutes.

Then he sighed.

“Insecurity’s really a terrible thing,” he mused.
“What?”

“Nothing, nothing. Just thinking to myself. A-Jiu…” Another sigh escaped the man, and he shifted in place. His fan tapped against the side of his desk in thought. “There is a lesson I wish to teach, but I am not certain how.”

Oh good, a change in subject. Shen Jiu let his eyebrow lift in curiosity.

“Is it a technique?”

Shen Qingqiu shook his head.

“It’s a life lesson,” he said, resolutely. “A-Jiu, do you trust me?”

Shen Jiu frowned.

“No one ever asks that question for a good reason,” he accused.

His master chuckled. Tap, tap went his fan. His thoughtful expression persisted.

“Maybe it is less that it needs to be learned, and more that it needs to be recognized,” Shen Qingqiu mused. “This master suspects that A-Jiu shares with him a certain propensity for… denial.”

Was he going to be accused of lying again?

Annoyance rose up in him, and his arms lifted a little higher, as if to reflect it. It wasn’t that he didn’t lie, of course. Everyone did, unless they were a fool. But getting lectured meant that he’d gotten caught, and getting caught meant that he hadn’t lied well enough, and that was irritating.

“Let’s say this,” Shen Qingqiu just continued, though, without bringing up any gentle accusations. “Imagine a scenario where a master adopts a young apprentice into his household. The household
isn’t big. So long as it doesn’t grow any bigger, then if some ill fate were to befall the master, and his lord, the apprentice would likely inherit at least a good chunk of their wealth and power. On the other hand, if the master and his lord have children of their own, then the apprentice will be pushed quite entirely out of the line of inheritance for such things. Logically speaking, would that apprentice counsel his master to have children?”

Shen Jiu wasn’t stupid enough to miss the obvious parallels, but he suddenly felt like a fool.

Shen Qingqiu raised a hand as if to forestall Shen Jiu’s actual thoughts.

“That is only the bare skeleton of a situation, mind you. Real life tends to exist with far more nuance,” he continued. “So let’s consider some other factors. Let’s say that this master has no maiden family to speak of - so the only real inheritance he could offer would be through his lord. And let’s say that this master is kind enough to his apprentice, and has done what he could to grant the youth a good life. Security comes in the form of the lord’s grace to his husband, and the master’s grace to his student. So, in that situation, promoting further filial harmony is also seeing to the apprentice’s best interests. Isn’t it?”

Slowly, Shen Jiu relaxed a little. After a moment, when it was clear that this man was waiting for a response, he offered a tight nod.

Shen Qingqiu smiled.

“But then, the master could suddenly change his behaviour at any moment,” he pointed out. “As long as he lived, he could disown his apprentice. He could decry him. He could run him off, or sell him into an unwanted marriage. Why wouldn’t it be wiser to wait for an opportune moment, poison him in his sleep, and then reap the rewards that way?”

The discomfort came back.

Shen Jiu knew this was a trap. He also knew that he was expected to offer an answer. Obviously, he couldn’t just say ‘that’s exactly right’. Then Shen Qingqiu would think he was threatening him. Or, maybe not, but it was definitely not the right answer.

“Because the apprentice isn’t a murderer,” he settled for saying, with a slight, defensive sneer.
“Yes,” Shen Qingqiu agreed, perfectly pleasant and serene about the whole conversation. Prick.
“But given the right incentive, anyone could become a murderer. And we are all martial combatants, here. Killing things, particularly for necessity and self-gain, isn’t alien to us. So. Why not kill the master? Under what situation is it more beneficial not to?”

Shen Jiu shrugged.

His master waited.

Alright, fine. It was a puzzle. There was clearly a correct answer. And given the tone of this conversation, and what had prompted it…

“The situation where the apprentice trusts the master?” he ventured, reluctantly.

Shen Qingqiu smiled one of his small smiles of approval at him, even though he also looked like he wanted to roll his eyes a little. Again, prick. When he wasn’t being a complete idiot, he managed to be entirely insufferable instead.

“A-Jiu is a pragmatic person,” his master told him, throwing him again with the random compliment. “But he is also a cynic. Cynics usually think the worst outcome is the most true - so a cynical pragmatist will plan for all outcomes to be bad. But, every once in a while, it becomes impossible to ignore that reality and cynicism are not in complete accordance with one another. A-Jiu has already learned this lesson. He just needs to recognize what it means for him, and how he can manage bad outcomes without always expecting them, too.”

Shifting in discomfort, Shen Jiu finally stood up from his spot.

“It’s late,” he said.

To his relief, Shen Qingqiu let him go without any further things to claim he already knew.
Of course the world wasn’t always a bad place. Of course people weren’t always malicious. That didn’t mean anything, except that a person couldn’t even rely on consistency.

For Shen Jiu’s seventeenth birthday, Shen Qingqiu took him into town and thoroughly spoiled him. The man was like a dotty grandfather sometimes, however incongruous that might seem when combined with his elegant immortal facade. He carried the damn dog around with him, tutting over ‘Ben Ben’s arthritis’ and making a stop at the apothecary to get medicine for the dog like the absolute fool that he was. It was probably snake oil. But other than that one stop, Shen Jiu got to choose where they went, and he didn’t have any reservations about milking the preferential treatment for all it was worth. They had an expensive feast of a meal at a nice restaurant, and Shen Jiu commissioned a new sheath for his sword, and spent hours at the tailor’s getting himself several new outfits that would show him off more at the tournaments.

Seventeen was one year shy of eighteen, after all, and while apprenticeships could - and often did - outlast one’s teen years, he wouldn’t be able to frequent his master’s company unsupervised after that point. Also, it was better to leverage his youth while he had it. Even though he’d stop aging once his cultivation reached a certain point, so his looks weren’t in much danger, virgins were still a hot commodity in the marriage market. Nobles more readily believed that a young man was ‘intact’ than an older one.

Shen Jiu was the fox-faced type, all hard angles but narrow, so even when he was trying to play up his youthful innocence there was always an edge to him. He decided to work with it, rather than against it, and cultivate an appearance that was more ‘beguiling’ than ‘unsullied’. But it never hurt to follow a good leader, either, and one thing he could say for his master was that the man had decent taste. Shen Jiu bought himself a few fans with tranquil landscape paintings and appealing patterns, and veered more towards greens, blacks, silvers, and whites in clothes, rather than following the trendy, brighter colours.

For the sake of making things ‘pop’, he decided to turn to the rouge shop instead.

Shen Qingqiu turned up his nose at much of their concoctions, but to his surprise, his insights seemed less to do with the purity of an immortal who was Above Earthly Things, and more to do with chemistry.

“That has lead in it, don’t ever use anything with lead in it; it will poison your mind and set back your cultivation,” his master instructed, with uncommon sternness. The shop assistant all but flailed to keep up with him as he frowned at their offerings and demanded ingredients lists, and
scoffed when he deduced that they were being lied to.

“No, no, no, absolutely not,” he tutted, with increasing severity. Even Shen Jiu found himself at something of a loss to keep up, and didn’t resist as he was abruptly tugged back out of the store, and down the street to another one. “I doubt it’s any better, but let’s see…” the man muttered.

“Master Shen knows a lot about cosmetics,” he couldn’t help but observe, grudgingly impressed.

Shen Qingqiu huffed, as if somehow displeased.

“This master knows a lot about poisons,” he corrected.

Oh. That actually made much more sense - especially considering that he’d never seen his master put on a single ounce of rouge.

Shen Jiu, of course, knew of snake oil sellers and con artists aplenty, so he didn’t bother disbelieving that most cosmetics were full of harmful things. Instead he found himself listening intently as his master examined the offerings of no less than four different shops and one stall, and proclaimed only a handful of things suitable.

It would probably be very easy to poison someone through their rouge.

Shen Jiu filed that information away for future use.

After spending an unexpected amount of time on the matter of cosmetics, however, Shen Qingqiu declared that it was time to go home. In the carriage ride back, he presented Shen Jiu with a wrapping that contained a valuable jade figurine.

“If it disappears, I won’t ask where it’s gone,” Shen Qingqiu said, simply. “Just make certain you get the value out of it.”

Shen Jiu feigned affront.
“Does Master Shen think his apprentice wouldn’t treasure his gifts?”

Shen Qingqiu just smiled at him, as if it really didn’t matter either way, and then rummaged around to retrieve some snacks.

When they got home, Shen Jiu set out all his gifts, and considered the little figurine for a moment. It would serve that shitty master just right if he put it in one of his stashes. It would be practical to do it, too, what use did Shen Jiu have for silly figurines that could only sit around and look pretty? When he was rich, sure, he’d have plenty. But he was still starting out. Who knew where he would land, when all was said and done?

But it was probably a test, he decided. Even though Shen Qingqiu never went into his room, he’d doubtless made that comment just to check and see if Shen Jiu would barter away his present.

The figurine wasn’t even that nice of a piece.

He put it on his little vanity, next to the cosmetics cases.

~

Yue Qingyuan was watching him.

Shen Jiu had noticed it starting not long after his birthday, with the autumn tournament that was hosted by the Fourth Prince. It wasn’t only Yue Qingyuan who has started to pay him more attention, but given the history involved, that particular attention was interesting to him. Especially after he’d caught the man staring at the tournament listings with a look on his face as though he was seeing a ghost.

After the third time Shen Jiu caught Yue Qingyuan’s eyes on him, he decided to do some digging around. Mostly, that meant antagonizing the other apprentices into giving away a bunch of
information they didn’t mean to.

What he found out was this:

Yue Qingyuan was currently unmarried. A major source of controversy about the man.

He used to have a grand estate, but after his two marriages fell apart, the emperor claimed it from him to keep it from going into disrepair. The lord had been living in a palace apartment ever since.

Despite two divorces and the broad connections of the Liu clan, most of the bad impressions over things falling apart rested firmly on the spouses. Shen Qingqiu was a mesmerizing seducer of men, apparently, and Liu Qingge was frigid. That last point, Shen Jiu could believe.

Lord Luo was not a fan of Lord Yue at all, but also discouraged his demonic retainers from messing with him. Shen Qingqiu’s soft touch was written all over that.

Despite losing his estate, Yue Qingyuan still earned enough of a salary and held enough of the emperor’s trust that he was a hot commodity.

And, perhaps most intriguingly - the emperor had promised to return Yue estate to Yue Qingyuan if he got married and finally started pumping out some loyal little heirs.

That part wasn’t a total shock either, all things considered. The emperor was a paranoid man. He had made a lot of enemies in his rise to power, and being immortal himself, even his own heirs were a genuine threat to him in their impatience and ambition. The longer his reign lasted, the more worries over its end seemed to encroach upon his decisions. Shen Qingqiu hadn’t been overstating it when he described Yue Qingyuan as a man ‘loyal to the emperor’ - probably, someone with so few family ties would never have ascended to power in the first place unless the emperor found some solace in his lack of compromising connections.

Shen Jiu also enjoyed a low number of compromising connections.

Of course, Yue Qingyuan was still a man who had been divorced twice. He’d lost Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge. But neither of those men had ever struck him as particularly ambitious. And in Shen Qingqiu’s description of events, it sounded mostly as though he’d just gotten all worked up over the second marriage.
How foolish of him, really. He should have seen it coming.

Well, Shen Jiu didn’t have any blind romantic notions to cloud things up for him. And the more he thought about it, the more his ego liked the concept of succeeding where the two great masters had failed. If he could use Yue Qingyuan’s interest to seduce him, he could land himself a lord, an estate, and enough of a headstart to probably even have a say in any concubines or future spouses to join the household later on. He could rule a lordly household with an iron fist! Just so long as he got that man eating out of his hand first.

It was good to have a plan of action, but he reminded himself not to get ahead of things. He started out slow. ‘Accidentally’ crossing paths with Yue Qingyuan during various events. Pressuring Master Shen to finally let him compete in more mixed rounds, and subsequently mingle with some more established cultivators. All men wanted what others wanted, so Shen Jiu flirted strategically, treading the line of what was appropriate for someone of his age and position.

It worked better than he thought. Yue Qingyuan stared at him as if he didn’t know how to look away.

Which was perfect, except… sometimes it was unsettling, too. Shen Jiu was seventeen, he thought he should be ready for anything, but to his frustration, there was a part of him that felt intimidated by his own efforts. Yue Qingyuan’s intensity made him worry that there were still too many things he didn’t know. And sometimes his flirting got reactions that made his skin crawl; made him want to go find Shen Qingqiu and hide behind him.

He never did, but his master still interfered sometimes anyway.

Shen Qingqiu had a certain way of uttering the sentence ‘he’s seventeen’ that managed to sound like ‘demons will clean their teeth with your bones’.

Sometimes, when he was alone, Shen Jiu tried to practice uttering things in the same tone of voice. It never seemed to menace with quite the same degree of severity, though. The only time he got it right was when he caught one of the demon servants trying to mess with his master’s dog, and informed said servant that he’d be telling Lord Luo about it. And that was probably just a coincidence.

Ben Ben was old, anyway. Why mess with an old dog? It wasn’t even a spirit animal, the stupid thing had no cultivation to speak of. And cataracts. It was an arthritic half-blind sack of fur, a
demon could find better prey just by walking out of any door in hell.

But anyways, mostly his plan to win Yue Qingyuan’s interest seemed to be going along well. By the time his eighteenth birthday was on its way in, the only real snag was that the lord hadn’t sent a single offer.

Then again, given his master’s ‘he’s seventeen’ tone of voice, the man was probably just waiting until he wasn’t seventeen in order to wisely protect himself from his ex-husband’s wrath.

Shen Jiu still felt inexplicably anxious when his eighteenth birthday rolled around. He shouldn’t have. His cultivation was progressing very well, and so were his other skills. His tutors weren’t precisely pleased with him, but they didn’t have anything negative to say about his actual abilities. He had several emergency stashes he’d moved around in case he needed to flee during the night, and even if his grand plan didn’t work out there had been some interesting offers already. Turning eighteen just meant he couldn’t stay in Shen Qingqiu’s courtyard anymore, that he’d probably live full time in a smaller courtyard at the human realm estate, and have more independence in his studies and socializing.

It was fine. It would be fine. He could handle it. In fact, he was looking forward to not having to see Shen Qingqiu all the time, or block out the sounds when he and Lord Luo got particularly intense in attending to their marital obligations.

Sitting in his silly little side room, next to Shen Qingqiu’s own, Shen Jiu reminded himself of all of this as he tried not to panic.

…The problem, he decided, was that he had let himself feel safe here. There really weren’t a lot of safe places in the world. But at some point, he had concluded that a room right next to Shen Qingqiu’s was one. He hadn’t concluded this with his own permission, but instead it just seemed that it happened to him sneakily, as a result of not being attacked or beaten or dragged out and dumped onto the street at any point. It had made him soft, made him afraid of going back to the kind of vigilance he’d need in order to live somewhere else.

If Shen Qingqiu thought there was something odd about the length of time it took for Shen Jiu to come out that morning, he didn’t say anything. Instead he just fuss ed at him to wear a warm riding cloak, and took him off for another birthday trip. As if this was any other birthday, as if it probably wouldn’t be their last.

“I want to go to that tall pagoda, the one where the musicians like to go,” he insisted, citing the most expensive tea shop in the city, more or less.
Shen Qingqiu regarded him for a moment, and then dropped a full money purse onto his lap.

“Lord Luo is very wealthy, but I didn’t want to bankrupt him. So I set a limit. We’ll spend all of that for your birthday, but when the purse is empty, we’ll go home.”

Frowning a little, Shen Jiu opened the purse.

He stared at the contents. Then he looked incredulously at Master Shen.

Then he narrowed his eyes.

“What if there’s money leftover?” he asked.

Shen Qingqiu waved negligently.

“A-Jiu can keep it as part of his gifts,” he said.

Shen Jiu pursed his lips.

“This servant is getting somewhat old for birthday celebrations, and it is a cold day. Maybe this time we should go back home and just have a quiet celebration…”

Shen Qingqiu laughed at him. Surprisingly, it didn’t annoy him today, to be laughed at.

“It’s up to you,” his master assured him.

Giving it some serious thought, Shen Jiu closed the money pouch, and eventually subsided. He handed it back to Shen Qingqiu, muttering that it shouldn’t be his obligation to keep track of things on his own birthday.
After all, this probably would be the last time. And... he wanted it to feel the same as the other times before.

~

Three months after his eighteenth birthday, the stupid dog went and died.

Shen Qingqiu had been in the demon realm with Lord Luo when it happened, while Shen Jiu was still settling into his own courtyard at the human estate - the official ‘Luo estate’, as it were. He found out via a letter that Lord Luo, of all people, wrote to him.

It was infuriating. Shen Qingqiu was going to be upset, and the stupid dog hadn’t even waited until Shen Jiu could be there to deal with it all conveniently, no. Lord Luo said he died in his sleep, well, at least that was one thing. He’d probably be warm and safe in that ludicrously over-stuffed bed of his, not even aware that he wouldn’t wake up again.

Shen Jiu cursed as something wet got on the letter, and angrily scrunched it up to throw away.

Then he cursed again, and smoothed it out, and stuck it into one of his drawers instead.

Now he’d have to go all the way to the demon estate, and make sure that Shen Qingqiu wasn’t doing that foolish thing where he pretended not to be upset about things. As if the man was somehow immovable, and not just a gigantic, ridiculous, softhearted sap. He’d loved that stupid dog, after all. It wasn’t even believable that he wouldn't be upset.

When he got the demonic estate grounds, he even bumped into Liu Qingge.

Even Liu Qingge knew that Shen Qingqiu would be upset.
Someone had told Liu Qingge about the dog dying. Actually that was even stranger to contemplate. Who would tell Liu Qingge? Lord Luo? The lord was probably pretty worried indeed if he’d just sent out missives left and right. Shen Jiu regarded Liu Qingge for a long moment, before the man nodded at him. After a beat, he nodded back, and they both went to go find Shen Qingqiu.

The man was sitting sadly in his outdoor space. There were clear signs of Lord Luo’s bizarre brand of anxious fussing, which included a small plate of untouched snacks, a book, and a folded up blanket that he’d probably draped over Shen Qingqiu, before Shen Qingqiu pulled it off and protested that he wasn’t ‘a victim of shock, Binghe’ - whatever he always meant by that.

He looked sad, too. But his expression perked up when he saw the both of them. Then he lifted his fan, but the fan couldn’t hide the fact that he rolled his eyes.

“Really, you two,” he said. “All this fussing. I am not going to keel over from grief.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Shen Jiu replied, sharply. “You adored that foolish little beast. Go ahead and be upset, you aren’t fooling anyone.”

Shen Qingqiu narrowed his eyes at him.

“He’s right,” Liu Qingge said, to his surprise. “No one expects you to be anything other than upset. You may as well just be upset.”

So saying, the man strode over, and took the seat across from Shen Qingqiu. Whose expression had turned conflicted, before smoothing out into deliberate neutrality.

“Honestly,” his master protested. “Of course I’m sad. I can handle being sad.”

Not to be outdone, Shen Jiu stalked over to the chair next to him, and sat down as well. He was kind of surprised that Lord Luo had left his husband alone, under the circumstances - but then the unasked question answered itself, as the man suddenly turned up with a tray of tea. He barely blinked at Shen Jiu or Liu Qingge, even nodded at them as he came over and set the tea down, and then unabashedly cozied up to his husband.

That was when Shen Jiu knew that his master really was more affected than he looked. Because the
man didn’t protest his lord’s cuddling, not even weakly.

“...Ben Ben really was not all that bright,” Shen Qingqiu said, after a few moments of no one drinking tea. He glanced at Liu Qingge. “I never asked, where did you get him from?”

Liu Qingge shrugged.

“One of my cousins’ dogs had a litter,” he said. “If you want another, I can arrange for it.”

Shen Qingqiu seemed to think about it for a moment.

“We do have a lot of things for a dog...” he replied. But then he shook his head, and glanced at Lord Luo. “But, I don’t think I’ll have the time to look after a puppy.”

For some reason, Lord Luo’s expression softened all over at that comment.

Shen Jiu narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Apprentice grown. Dog gone. What was the phrase for softhearted people who got all mopey about being left alone...? ‘Empty nest’? That was it. Times like that were often when couples started seriously considering children. Especially among immortals, who didn’t really have to worry about age and timing on that front, as much.

Shen Jiu frowned at his hands.

Silly little dogs definitely seemed to up the ‘soft and appealing’ factor of some people. That was definitely an area he was lacking in, with regards to building up his own appeal.

“Give me the dog things,” he suggested, before he’d even really thought about it.

His master blinked at him.
Straightening his back, Shen Jiu gave him a challenging look.

“’I’m still your apprentice, after all. I’ll look after a dog for you. Then you can see it whenever you’re at the Luo estate. It’s safer for a dog there anyway,’’ he reasoned.

Right. Filial obligation. This was probably also a way to get in better graces with his master, too, doing him a favour like this.

For some reason, Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge shared an odd glance with one another. Lord Luo almost looked *amused.*

Shen Jiu would just dare that demon to laugh at something, or make some kind of accusations.

*He* wasn’t a sap. Unlike Shen Qingqiu, he wasn’t disguising anything with any ulterior motives.

That was definitely not a thing they had in common.

“It’s just strange not to have a dog,” he blurted.

Shen Qingqiu patted his shoulder.

“Of course, that’s a fine idea,” he said. Shen Jiu scowled. He did not appreciate the man’s tone. But no one was laughing at him, so after a minute, he relaxed a little. Shen Qingqiu seemed to relax somewhat, too. The conversation turned towards reminiscing over stupid things that dog had done. There were a wealth of tales to share; all told it was amazing that Ben Ben had lived long enough to die of natural causes.

When their courtesy visit had concluded, Liu Qingge left Shen Jiu with an assurance that he’d send someone to the estate with a puppy at some point. A month later, a servant turned up with a lined basket that held a wriggling white fur ball. Very clearly a different breed altogether from what Ben Ben had been, but after considering it, he supposed it didn’t really matter. This puppy had much keener eyes, but was also a lot quieter. It watched Shen Jiu attentively, ears perked, and responded very quickly to the tone of his voice.
In short order, Shen Jiu managed to obtain a training manual for dogs, and started teaching his new puppy how to actually *behave*.

The results were astonishingly different. In no time at all, the puppy was doing her business outside, and had stopped chewing on anything that Shen Jiu didn’t want her to. She was better behaved towards him than most of the servants - so he heard, anyway - and she was still a puppy, and therefore still got into trouble. But before long, she learned not to run off, and not to bark at certain things, and not to beg for food or dig at flowerbeds.

Shen Jiu named her Lady, and often mentioned that she was probably the most well-mannered creature in the estate.

When his master came to visit, he was recovered enough to cluck at him about this.

“*Why* must you antagonize the staff?” he asked, exasperated.

“Because they annoy me,” Shen Jiu replied, defensively. Was it his fault that people always made up their minds about him before they even met him? No. Most people were perfectly two-faced. If the staff didn’t like him, they could go find work elsewhere - and if they wanted him to be nice to them, then they should have tried it out themselves first of all. But that wasn’t how it went.

Anyway, he didn’t want to talk about nonsense.

“Are you pregnant?” he asked, instead.

Shen Qingqiu, gratifyingly, nearly spat out his tea.

“It doesn’t work like that,” he said, icily, a moment later. With just the faintest hint of doubt - probably wondering if he’d gone that badly awry in educating his student.

Shen Jiu smirked.

“I know. I just wanted to see the look on your face,” he admitted. “But in all seriousness, have you settled on a method?”
Not that he particularly cared how Lord Luo and Shen Qingqiu went about spawning. But there was some passing intellectual curiosity.

“It’s hardly A-Jiu’s business, but no,” Shen Qingqiu admitted. “…All of them seem a little strange.”

“Get over yourself,” he advised. “Is there even a pleasant way to have children? It’s either weird plants or rituals or blood and screaming. No matter what method you use, the baby’s the point. Isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” his master said, cheeks darkening. “And I am not discussing this topic with you.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“But what if I need to know for my own edification?” he asked. “Master Shen, this is your student you are speaking to. Who else will I turn to with my questions?”

“Books,” Shen Qingqiu told him, flatly.

Shen Jiu couldn’t quite hold back a huff of amusement, curse him. As ever, it made Shen Qingqiu look as though he’d wrestled a great victory away from something, and somehow he lost the upper hand in the conversation.

In a bid to save face, or at least distract from whatever horrible new direction things might move in, he leaned over and picked up Lady, and promptly dumped her into his master’s lap.

“Here, pet the dog,” he instructed. “Think maternal thoughts. Maybe it will lead to an epiphany.”

“Paternal,” Shen Qingqiu insisted back, while he automatically pet the puppy.

There. That was more like it.
On Shen Jiu’s nineteenth birthday, Shen Qingqiu showed up with a carriage and an expectant look.

“Don’t tell this master that his apprentice made other plans…?” he asked, when Shen Jiu hesitated.

Scowling, he pulled himself up into the carriage.

“I’m just too mature for such frivolities. But if Master Shen insists…” he replied, and tried not to squirm over the unexpected feeling in his chest, and itch in his throat.

~

Sometimes, Shen Jiu had really strange dreams.

They seemed to be about him, and they seemed to be about his master’s past. Dreams could often be nonsense, though, so he didn’t dwell on them too much. It was only while they were happening that he felt strongly about things.

Sometimes he dreamed that Lord Luo had never rescued him from slavers. In those dreams, he had been bought by a family called Qiu - so, obviously something his mind made up; it couldn’t even come up with an original name - and his life was a nightmare. There was a young mistress who was spoiled but kind to him, but there was also Young Master Qiu, who was obsessed with controlling and tormenting him. The dream always started out muddy, with impressions of pain and cold and fear, cloying and thick in his veins, but it ended the same - with Shen Jiu killing Young
Master Qiu in a fit of panic, and then running away. Murdering more men on the way out, until he was covered in blood, and the sword in his grip had torn up his palm from the improper way he’d wielded it.

In the dream, he was frightened and nauseous, vindicated and hollowed out, afterwards. And angry. Bitterly angry. *He didn’t come back for me.* Who was ‘he’? Shen Qingqiu? Lord Luo? Those notions didn’t seem to fit, but his sleeping mind always seemed certain that there was someone who had failed to keep his promise.

Shen Jiu thought that was a little unrealistic. If Lord Luo never rescued him, and he ended up the house slave of some sadistic young master, then whose word would he even trust? And why? There was no one he trusted in his life before he was an apprentice.

Maybe it was too much to expect logic from dreams.

Other nights, he dreamed that he was Shen Qingqiu. But he was also still himself. He dreamed that he was married to Yue Qingyuan, that they lived together in a grand estate. He didn’t really wonder why he would dream such things - after all, he knew his master’s story, and he had his own grand plan. It made a sort of sense that his dreams would try and foretell the future by imagining things from the past, adjusted accordingly. Sometimes, in the dreams, he was very happy. Yue Qingyuan doted on him and the way he loved him in return could take him aback so much that he would wake himself up. Like jolting from a nightmare, except it wasn’t frightening - just overwhelming.

But sometimes, it *was* frightening. Sometimes he dreamed that he had been captured by demons, only Yue Qingyuan didn’t come for him, so he had to rescue himself. And then he would think ‘of course’, as if it was only to be expected that no one would ever come for him; no one would ever risk so much for his sake. By the end of those dreams he had always found Yue Qingyuan again, but his heart felt brittle as the man held him tight. The love *hurt*, because it felt like his was so much bigger than anything returned to him.

And sometimes he dreamed about Yue Qingyuan telling Shen Qingqiu that he was going to marry Liu Qingge. In his waking mind, Shen Jiu thought it was just a muddled mess - why hadn’t that man just taken on political consorts? Why had he challenged his vows by actually letting another man into his heart? - but in the dream, it always felt devastating. Like the feeling from before, but so much worse, because he was convinced that Yue Qingyuan owned so much more of him than he could ever get back in return. That he’d become a plaything, dancing to this noble lord’s tune, and nothing he could do was working, nothing was stopping him from losing and losing and he wished he could stop it, just stop caring, stop loving, it was so foolish but trying to get rid of it was like trying to burn his own soul out of his body…

Those were the dreams where he woke up gasping, trembling, and feeling as though he’d somehow
died.

In the cold light of morning, his perspective always returned. And he was always grateful to have it back.

He wasn’t planning on falling in love with Yue Qingyuan, after all. The man was handsome and convenient; interesting. He drew the eye, he made Shen Jiu wonder about some things, but that was a far cry from handing his heart over to him. And even if he was foolish enough to start loving someone he’d married, he wouldn’t lose his head over it. After all, it wasn’t as if he only had a single attachment in this world.

Maybe it was childish or its own kind of foolishness to reassure himself that way, but he couldn’t help thinking that if someone really wronged him, then Master Shen would come help. Probably Lord Luo, hell, even some of those demon retainers might show their teeth, too.

Shen Jiu wouldn’t be allowed to die of a broken heart. If nothing else, Lady would come sit on his chest and nose at his chin, wagging her tail to try and entice him to play.

It would probably still be painful, however. So it was better to just stick with the plan. He supposed his dreams were warning him off of getting in too deep, or losing what he already had. Trustworthy people were hard to find, and betrayals could still happen, but he definitely wasn’t going to throw away his good alliances, or bet too heavily on one idea. He probably shouldn’t forget past debts, either, and that was the thought that gave him some pause.

Would Shen Qingqiu be upset if his own student ended up seducing his ex-husband…?

As soon as he thought of that, it seemed strange to realize that he’d never considered it before. Maybe it was because, in his mind, he really couldn’t picture Shen Qingqiu loving anyone other than Lord Luo. The couple was much too sickening. And hadn’t even Liu Qingge divorced Yue Qingyuan? That wasn’t an easy thing to do, however one went about it. So he couldn’t imagine a lot of lingering jealousies manifesting on anyone’s part - at least, not strongly.

It occurred to him, however, that maybe Shen Qingqiu would be upset for another reason. Thinking of how the heartbreak in the dream felt, he wondered if… maybe his sentimental, soft-hearted master would worry for his sake?

Had there really been no offers from Yue Qingyuan, in the past couple of years? Or had his master
simply burned them out of hand, furious that the man who broke his heart would presume to ask for his student’s in turn?

…It… actually didn’t seem that unlikely, thinking about it…

Shen Jiu wasn’t sure what to make of that line of thought. It irritated him. It irritated him even more that he couldn’t stop wondering about it.

When Shen Qingqiu returned to the Luo estate for his next stay in the human realm, Shen Jiu decided to just investigate the matter a little.

“What would Master Shen think if I told him that I wanted to pursue Yue Qingyuan?” he asked.

Shen Qingqiu’s expression froze, and then twisted with some very conflicted-looking emotions. The emotions themselves weren’t so remarkable, but their visibility was something that immediately took Shen Jiu aback. Suddenly, he very much regretted bringing it up. Shen Qingqiu couldn’t be called an emotionless man, by any means, but he was reserved. Especially when it came to negative emotions. Sometimes he would hide smiles or swallow back laughter, but it was much more common for a person to catch him making a pleasant expression rather than outwardly expressing anger or contempt - Shen Jiu had seen those, too, but only when his control had been frayed by some really bad things.

So seeing his expression distort with emotions that couldn’t safely be called ‘positive’ made him feel as if he had badly transgressed.

“Nevermind, forget I said anything-”

Shen Qingqiu raised a hand.

Before Shen Jiu could properly withdraw his question, his master’s expression into something perilously close to resignation.

“Let’s go somewhere more private,” he said.
Shen Jiu hesitated. He was twenty years old, after all, and Shen Qingqiu was a married man with a lord husband.

“Having Lord Luo cleave my head from my shoulders doesn’t really seem like an appealing prospect,” he drawled. More to point out the obvious than to actually make an accusation. His master just waved off the concern, however.

“Binghe will understand, I have his trust,” the man said, simply. Then he tugged Shen Jiu along until they were inside, sequestered in his own rooms. He took his time sitting down, very obviously putting off the conversation that they were about to have. The grip of his fan read more ‘anxious’ than ‘relaxed’, even though his expression had evened out.

“I suppose it was inevitable,” Shen Qingqiu mumbled to himself, and tapped his lips with the side of his fan.

*What* was inevitable?

Before he could ask, his master pinned him with a look that kept him silent.

“Why does A-Jiu want to pursue Yue Qingyuan?” he asked.

Shen Jiu swallowed, and then straightened up in his seat. This question, at least, he had suspected - and his master’s tone wasn’t as accusatory as he’d feared.

“He has good prospects,” he said. “He’s unmarried, but simultaneously well-connected. The emperor has promised to return his family estate to his care if he can secure another marriage. A person with the right mindset could work a lot of his standing to their benefit, with enough time and commitment. This student would prefer to enter into a household without prior spouses. It’s easier to influence things that way, and hold onto an advantageous position.”

Shen Qingqiu leaned back in his seat, and regarded him for another moment.

“There are many people with good prospects who meet a lot of that criteria,” he pointed out, then. “Why does Yue Qingyuan stand out among them?”
Shen Jiu hesitated.

“He… watches me,” he finally admitted. “He seems interested, and not in the same way as some others. I think this lord is moved by me. That is also advantageous, isn’t it?”

His master let out a soft sigh.

He stiffened.

“If Master Shen disapproves, then I will of course abide by his decision,” he said, worried again about this line that he had crossed, when he had only meant to test the waters.

But when Shen Qingqiu met his gaze again, he didn’t look angry, or betrayed, or resentful. He just looked… concerned.

“If he does it again, I’ll kill him with my own hands,” the man murmured.

“What?” Shen Jiu asked, suspiciously.

Did he mean Yue Qingyuan? Doing ‘it’ again? What was ‘it’? Sleeping with another man? Or something worse?

Shen Qingqiu waved off the question, and in a moment of inspiration, Shen Jiu decided to try a different line to reassure him.

“I don’t have strong feelings of affection towards that person,” he said, leaning forward a little. “If that’s what Master Shen is worried about. I know his reputation. If he takes an interest in someone else at some point, this student won’t be devastated. It’ll be enough just to use him for my own ends. Or mutually beneficial ones.”

For some reason, Shen Qingqiu just raised his eyebrows at him.

“Truly,” Shen Jiu insisted.
His master lifted a hand and rubbed at his forehead.

“A-Jiu…”

“What?”

“. . . This master doesn’t know how to explain,” he admitted, in a surprisingly helpless tone of voice.

Awkward silence descended.

Then Shen Qingqiu let out another, more audible sigh, and set his fan down onto the little table beside him. Folding his hands, he stared at Shen Jiu from atop them for a long moment, which seemed like it would be unwise to break. Shen Jiu felt increasingly defensive, but he wasn’t certain of what. It didn’t seem as though he was being criticized, but more like he was ignorant of something. The more seconds slipped by without his master explaining, the more agitated he became.

“What?” he finally snapped out, frustrated.

“. . . Okay,” Shen Qingqiu said, closing his eyes. “This is . . . complicated. But, if it is something that A-Jiu feels he should pursue, then this master will support him. No matter what. Understand?”

Reflexively, he shook his head a little. A moment later, he relaxed, and nodded instead.

Of course it was complicated - he was talking about pursuing a man whom his own master had been married to in the past. Of course there were things Shen Qingqiu was probably struggling over. Maybe Yue Qingyuan was weird in bed. Maybe he had odd habits. Maybe he had an inappropriate affection for barn animals. Shen Jiu had been a slave and then a servant living in hell, not a lot surprised him - at least, not in theory.

But it didn’t really matter, so long as he could still manage things. He wasn’t going to fall in love. Shen Qingqiu was a romantic who adored his husband - that alone was probably enough to worry him, to make him fret that his poor student would be miserable without a loving marriage.
As long as his master still supported him, though, it would be fine.

Standing up, Shen Qingqiu walked over towards him. Shen Jiu stood as well, supposing they had more or less concluded things.

He wasn’t expecting his master to pull him into a careful hug.

Surprise stiffened his spine. They didn’t really… do that sort of thing often. Lord Luo embraced Shen Qingqiu all the time, of course, but the lord himself usually instigated. At least, in public he did. Shen Qingqiu was a dignified man, and Shen Jiu wasn’t accustomed to being touched in a positive fashion, so they usually maintained a certain amount of comfortable distance and limited contact.

It wasn’t… necessarily awful, though. His master’s embrace was platonic and comforting, careful, and didn’t carry an ounce of threat. Shen Jiu’s arms were stiff and awkward at his sides, but after a moment, he managed a brief back pat in return.

“Don’t get sappy,” he admonished. “I haven’t even seduced the man yet.”

Shen Qingqiu cleared his throat, and straightened out.

“A-Jiu is a grown man and accomplished cultivator now,” he replied, somewhat wistfully. “This master is proud of how far he’s come. It hasn’t been easy for him. But if he ever finds himself in an unfeasible situation, he must swear to come to this master first. Even if it feels hopeless. Master will help.”

Shen Jiu’s throat closed. He leveled his foolish master with a glare.

“Didn’t I say not to get sappy?” he objected. It was too disgusting, it was making his eyes itch…

Shen Qingqiu nodded in agreement.
“No more hugs,” he promised.

Shen Jiu scoffed.

“...Sentimental fool.”

“Prickly brat.”

All things considered, that conversation could have gone a lot worse. But somehow, rather than feeling reassured, he found himself even more hesitant than before.

~

A week after their awkward conversation about Yue Qingyuan, Shen Jiu still hadn’t entirely made his mind up about some things. But Master Shen and Lord Luo had finally settled on a method of procreation.

There was a fairly uncommon, but not entirely rare, type of spirit plant called the Infant Seed Tree. If two men planted their ‘seed’ in the same earth as one of the tree’s seed pods, the tree would absorb it. Then it would start to sprout. A single fruit would begin to grow within the interior branches of the tree. After a few months, this fruit could be safely plucked, and fed gradual amounts of spiritual energy. After a year, the hard outer casings on the fruit would fall away, and ‘give birth’ to a newborn baby.

Infant Seed Trees were a fairly popular way for men and women alike to have children. The babies were as normal as any others, and never seemed to grow up with any particular complications or difficulties - unless something interfered with their development, of course. And it wasn’t painful. The only downside was that the tree needed to grow outdoors, and the seeds were expensive - so before the fruit could be harvested, the plants was very vulnerable to tampering, and failures were costly on one’s wallet as well as one’s emotions.

So for the first while, Shen Jiu was one of only a few people who knew about the tree. Its actual
location was a secret even from him - no one except Lord Luo and Shen Qingqiu knew where to find it. Both men withdrew from a lot of their responsibilities to go and babysit it at the secret location, so Shen Jiu did his duty as his master’s protege and took over a lot more petty day-to-day management at the Luo estate.

It was frustrating how much competition there was for such a tedious job. But managing things did give a person power. Shen Jiu unabashedly wielded the token that Shen Qingqiu had loaned him to symbolize his authority, and ruled with a tightly clenched iron fist. He wasn’t going to let the staff or retainers rob everyone blind or try to sneak one past him. The emperor had spies all over the place, and Shen Jiu had been keeping track of them for years, itching for the opportunity to finally catch them up on something he could officially hold against them, and then toss them out like the garbage they were.

Master Shen was much too trusting. He’d been letting this filth clutter up his home for too long. It was about time someone put the fear of retribution into the hearts of these complacent good-for-nothings.

How would the imperial family ‘reward’ them for their ‘good work’ when they were begging on street corners? They wouldn’t. The little fools had thrown their lot in with the wrong crowd, but they had only themselves to blame.

Of course, many of them protested and insisted that they’d claim grievances with Master Shen when he got back, so Shen Jiu kept records of all the reasons he was firing them for in the first place. His master wasn’t so soft-hearted that he didn’t understand treachery. And with a baby coming into the household, Shen Jiu was banking on him being more cautious than magnanimous.

That turned out to be a good call.

A few months later, when their ‘romantic sojourn’ ended, Lord Luo and Master Shen arrived back at the Luo estate.

Lord Luo had an odd package strapped to his chest. A baby-sized ‘fruit’, which look more like an egg actually, was nestled carefully into several blankets. The odd basket that was holding it was made out of Moon Python Rhinoceros hide, and the straps went around his arms, and included a belt, too.

Lord Luo looked utterly ridiculous, but since he was also radiating protectiveness and sheer menace at anyone who came too close, no one dared say anything about it. Except for Master Shen, perhaps, who looked exasperated whenever he wasn’t hiding mortification behind his fan.
Or gazing at his lord as if the man was still made of solid gold, even while he babied a fruit-egg that was fastened to him like some mock pregnant belly.

Shen Jiu suddenly knew, deep in his bones, that the both of them were cuddling with that thing at night. And also that he wished he didn’t know that.

“You look ridiculous,” he said, as he went out to greet them.

Lord Luo just shrugged, while Shen Qingqiu inclined his head in agreement.

“It’s… practical,” his master nevertheless excused.

Lord Luo settled a protective hand over the baby fruit, but didn’t snarl at Shen Jiu for getting too close, unlike he'd done to some of the servants. When Lady trotted over to sniff, he did gently nudge her back with his foot - even though there was no way she could reach high enough to do anything untoward. Not that Lady would.

Curious, Shen Jiu dared to come a little closer, and peered at the soft texture of the fruit’s shell. He was almost expecting the thing to look unnervingly fleshy, but it was smooth, and darkly coloured, with a few lighter patches here and there. The thought occurred to him that if this worked out for his master, he’d probably use the same method himself someday. Most families adopted the same traditions, so that they could help one another with such things.

He almost made a face at the thought of strapping a fruit to his front.

But then again… if it kept it safe…

“I fired a quarter of the staff,” he mentioned off-hand, as he leaned back and stopped testing his luck with Lord Luo’s protective instincts.

Master Shen sighed. He also didn’t seem terribly surprised.
“Why can’t you just get along with the staff?” he bemoaned once again, slipping out of formalities. He was probably pretty tired.

Shen Jiu shot him a wronged look, and folded his arms.

“Because they were selling information, that’s why.”

“Of course they were, that’s how one gets information. And that’s why we don’t actually leave important information lying around for anyone to find.”

“Don’t pretend like you were doing anything clever, like feeding false information to a bunch of spies. You were just too lazy to clean house!”

“But now there are going to be entirely new spies sneaking in, and we’ll have to learn who they are! There are always spies, A-Jiu!”

“There are until you catch them and fire them for being filthy traitors! This is what routine cullings are for! Prune your damn staff once in a while!”

“Shush,” Lord Luo interrupted. “Negative energy is bad for the baby.”

Shen Jiu stared blankly at him, while Shen Qingqiu offered his lord a soothing pat, and then fuzzed a little about getting inside and resting from the long trip. Every inch the doting husband with his child-burdened spouse. After a minute Shen Jiu rolled his eyes so hard he nearly strained them, and went to go terrify some servants into providing non-poisoned refreshments.

So, just water, really.

He shouldn’t have been at all surprised when he got back to the lord’s courtyard to find Shen Qingqiu sitting with the chest-fruit-contraption on him instead, while Lord Luo fussed around in the courtyard’s kitchen, making tea and lunch. Shen Jiu silently thrust a glass of water into the lord’s hands, before going and forcing one onto Shen Qingqiu, too. Then he sat down and stared a little more freely at the fruit baby.
Since it was on Shen Qingqiu instead, he ventured a questioning hand out. When he wasn’t rebuked, he settled his fingers onto the smooth texture of the shell.

It was warm.

…That made sense.

“Boy or girl?” he asked.

Shen Qingqiu raised an eyebrow.

“It’s a fruit. How does A-Jiu imagine one would deduce such a thing?” he wondered.

Embarrassed, Shen Jiu huffed.

“Master Shen could have figured out a way,” he muttered defensively.

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” his master said, and patted his shoulder fondly.

~

Looking after the Fruit Baby occupied most of Master Shen and Lord Luo’s attention, in the following months. Even despite their return, now that they’d picked the fruit, they needed to feed it a regular diet of spiritual energy, and also make certain that nothing bad happened to it. So the Fruit Baby was always with either Lord Luo or Shen Qingqiu - usually Lord Luo, if they were in public - and neither man was willing to take it traveling very far.
There were still times when Lord Luo was required to return to the demon realms, though. When that happened, either Shen Jiu or Liu Qingge would be requested to come and watch Shen Qingqiu and the Fruit Baby. The requests weren’t really ‘requests’, either, but Shen Jiu was surprised to find that he didn’t actually mind - it wasn’t like he expected the best out of people, so a little paranoia couldn’t go astray. Even Master Shen didn’t grumble too much about the arrangements made.

Despite the protectiveness, the Luo estate still saw a lot of visitors as well. Mobei-Jun’s first husband, Shang Qinghua, showed up with odd gifts and odder remarks. Shen Qingqiu smacked his hand when he tried to touch the Fruit Baby, which pleased Shen Jiu more than it probably should have. Ning Yingying, one of his master’s former students, also came by and somehow managed to coo sincerely over what was in fact a big smooth lump with no discernible ‘cuteness’ to admire. Some of Shen Qingqiu’s old courtier friends came by as well, but Shen Jiu hosted them himself, with apologies that his master was ‘in voluntary seclusion’ to meditate with the Fruit Baby.

He wasn’t, of course, but some people did that sort of thing, and it was more polite than telling them they weren’t trustworthy enough to be in the same room as his master’s unborn child.

The cultivation world didn’t stop moving for individuals, however, and as Fruit Baby entered the latter stages of its… gestation, he supposed, the emperor hosted the first Immortal Alliance Conference in ten years.

The last time such a conference had been held, Shen Jiu had still been a slave. And also a child. So he didn’t know particularly what to expect from the emperor’s efforts. Notably, though, the leaders of several demon clans had been invited, in addition to accomplished cultivators from various human noble clans, and ‘individuals of merit’ - aka people unaffiliated with noble families, but skilled enough that some might be interested in forging ties with them anyway. Lord Luo had received an invitation, but since Fruit Baby could ‘hatch’ at any moment, neither he nor Master Shen felt comfortable with leaving the estate grounds to attend.

As Shen Qingqiu’s protege and adopted relative, Shen Jiu could only volunteer himself to attend in their steads.

Mobei-Jun had also received an invitation, so, Shen Jiu went with along with his party. As per tradition at large imperial gatherings, everyone was expected to wear their clan colours. Independent cultivators without noble families or sponsors could also wear white. Mobei-Jun and his First Husband wore shades of dark blue and black, which meant that Shen Jiu, in his pale green, looked like a leaf that had gotten caught up in a blizzard. He couldn’t help but feel that way somewhat as well, because the crowds for this conference were much bigger than most. The palace halls were wide and open, and the pillars in the main pavilion were clearly designed to intimidate. As he moved through the throngs, Shen Jiu tried to match faces to names, and names to events in the current political landscape.
The Liu clan was out in full force, making a strong showing for themselves and a probably-intentional statement on their power. That clan made the emperor nervous, and rightly so - if there was a group in the empire that was liable to seize control through force of arms and popularity, they were likely contenders, along with the Wen and Jin clans. Liu Qingge was mingling with his sister and one of their cousins. He nodded at Shen Jiu when they spotted one another.

Of the demon clans, apart from Mobei-Jun, it seemed some of the smaller noble families who kept mostly to the eastern regions of the demonic realm had answered their invitations. They were human-looking enough, dressed mostly in stark, dark clothing, and notable for their stiff posture and wary attitudes. Diplomatic overtures were one thing, but this was still a conference full of human cultivators, after all.

As Shen Jiu exchanged his own greetings in the preliminaries before the emperor’s speech, a flash of pale blue caught his eye.

Absently turning towards the colour, he was struck by a sudden, inexplicable sense of deja-vu. But he couldn’t place it. A man was standing not too far off, dressed in pale blue and saffron clan colours, with white accents. He had a handsome face and a noble countenance, of the sort that could put a person at ease, and make them feel as though they were in the presence of someone eminently honest and trustworthy.

It was Lord Yue, of course. He was staring at Shen Jiu with an odd look on his face - his eyes seemed to peer right through him, and also to stare at something only he could see. His lips were parted, slack as if in surprise. But why would Yue Qingyuan feel surprised? There was no accounting for the man’s reactions to him, sometimes. Shen Jiu felt as though his own reaction was very simple - once he shook away the inexplicable deja-vu, at least. In his fine clothes that complimented his features so well, Lord Yue looked… appealing.

Shen Jiu didn’t bother to hide the appreciative glint in his gaze as he gave the man a slow once-over.

To his amusement, Yue Qingyuan actually blushed and looked hurriedly away from him. As if he was the young cultivator barely come into his own, being scrutinized too keenly by some wicked, predatory creature.

Shen Jiu’s lips quirked, and he unfurled the fan at his belt.
“The hunt is on,” he informed First Husband Shang, who blinked in confusion, until he spotted Yue Qingyuan. Then his expression cleared in comprehension. He offered that strange gesture with his single thumb raised in return.

“Good luck, Mister Shen! Hunt the pants right off of him!”

Ugh.

He shouldn’t have said anything.

“Don’t be crass,” he scoffed, before putting the interaction aside, and making his way over to where Yue Qingyuan was still loitering in what seemed to be perilous indecision. As he drew closer, Shen Jiu schooled his features into a mask of polite bewilderment.

“Lord Yue?” he said. “Has this junior done something to offend?”

As expected, Yue Qingyuan looked utterly taken aback.

“Offend?” he asked.

“En. Lord Yue was glaring so intently at this junior, it seems he must have done something to offend the great lord. If this junior has done anything to cause offense, he can only offer his apologies.”

Shen Jiu made certain to stare at the man with wide, glittering dark eyes, and modestly positioned his fan. His features were good for this sort of thing. While most of the time he was aware that he could look somewhat… sly, and unfortunately he veered closer to ‘delicate’ than ‘virile masculine energy’, or, even better, ‘aristocratic authority’, he had slowly figured out how to make the most out of what he had. With his mouth and brows softened, that was basically the ‘coy ingenue who secretly knows your wicked fantasies but will still blush right to the roots over them’ sort of look.

For a few minutes, though, Yue Qingyuan just stared at him.

And then his lips twitched upwards. As if he was trying to bite back a smile. Good or bad was hard
to say, but an inexplicable softening of his eyes made Shen Jiu think he’d pulled off the right move.

“Is that so?” he said.

“Just so. If Lord Yue could explain how this junior has offended, he’ll do his utmost to make amends,” he promised. And while the act would normally call for casting his eyes down demurely, something told him that was the wrong move. And so instead he grinned a little, too, and kept their gazes locked instead.

Yue Qingyuan shook his head.

“Young Mister Shen didn’t offend this lord,” he said. “He was only… lost in thought.”

“Oh? What sort of thoughts?” Shen Jiu asked, and ventured a step closer.

For some reason, Yue Qingyuan seemed to go tongue-tied over that. Better and better - especially for what it implied about his ‘thoughts’. However, as they came to be standing almost-too-close for propriety, something in the lord’s expression shifted. A softness seemed to come over him. Shen Jiu felt his own expression freeze, as his heart skipped a beat in his chest. It was only a subtle, single look, but somehow he felt as if the tables had just been completely turned on him.

“Good thoughts, actually,” Yue Qingyuan told him.

Thump-thump went Shen Jiu’s heart.

Oh no, went Shen Jiu’s head.

“Well,” he said. “In that case, this junior won’t distract his senior from his contemplations.”

Then he made his retreat so hastily, he didn’t even see the hand that Yue Qingyuan extended out after him. Nor the way his expression fell, like a man who’d just watched something precious slip between his fingers, and was only consoled by the faintest chance that it might come back again. Instead he disappeared into the crowds, grateful for the high number of pale-clad figures and
bodies all around, and then looped his way back to where the demonic cultivators had gathered.

His heart was beating so fast he could hear it ringing in his ears, and his face felt hot.

What was that?

~

So apparently, when Yue Qingyuan wasn’t just gaping at him like a stunned fish, Shen Jiu wasn’t… entirely… immune to something that might be called his ‘charms’.

His reaction to the revelation had been foolish, he decided, into the second day of the conference. He had been taken off-balance and over-reacted, fearing for his heart just because it had sped up at the sight of a handsome man looking smitten with him. But wasn’t that the point? To have Yue Qingyuan smitten with him? Shouldn’t he feel pleased about it?

Half of his reaction was probably just the giddy rush of success. He had been gaining ground, actually getting the man to flirt back, and then like a skittish horse he’d spooked himself.

Well, at least it fit with the ‘teasing ingenue’ image.

He ought to just resume his strategy, he decided. There were many rounds of competition going on at the conference, and not everyone could enter all of them. Shen Jiu only qualified for a few, and most were on the third day. But Yue Qingyuan was competing in some events as well, so he decided to go and watch. The competitions were being held outside the city, of course, with proper barriers erected, and viewing platforms arranged all around. Shen Jiu managed to snap a spot close to the entrance, although he had to venture away from his usual circles to get there. One of the senior cultivators standing near to him gave him a once-over, and then turned his full attention towards him.
“Well, well,” the man murmured. “This lord must thank the young mister. Did the tournament hosts send you over here to give us something fine to look at, before all the monsters come racing in to ruin our poor eyes?”

Shen Jiu did a quick calculation. Purple robes, forward nature, total overconfidence - he'd be one of the Lords Zhou from that clan that was disbanded a few generations ago, but won back their noble status through ‘deeds of merit’ - aka bribes. So, probably not someone he should needlessly offend, but not someone he should worry much about either. Feeling eyes on him, he glanced down - and sure enough, there was Yue Qingyuan. Apparently managing to spot him at a distance again, and back to his staring habit.

Well, there was more than one way to gain a man’s interest. Letting his expression turn appropriately coy, he tilted his head.

“This junior is flattered,” he murmured.

Lord Zhou didn’t need much more encouragement to start laying it on thick. He leaned into Shen Jiu’s personal space with a manner that would have made his skin crawl a few years ago, and still made him want to curl his lip in disgust. He put his fan to good use, instead, and played the part of the ‘young man who can’t possibly tell he’s being aggressively flirted with’. No, dear sir, he couldn’t pick up an ounce of innuendo in that description of your ‘sword’! Please do go on, it sounds so impressive!

When he chanced a look back down to Yue Qingyuan’s position, before the starting bell went out, he was pleased to see the man glaring daggers at Lord Zhou.

Something in his chest relaxed a little in relief. He hadn’t put him off too badly yesterday, then. No one would focus that much intensity over a person that they’d lost interest in. Good. Once the event began, Shen Jiu offered up an excuse and then hastily found somewhere more comfortable to watch the actual proceedings from. Lord Zhou attempted to follow after him, but he was a large man, and at a sincere disadvantage for getting lost in a crowd.

He didn’t manage to see Yue Qingyuan again until later. And then he was taken by surprise again, as he had only been mingling with some of the demonic cultivators he knew when the lord approached him of his own accord.

That was a first.
“Young Mister Shen!” Lord Yue greeted, smiling. “What good fortune that our paths have crossed again. This lord noticed a trinket falling from your belt onto the arena grounds, and picked it up before it could be lost. Please let him return it.”

Confused, Shen Jiu glanced at the item extended towards him. It was something small, wrapped in a simple handkerchief. He was certain he hadn’t dropped anything, however. The only items he generally kept on his belt were his sword, his fan, and his qiankun pouch, and all were accounted for.

When he unwrapped the handkerchief, he became even more certain.

Inside was a very small but very fine white jade token. It was such a nice piece, his mouth dropped open somewhat at the sight of it. His first impulse was to wrap it back up, shove it into his pocket, and thank Lord Yue kindly for returning it. Even if it wasn’t his, he might as well profit from the misunderstanding - he wanted it to be his. And maybe that boorish Lord Zhou had dropped it. Shen Jiu wouldn’t lose sleep over liberating someone like that of some wealth.

A glance up revealed that Yue Qingyuan was smiling at him.

…No.

Undoubtedly, this was some kind of trick. No one just misplaced a valuable piece of jade like the one he was holding. Even if they did, word would have gotten around, and people would have started looking for it.

“My lord is too kind, but… this junior has never seen this fine token before,” he said, inwardly cursing as he extended it back.

Yue Qingyuan’s smile faltered a little. He stared for an awkward moment, eyes flitting to the treasure, and then back to Shen Jiu’s face. It seemed like he was reassessing something, somehow. Definitely a test, then. After a moment, he smiled again.

“Ah, this lord was mistaken,” he said, as if having a sudden epiphany. “This jade piece must have fallen from his belt. Well. It suits Young Mister Shen’s lively nature anyway, so why not keep it?”

Shen Jiu had to fight to keep his jaw from dropping again.
“Is Lord Yue always in the habit of handing out such valuable gifts to juniors?” he asked, suspiciously.

Yue Qingyuan chuckled.

“No,” he said. “But Young Mister Shen’s eyes make this lord want to give him… many fine things.”

Thump-thump.

Another rush of deja-vu struck him, incongruously.

His eyes…?

His eyes weren’t even a trait worth complimenting, though…

Somehow, he was still trying to process what had just happened when Lord Yue folded his hand presumptuously around the jade token, and pressed it towards his chest. The man gave it a satisfied pat, as his smile turned entirely sunny, and then claimed he was looking forward to seeing Shen Jiu compete in the next day’s events.

Just what was he playing at?

The encounter didn’t make any more sense even after Yue Qingyuan had walked away. Shen Jiu’s hand still felt warm, and when he checked again, the jade token still seemed very real and very valuable.
After the conference was finished, it was as if some kind of floodgate had opened.

Every few weeks, it seemed, some new gift arrived at the Luo estate for Shen Jiu. First, of course, was the white jade token, but then a few days after the conference was done, someone sent a box of sweets over from the imperial palace kitchens. Then it was a bottle of the same kind of perfume the empress favoured, which was nearly impossible to get, because it was so coveted. Then it was an emerald hair piece. Then a coral and pearl bracelet. Then an embroidered cloak.

None of them came with much more fuss than a simple assertion from the courier that they were ‘tokens of Lord Yue’s esteem’. Shen Jiu’s eyes were getting tired of widening.

“Who does that man think he is?” he demanded in a low mutter to himself, after the cloak arrived. “Is he trying to buy me?”

The only person around to hear his muttering was Lord Luo, who was currently babying the still-unhatched Fruit Baby and resting from some nighttime activities that Shen Jiu emphatically didn’t want to know anything more about. The fact that he could see rope burns and also knew that Lord Luo could heal almost any injury he wanted in a snap was something to emphatically avoid dwelling on. Master Shen had tasked him with keeping a lookout while he went to go supervise the steward’s payout of the estate’s monthly allowances.

“A-Jiu shouldn’t let him,” Lord Luo opined, even though no one had been speaking to him. “Yue Qingyuan is an oathbreaker.”

Shen Jiu rolled his eyes.

“As if I care. He clearly has more money than sense, which is much more important to me than his honesty.”

Lord Luo shifted the Fruit Baby, and half opened one eye to look at him.

“This lord didn’t rescue A-Jiu from slavery just so he could watch him sell himself off,” he said, to Shen Jiu’s shock. Then he stood up, pulled Fruit Baby back into its chest-harness contraption, and started walking away. When he realized that Shen Jiu hadn’t moved, he motioned at him to follow.
“Come,” he said.

Baffled and slightly suspicious, Shen Jiu put aside his new gift, and did. Lord Luo led him - of all places - to one of the storerooms in his own courtyard. He watched as the man produced a key from the pouch he kept on his person at all times, and opened a small side door that he’d never been in before. Well, there were a lot of store rooms in the estate; Shen Jiu wasn’t even interested in trying to poke his nose through all of them. This one was bigger than it looked from the outside, however. The walls were lined with red boxes, and there were several items that had been covered in cloth to protect them from dust.

It looked like a treasury.

Lord Luo pulled down an inventory book that had been hung from the wall.

“This is A-Jiu’s dowry,” he said.

Shen Jiu froze.

“...What part is?” he asked, trying to pinpoint where some segment of the storeroom must have been sectioned off.

Lord Luo gestured in a way that encapsulated the whole room.

“All of it,” he said. “Shizun’s been putting it together since A-Jiu was twelve.”

“But Master Shen hadn’t even adopted me when I was twelve!” he protested.

Lord Luo snorted.

“As if he would have treated you any different, even if you turned down that offer,” he scoffed. Reaching over, he handed Shen Jiu the inventory book.
“Only three people know about the contents of this room - this lord, Shizun, and now A-Jiu. This is a dowry in the demonic tradition, not the human one. You know the difference?”

Shen Jiu gaped, and actually took a minute to grab the inventory book that had been thrust at him.

“...Yes…” he could only numbly reply, at first.

In the previous dynasty, human dowries and demonic ones were pretty similar. They were the private funds of a spouse who was being married off. Even if a person encountered a lot of hardship and was thrown out by their lord or lady, their dowry was legally their own. It was the only kind of inheritance a person could expect if they weren’t entitled to, well, an actual inheritance.

In the current dynasty, however, the human tradition had changed. Dowries became part of the household funds of whatever estate a spouse was marrying into. The lord or lady had a say in what goods would be bartered, and any funds went into the same purse. Ostensibly it was because this ‘encouraged a more harmonious household balance’, but in reality, it just tipped more control into the hands of the titled nobility, and made it harder for divorces or separations to happen. The only upside was that the size of one’s dowry could still be taken as a strong sign of their family’s favour - someone with a large dowry must be beloved, so, if they were mistreated, there would be consequences.

But demons hadn’t mirrored this change in practices. Independence was still highly valued in demonic society, and dowries remained independently controlled by the spouse they belonged to. Shen Jiu and Shen Qingqiu were both human, and should have only observed human traditions; but since Master Shen was Lord Luo’s husband, and as far as the human nobility was concerned, Lord Luo was a demon, it wasn't uncommon for him to insist on following demonic traditions instead.

Which meant that Shen Jiu’s dowry was a cache of independent wealth that had been set aside for him.

Lord Luo regarded him for a moment, and then smiled.

“See?” he said. “Even if A-Jiu doesn’t marry anyone, Shizun’s still made certain he’ll be fine. So, the only reason A-Jiu should marry someone is because he wishes to. Otherwise, don’t worry about it - this estate can afford to support all of Shizun’s family.”
Shen Jiu stared. First at Lord Luo, and then at the rows and rows of red boxes. He wasn’t a fool. There wasn’t any chance that Shen Qingqiu had enough independent wealth to pull this off himself. The man hadn’t even had a dowry for his first marriage, after all, and for his second he’d basically been whisked away with whatever things he could fit onto a single carriage. Even though Shen Qingqiu had definitely helped grow his lord’s influence and supported him, unless most of this dowry was junk, it had to be Lord Luo’s doing too.

He blinked at the man.

“...But you don’t even like me,” he couldn’t help blurting.

Lord Luo laughed in surprise.

“Says who?” he demanded. Reaching over, then, he patted Shen Jiu’s head - as if he was back to back to being twelve, and not twenty. Narrowing his eyes, he leaned away from the unsolicited touch. But Lord Luo just looked even more amused.

“Lord Luo only likes Master Shen. And Fruit Baby,” he asserted, adding the last with a glance to the bundle still conspicuously strapped to the man’s chest.

Lord Luo shrugged.

“That’s just who this lord likes best,” he argued. “A-Jiu takes after Shizun. How could this lord not like him even a little?”

Shen Jiu didn’t have a good answer to that. He wasn’t anything like Master Shen anyway, they weren’t even really related.

And yet…

He felt somehow like he’d been stripped bare, as his gaze flitted back towards the red boxes again.

“Heel free to go through it all. It’s yours anyway,” Lord Luo said then, and also put the key to the store room in his numb hand. “Lock up after, and then return the key for safekeeping. Shizun
hadn’t planned to say anything until next year, but since its like this, just keep it between us for now.”

Then Lord Luo left.

Shen Jiu stood in the storeroom for several long moments, lost in thought. Finally, he blinked himself out of it, and moved over to the little table and chair in the front corner of the room. There were some writing implements there, doubtless for marking down additions or revisions to the items in the dowry. Shen Jiu set the inventory book in front of him, and started to read through the list. The book was in two parts, it seemed. The back section listed the physical items in the dowry, things like jewelry and furniture and antiques. The front section, however, was much shorter, and listed investments. There was a bank statement for a hundred gold taels, and some small properties on the borderlands. As yet, nothing was being done with them. Lord Luo had probably acquired them at some point just to keep a rival from getting their hands on them instead.

When he had read the book from cover to cover, it was dark enough that he needed to put on a lamp.

Very carefully, he went around the room, then, and looked at the physical items in person. Some of them, anyway. He didn’t need to see them all to know that, while there was definitely some variation in value, none of the items were shabbier than their listed descriptions implied.

As he re-wrapped another antique and set it back down, his hand moved to his wrist, and the jade token he’d strung on it like a bracelet.

Could Yue Qingyuan know…?

No, Lord Luo said that only he and Master Shen knew about it. Even Shen Jiu himself hadn’t, so he could believe that. No one in the outside world thought he was worth much of anything, it was why they snubbed him. That thought made him angry for a moment. Everyone believed that Shen Jiu didn’t have much to his name, because he was just the adopted apprentice of a demon’s husband. If some of those people knew he had a dowry like this, they’d be falling all over themselves to curry his favour!

But as soon as the anger came, it started to fade away again.

Good people were rare. He firmly believed that, had even once believed that they were altogether
mythical. Most people acted good, but when the time came, they’d turn around and sell their own mother if it gave them an edge. Anyone who claimed to be good as gold was probably just wearing paint; at the slightest disturbance, it would fleck away and reveal the tarnished, cheaper reality underneath. However, even though they were rare… good people existed. And sometimes they were so good that they even made everyone else want to be good in return.

Even though it would be easier if everyone had a reason to pretend they liked him, it would also make it harder to know who actually did. The good people would be invisible among the throngs of two-faced ‘admirers’ who only acted the part. In a situation like that, it would be much harder to find anyone who was actually worth his time.

Shen Jiu ran his thumb over the jade token’s surface while he thought.

He didn’t need Yue Qingyuan. Not really. He’d already known that, even if he hadn’t had this much assurance before.

But…

For some reason, he still didn’t want to throw his grand plan away.

~

It took almost a full year for the Fruit Baby’s shell to open up.

When it began to happen, the entire estate was thrown into an uproar. It wasn’t quite the same sort of scene as someone going into labour, of course, but all the security was increased, and Lord Luo and Master Shen retreated with Fruit Baby to Master Shen’s inner chambers, and wouldn’t let anyone else in or out. A few hours later, however, the sounds of a baby crying drifted up even through all the closed doors.
Following the instructions he’d been given, Shen Jiu unlocked some of the chamber doors, and ventured in with a few servants that Lord Luo had carefully selected. Thus, he was one of the first people to offer his greetings to the new Little Mistress, who was wrinkly and chubby and still looked somewhat like a fruit to him, even if Master Shen insisted she was the spitting image of Lord Luo.

Lord Luo looked too dazed to be offended.

Master Shen gave the Little Mistress the baby name of ‘Ling-er’.

“Get someone else to choose her proper name,” he advised Lord Luo. The man wasn’t paying him any attention, though, he was too busy looking at Master Shen and the baby while his eyes shone with unshed tears.

Ugh.

Shen Jiu left as soon as he politely could. Fruit Baby was fine, everyone was fine, and he wasn’t really all that interested in a tiny little creature that couldn’t even do clever tricks yet. He could take care of other things and gladly forego all the joyful weeping and whatnot. Fruit Baby still wouldn’t be interesting for a long while yet, in his opinion. He obviously wasn’t the sort of person who was good with children anyway.

More importantly, Luo Binghe now had a proper heir who had enjoyed a healthy birth, and would likely make it to her adulthood. There were more things to prepare now that it was at this stage, and gifts to receive, and irritating people to cut off at the pass. Mostly demons, in fact. Even though the human nobility wasn’t exactly in favour of Lord Luo, there were enough advantages to his odd social positioning that few people wanted to get rid of him entirely, either. Those that did were mostly those who favoured the idea of actually going to war with the demonic realm, and since the emperor was staunchly against it, none of them could act openly.

Among demons, though, targeting Lord Luo’s firstborn was a good way to humiliate him, and increase their own standing in the process. That was the reason why Fruit Baby had been cared for at the Luo estate, and would probably spend the first few years of her life there, too. Humans didn’t know how to target a child with demon blood as effectively as demons did either, and most of the ‘sneaky’ things that a human might try - like poison - weren’t apt to even work on Fruit Baby.

It was a good thing demons were durable folk.
The week after Fruit Baby ‘hatched’, Shen Jiu got into no less than three fights with would-be infiltrators. It would have been more, but Liu Qingge had come to pay his respects and bring some gifts, and intercepted a few as well. Either way the demons didn’t get very far with their efforts, and since it was a matter of the Little Mistress, they weren’t left breathing afterwards. Statements had to be made.

“Are you just killing everyone who tries anything?” Master Shen asked him in the second week. The man looked very tired. There were small stains on his collar, and he smelled like the formula concoction Fruit Baby ate in order to avoid having a wet nurse.

“Yes,” Shen Jiu confirmed.

Shen Qingqiu sighed.

“...Okay,” he conceded, and shook his head. “That’s fine.” His tone managed to imply that he had come to this conclusion at some brief point between the question and its obvious answer.

Shen Jiu curled his lip at the state of the man.

“Go sleep,” he instructed.

“This master is an accomplished cultivator, he doesn’t need to sleep.”

“Master Shen looks like a corpse. It’s unsightly and pathetic. Go back inside and sleep.”

Some cultivators could forgo ‘worldly’ things and it just made them seem ethereal and lofty, and a little less human. More obviously immortal. In Shen Jiu’s experience, however, whenever his master went without worldly comforts, he definitely gave off an aura of self-neglect and deprivation. Like a cat, he only looked other-worldly when he was actually well cared for. Otherwise the result was just pathetic.

Surprisingly, Shen Qingqiu didn’t even put up much of an argument before he gave in. Although he did huff a little about rude and ungrateful students.
Shen Jiu rolled his eyes and went to go drag the laundry out with him. Even Lord Luo’s usual standards of meticulousness seemed to have been thrown into disarray by the baby.

He’d just handed off the laundry to the servants at the back of the estate - grimacing distastefully the entire while because this sort of chore was beneath him - when a courier arrived with some mail. Shen Jiu left to go take care of that, and check everything for poison, before silently vowing that today he was going to take some time for his actual cultivation and music, dammit. He wasn’t a steward! Everyone really was depending on him too much. What would they even do without him?

He was surprised to find that one of the letters addressed to Master Shen bore Yue Qingyuan’s seal.

Was it…?

Shen Jiu pursed his lips, and as he went through his normal task of checking the mail, he set that one aside. After he’d finished with the others, he then picked Lord Yue’s letter back up.

Very carefully, he broke the wax seal on it, withdrew the paper inside, and began to read it.

To his disappointment, however, it wasn’t a betrothal contract. It looked to just be the standard well-wishes on a healthy heir being born. But why address it to Shen Qingqiu and not Lord Luo, in that case? Well, the two men had history, and Lord Luo would probably just burn anything Yue Qingyuan sent him out of hand. So that could be why… Shen Jiu paused as he got to the end of the letter, however.

Lord Yue wanted to come and visit?

The request would ordinarily have very presumptuous timing, with Fruit Baby barely being a few weeks old. The date suggested wasn’t immediate, however, but rather in a few months time. Yue Qingyuan asserted that there was something he wanted to speak to Master Shen about in person. The way it was phrased made it sound important.

Shen Jiu pursed his lips, and put the letter back. Then he carefully fixed the wax seal, using a technique he’d picked up from Mobei-Jun’s First Husband, who knew all kinds of strange things. It wasn’t perfect, but it would pass without very close inspection. And if Master Shen got suspicious, then Shen Jiu could just confess. He wouldn’t have a severe punishment.
Thinking about it, he decided that there were very good odds that Yue Qingyuan wanted to discuss their courtship with Shen Qingqiu in person. Shen Jiu could concede that he’d probably make the same choice on how to go about things, if the situation was reversed. Give the lord’s history with his master, there was too much to go over and sending a contract proposal first might give off the wrong impression, especially if others had been rejected in the past. Which he still wasn’t certain of. And considering the lord’s extravagant gifts, it was obvious that Yue Qingyuan was interested in him. He’d also sent things over when the Little Mistress was born - and would a man really send gifts to celebrate the birth of an heir to a lord who hated him, who had robbed him of his first husband, if he didn’t have some motivation to start playing nice?

But would Master Shen accept his request for a visit, or reject it?

Shen Jiu couldn’t really influence that. He’d have to respond as the situation changed, frustratingly.

Feeling inexplicably nervous, he had his personal servant send out the mail he’d cleared, and then went to do what he’d vowed and look after his own interests for the rest of the day. Provided this place could last a few hours and not just fall apart without him.

~

The window to Shen Qingqiu’s parlor was open a bare fraction of an inch.

Shen Jiu knew that, because he was the one who had gone in and opened it a minute after Yue Qingyuan’s arrival had been announced. His master had given him a steady look, and told him that he might get a chance to speak to the lord after their business was concluded - a pretty firm dismissal from hanging around for the entire conversation. Then he’d headed off to welcome the guests.

But Shen Jiu had anticipated that. And while he was a little old to be skulking around back pathways and listening in at windows, no one else was around, so that was exactly what he was going to do. He ducked under the sill and listened closely, waiting and waiting until he finally heard the sound of people moving around.
“...Yes,” he heard Master Shen say, in answer to some question he must have missed.

“How is it possible?” Yue Qingyuan’s voice asked. His tone was very serious.

Shen Jiu frowned a little.

“This master told Lord Yue that he had died,” Shen Qingqiu answered, in a very even sort of voice. Shen Jiu heard the soft clack of his hand fan. “Why would it not be possible for a dead person to come back?”

What…? Who had died?

And apparently come back?

Shen Jiu’s frown deepened. Apparently they weren’t talking about him at all. They were discussing ghosts or something. Was his master trying to make small talk? That often ended up being about monsters, if it wasn’t about the weather, or some book he had read.

He tried to contain his disappointment and be patient. Sooner or later they would get to the matter at hand.

“If he’s… if… then, who am I speaking to right now?” Yue Qingyuan asked.

Shen Jiu wasn’t certain he hadn’t misheard, because the question didn’t make any sense.

Before he could hear his master’s reply, and try to figure it out a bit better, there was a soft shuffling sound. To his dismay, he heard the window slide all the way shut.

Try as he might, Shen Jiu couldn’t make anything intelligible out of the soft murmur of voices after that.
With a silent curse, he got up, and stalked angrily from the courtyard.

~

Fruit Baby got bigger and cuter and chubbier, and despite Shen Qingqiu’s insistence that she was the spitting image of Lord Luo, just sort of looked generally 'round' to him. Yue Qingyuan sent more courting gifts. Singular items, always fine, like little treasures that had been picked and mused over with great care. All of them were to his taste. Shen Jiu idly wondered which servant of the man’s was selecting things, as he added another item to the collection in his room.

“A-Jiu,” Shen Qingqiu asked him, from where he was currently using Shen Jiu’s space as a temporary escape from the antics of his lord and the baby. “Past lives… what are my student’s thoughts on them?”

Shen Jiu blinked at the odd topic. Then he actually considered it.

“They can influence ones future prospects,” he decided. “It’s inconvenient, since there’s no way to know what transgressions a person might be paying for. No one really starts with a clean slate, not unless it’s their first incarnation, but in that case they don’t really have any advantages either.”

Shen Qingqiu hummed, and gently fanned himself. He looked vexed about something. Parenthood seemed to put people in strange, useless moods and cause irrational fits. Shen Jiu dearly hoped that whenever his own time came, he’d be spared.

“If A-Jiu could know his history from other lives, would he want to?” the man wondered.

An easy agreement nearly escaped him. After all, wasn’t it always better to know everything? Acting in ignorance usually just made it easier for others to catch a person off their guard. Even if that ‘other’ was some kind of divine judgement, rather than another person. But something stopped him. He paused, as a dark feeling twisted at his core. For a moment he almost even thought he’d somehow stumbled into the beginnings of a qi deviation. His brow furrowed, but between one breath and the next, the feeling passed.
Somehow he didn’t think this was his first life.

Shen Qingqiu was watching him intently.

“...No,” he finally said. The word came out quietly. As he spoke, his mind found a more reasonable explanation for the response than a feeling he could only puzzle over. “If it were that simple, then this student thinks people would remember their past lives more vividly. But that would mean grudges carried over, too, and that would erase the potential of a fresh start. Even if one begins their life with a backlog of debts, maybe those debts really are easier to pay when they are deprived of context and resentment. Like melting down ugly old jewelry, to make something less distasteful out of the same metal.”

Shen Qingqiu stared at him for long enough that his eyes seemed to get wet.

What?

Why wasn’t he blinking?

Shen Jiu shifted in place.

“That’s a strange topic to discuss,” he noted, brusquely. “What’s gotten into Master Shen’s head?” Maybe Lord Luo was having nightmares again. The man had suffered a few while Fruit Baby was still a fruit, and probably still had them from time to time - due to his abilities, he often accidentally dragged his husband along into them as well. Shen Jiu was never marrying a person with demonic dream powers, or if he did, he wasn’t ever sleeping in the same bed as them. Or maybe it had something to do with that ghost issue that he’d overheard the man making small talk with Yue Qingyuan about…?

Shen Qingqiu didn’t answer. He just got up and subjected him to another one of his inexplicable displays of affection.

Shen Jiu made a disgruntled face and patted awkwardly at him.

“Is Master Shen going to answer his student’s question?”
Shen Qingqiu remained conspicuously silent.

With a roll of his eyes, Shen Jiu decided to lead him off and go find Lord Luo and Fruit Baby - who were much better targets for his master’s random outbursts of affection. They’d go in a minute, he decided.

…Maybe just a minute more.

Somehow they didn’t quite manage to get anywhere before Shen Qingqiu finally stopped, and relinquished his hold on Shen Jiu with a gentle pat. Then man moved back a few steps, and then subjected him to one of his most scrutinizing looks. It was even a little intimidating, given the sudden shift in mood. Shen Jiu could only meet his stare and narrow his own eyes in return, wondering what had really prompted all of this odd behaviour.

But then Shen Qingqiu sighed, and at once seemed to go back to normal.

Shen Jiu let out a silent breath of relief.

“Is A-Jiu still interested in Yue Qingyuan?” his master asked him then, seeming to completely change topics.

With only a little hesitation, he offered a quick nod.

“That lord has good prospects,” he said. If his tone was a little defensive, it was probably just because of how strange the conversation was turning out to be.

“Prospects for what, I wonder?” Shen Qingqiu replied, to his surprise. His master gestured at him to come sit. Apparently this wasn’t the end of the discussion, but in fact, the beginning of a new stage of it. Shen Jiu’s personal servant was sent off with a word to fetch them some tea.

“The emperor–” Shen Jiu began, only to have his words waved off.
“Yes, yes, this master is aware of Lord Yue’s situation. But politics is an unhappy business. A-Jiu’s cultivation has proceeded splendidly, there is no need for him to rely on marriage to secure a name for himself. There is a great deal of work for talented cultivators to earn merit in, even the sort that can bestow the emperor’s favour directly. After all, that was how Yue Qingyuan himself came into so much power and influence - apart from his birthright,” Shen Qingqiu reasoned. “Pursuing Lord Yue is fine, but there is no need for A-Jiu to rush.”

He frowned at that.

“The more time passes, the less desirable a marriage candidate this student will become,” he pointed out. He was playing a carefully orchestrated game of seduction, after all - that kind of thing couldn’t be drawn out indefinitely. Someone younger and brighter would come along, sooner or later, and make everything that much harder for him.

Shen Qingqiu’s lips thinned in some unspoken disapproval.

“Ordinarily, perhaps,” he conceded. “But A-Jiu is in a position to make his own stance a great deal stronger before he takes any such action. That might deter some lords or ladies, however, this master would counsel that such people would make unreliable matches anyway. Yue Qingyuan does not court idly, nor impatiently.”

Some of his skepticism must have shown on his face, because his master gave him a very resolute sort of look. It was the kind of stare that prevailed upon him to believe in his words, to put some of the faith he had in the man into the advice he was giving, and not just dismiss it in favour of his own opinion.

…Shen Qingqiu had been married to Lord Yue. If anyone would know…

But. Lord Yue had broken his marriage promise to Master Shen, and demoted him, and replaced him with Liu Qingge. Surely the man had at least something of a wandering eye, or fickle heart, to have done such things? In fifteen years of marriage, despite all expectations, Lord Luo hadn’t even so much as glanced at a potential concubine. Demon society had different standards, but those standards still more or less favoured Lord Luo doing as he pleased.

“Does A-Jiu wish to be a lord?”

The question startled him right out of his thoughts.
Shen Jiu couldn’t hold in the surprised, sardonic laugh that escaped him.

“Master Shen is full of strange questions today,” he said. “Who wouldn’t want to be a lord?” The power, the authority, the ability to control his own fate… if he had that kind of path in life, his position would be excellent. He’d be able to raise up the people who deserved it, and block the traitors who spoke out against him, and if he played his cards right, maybe even steal the emperor’s seat out from underneath him.

“Yue Qingyuan has never particularly enjoyed it,” Shen Qingqiu told him, surprisingly matter-of-fact. “Binghe also had times when he would prefer it if we could only live peacefully in some quiet corner of the world.”

Shen Jiu scoffed.

“Then why are they still lords?” he countered. “What’s stopping either of them from just leaving? They just want to daydream about a peasant’s life, to tell themselves that being rich and influential is a form of hardship.”

He couldn’t keep the sneer out of his tone.

“Some do that. But neither of those men grew up ignorant of the world,” his master scolded him, to his surprise. A fan came down against his head. Shen Jiu glowered in return, and resisted the urge to rub the spot where he’d been hit.

“Some people have short memories,” he argued.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t refute that point, at least.

“To answer my student’s question, too many people would come after Lord Luo because of his bloodline, in all honesty. At first he achieved his standing to… for… for, ah. Personal reasons. But now he is too powerful, anywhere we went, someone would give chase to either force him to retake his position or kill him to prevent that possibility. It would be even more impossible to manage with Ling-er, now. As for Yue Qingyuan… this master suspects that, for a long while, he has simply not known what else to do with himself. So he does his duty to the emperor.”
Shen Jiu’s sneer subsided a little, as he considered that.

Everyone wanted power. It was reasonable - power was security. A quiet life wasn’t without appeal, either, but it was too fragile. Too easy for random misfortunes to destroy everything without recourse. Shen Jiu was capable of practicing inedia, and had a body that was no longer subject to the elements. But he could still remember going to sleep hungry, and cold, and getting sick, and facing the kind of death that only luck could help him evade.

Somehow, his luck had been very good.

Power was still better than the vagaries of fate.

Maybe that was what his master was trying to tell him, though. In places like the imperial court, he could never really be able to hold on to his own power. He’d always be subject to the influences of someone with more importance. But there were other places where he could hold his own much more ably, where he wouldn’t have to worry about outmatched as easily.

Even if he still ventured into circles where he wasn’t that influential, if he had such strong places to fall back to…

He wouldn’t even need to rely all that much on his master’s grace or Lord Luo’s, in the end.

But influence in courtly circles was hard to hold onto. In and of itself, it tended to be a full time occupation. It wasn’t just the practical aspects involved, it was keeping abreast of everything that was going on, every new threat that might arise, every nuance of the social dynamics at play. Only doing so superficially could lead to disaster of its own kind. For example, everyone knew that Lan clan’s second young master was likely to receive a lord’s title and split the clan’s branches into two, with the main branch being retained by his older brother - it would be reasonable to assume that Lan clan was on the verge of an internal schism, as the brothers would have far more reason to compete. Less obvious was that this was precisely what the emperor hoped to accomplish in rewarding the merits of the second young master to make him Second Lord Lan. But Shen Jiu had it on good authority that both of Lan clan’s scions were of good temperaments and genuinely allied in all matters concerning themselves, and despite numerous efforts and encouragement, the elder brother had yet to marry or produce any heirs of his own. So it was very unlikely that the clan’s filial harmony would actually be disrupted by new political rivalries - neither person involved was petty or insecure enough to take that bait on its own, and even the second young master was reportedly a cold fish and therefore unlikely to start a family of his own soon and be motivated by those sorts of interests, either.
By turns, one might assume that the promotion of Lan clan’s second young master would cause disruptions that would aggrieve the emperor, but also that in fact these disruptions would please the emperor and give him an excuse to reduce Lan clan’s influence in the ministries, but also that no such disruptions would occur anyway.

It took even more attention to the comings and goings of various intertwined social circles to know that the soon-to-be Second Lord Lan, despite his cold reputation, was in fact carrying a torch for one of the apprentices of Jiang clan. And that said apprentice secretly shared a bloodline with a demonic noble family, had already shown signs that his demon blood could be unsealed, and also never shut up about the second young master Lan. Therefore the entire situation was a ticking time bomb which would probably only go off after one of the most pure and righteous clans in the empire had harmoniously fostered marital ties to a demonic bloodline. As one of the few well-positioned people with all the necessary information, Shen Jiu could sit on this little tidbit until such a time as it was useful - most likely as a distraction, should some controversy or other crop up and start to threaten Lord Luo’s standing. If that happened, he could simply light the fuse on Lan clan’s own situation, and watch as ninety percent of the nobility fixated on that instead. For maximum effectiveness, the best time would be after Second Lord Lan had married his secret flame and plucked a few Fruit Babies with him. Then - if ever - it would be probable for the main branch of the Lan clan to come into conflict with the new second branch. Especially if the young masters’ conservative, spinster uncle was still running the main branch behind the scenes at that time.

Would Shen Jiu have any of that information if he spent his days like Liu Qingge did, running around the countryside and fighting monsters and defending minor settlements?

Probably not. He had barely even spoken to any of the persons involved, despite being their peers and a fellow cultivator. In fact, what he might well end up with would only be enough wrong information to hang himself on.

It did occur to him that a lot of these dealings were only important because of Lord Luo and Master Shen. It would be possible for someone in Shen Jiu’s position to simply leave. He’d assumed he would have to at some point, for many years in fact - even after he was adopted. One day, things would sour enough and then he would go. But, that thought had stopped feeling ‘true’ to him at some point he hadn’t really kept track of.

This was his home. Not just the estate, but this part of the world. The circles in it. He knew how to live here. He’d even thrived here. And he wanted to keep climbing, up and up, to fight dirty with the other dirty fighters who deserved it, to win against them so that there would always be clear grounds around the peaceful place he had secured against them. That peaceful place was better suited for softhearted people, and they could just… stay there, safe and sound.

That would be best.
That was what he wanted.

“Master Shen,” he said, into the contemplative silence that had fallen between them. He offered the other man a confident smile. “There’s no need to worry about it. This student will find great satisfaction in achieving his success through the path he is already on.”

This time I won’t make the same mistake, he couldn’t help but think.

A moment later, he brushed the odd thought away.

He wasn’t someone who had made any big mistakes in his life yet. What he probably meant was that, going forward, it would be important to keep it that way.
The first time it happened, Mobei-Jun had underestimated persons outside his sphere of influence.

The noble clans of the demonic realm were ever-changing in the details, but at the firmament of things there were several lines of antiquity that had not been broken. His own, of course, was one of them. Then there was the Heavenly Demon Line of Tianlang-Jun. The other elemental clans of fire and gold, wood and earth. The sky clan. And ancient figures of note, primordial and ageless, unsurpassed by any heirs, untouchable by the ordinary concepts of life and death, even as applied to immortals.

It was easy to remember to take caution with these elements of demonic society.

And also easy to forget that the others, however prone to change and chaos and turnover they might be, still had their own threats to offer.

The ghost city of the borderlands was the largest settlement in the chaotic region. It had changed hands many times, transitioning from control of leaders with various descriptions, always taking on the mantle of Crimson Rain That Seeks The Flower. Strong and old ghosts, sometimes with the appearance as young as a child or as old as a battle-scarred veteran. Some believed that all of these rulers were in fact the same, ever-changing spirit, but ghosts were not like demons. For them to become profoundly powerful took a great deal of time. It was much more likely, then, that the
mantle was simply passed to a revolving door of ghostly leaders.

Still, ghosts were better suited to the borderlands than other beings. They straddled the line between demon and human, even more than halfbreeds did. Most halfbreeds were ultimately overruled by their demonic blood; demons were more powerful than humans in any respect, and this bred true. But ghosts were human spirits corrupted by demonic energy. They created it, and fed it into the world around them, and were sustained by it in return.

Given that most ghosts were still easily destroyed, fractured and insane as they often tended to be, it was easy to forget that their nature was nearly as primordial as the most ancient of demons.

Mobei-Jun had forgotten.

There was a shrine, just beyond the ghost city, that was unknown in its origins. Whatever deity or noble demon it had been erected for was long gone from memory. The space exuded an odd aura of protection, however, which made it an adequate place to set camp or retreat to in defense. In all honesty, the shrine was a thorn in Mobei-Jun’s side; upstart demon lords used the spot as a strategic camp when trying to make forays into his territory. The portals nearby tended to lead out to spots not far from his northern fortress.

So. He made the decision to destroy the shrine.

It was a simple place, little more than a tall, man-made cave, with a single statue of a figure. The unearthly beautiful demon - or perhaps human, he supposed that was possible too - held a sword in one hand, and a flower in the other. Strangely, the flower was always a fresh, real bloom, while the rest of the statue was stone. The protective energies of the place seemed to spread outwards from the statue. It didn’t seem to be any kind of array, but then, the shrine was ancient.

Mobei-Jun theorized that destroying the statue would destroy the protective effects.

He was proven correct. It took some time to freeze and smash, freeze and smash, but eventually the ancient stone gave way. The forgotten figure’s visage shattered against the cavern floor. The flower broke into thousand of shards in Mobei-Jun’s fist, as he froze it and crushed it. When the deed was done, a chilling pall had settled over the region instead. The skies darkened, and the once-serene energy of the place turned ominous and unwelcoming.

Very effective.
He wondered why none of his predecessors had done something so simple before.

He found out a few days later, when the butterflies began to appear.

At first it was only one or two. Mobei-Jun wouldn’t have taken note of them, except that they seemed to exude a strange energy, and followed him into places where insects would usually not dare to tread. He expected ambush or attack, either that or some benign creature just spying on him for the fun of it, but when the butterflies became more numerous and daring, he didn’t hesitate to bat them aside.

Worryingly, the insects were immune to his frost.

More worryingly, whenever they came into contact with his skin, they turned black, and vanished.

Within a few weeks, Mobei-Jun was beginning to feel the effects. Disorientation, fever, delirium. He lashed out at his servants with no recollection of it. He would walk to places and not know how he had arrived at them. He sought out experts, trying to figure out what was wrong, but it took him some time to find the answer. The Elder Lady of the Poisons knew it, though.

“You’ve offended the Ghost Sovereign,” she informed him, with the sort of detached interest of someone who was about to witness a very fascinating death. “Crimson Rain That Seeks the Flower. That person is the only one who can cast the Butterfly Curse. Unless you make reparations, the little wretches will never give you a moment’s peace.”

Mobei-Jun was baffled.

“I’ve never even met the Ghost Sovereign,” he said.

Elder Lady of the Poisons shrugged.

“Did you make a ruckus in the Ghost City?” she suggested. “Or thereabouts?”
The correlation didn’t escape him, then. The shrine at the borderlands. Could it be that it was under the Ghost Sovereign’s protection? Was that why no one had dared to destroy it in the past? He scowled, irritated with the outcome of his investigations. Ghosts were so lowly, it offended him to be beset by one’s curse. But, even a human could be dangerous in the right circumstances. Even an animal could.

Mobei-Jun would have to go and negotiate with the Ghost Sovereign, it seemed. He still interrogated the elder demon further, to see if there was another solution; but if there was, it wasn’t known to her. None of his clan elders or advisers knew, either. So Mobei-Jun set out, with a few of his more steadfast servants, to arrange a meeting.

The Ghost Sovereign, when they met, kept himself half in shadow behind a patterned red screen. All Mobei-Jun could tell was that his robes were of the same colour; crimson as the gleam of a Heavenly Demon's eyes.

“When a person defames a deity, it is the deity they owe their reparations towards,” the ghostly lord said. “I am only a servant of the god whose shrine you destroyed.”

Mobei-Jun scoffed. Deities? Fanciful. Ghosts really were bizarre creatures, still driven by impulses and obsessions held over from their human lives. But for the time being, he was at the mercy of one.

“To what god do I owe these ‘reparations’?” he asked.

“You are not fit to know his name,” the Ghost Sovereign said.

Mobei-Jun bit back his growl of frustration.

“Then how do you suppose I might atone?”

The hand he could see casually turned a pair of dice between its fingers. More of the accursed butterflies lingered nearby, and if he had been harboring doubts about the source of his troubles, they were no longer compelling. He had indeed been bested by this tricky spirit.

He was already out of patience for this farce. The sovereign wanted something - clearly. No one would really go to such lengths for a dilapidated shrine to a nameless god. He only wanted to know
what price the ghost would demand, pay it, and be done with the entire scenario. The quiet sound of the dice moving together grated against his nerves. His temperature was veering hot again; he was dangerously close to losing his focus.

Gritting his teeth, he clenched his fists into the fabric of his pants, and forced himself to wait.

“The curse has conditions of its own,” the Ghost Sovereign finally said. “One thing will save you. Or it won’t, and you will die. It’s not something you can do. It’s only something you can receive. So, in essence… luck of the draw. Mobei-Jun’s life is out of his own hands.”

Unacceptable!

His vision reeled. With a growl of frustration, Mobei-Jun stood, and let his ice shards spread across the floor of the room.

“Then we will see if this curse can outlast your destruction!” he said.

He remembered, briefly, charging towards the red screen.

He remembered a flurry of butterflies.

The next thing he knew, he was stumbling along a road somewhere. Not somewhere he knew. It looked like a human settlement of some kind. There were buildings, people, none of them particularly strong… strangers gave him a wide berth, as Mobei-Jun staggered along. It was hot. Everything was too hot, and swimming in sweat. It took him a while to realize he was injured. A jagged gash, bleeding sluggishly, along his side.

And there were the butterflies.

He could see them every so often. Just flashing in and out of the corners of his vision. Whenever he turned to swipe at one, or even just stare, they would always elude him. Ordinarily he would cease the futile actions, but his heart was beating so fast and his rage and frustration were palpable. In his disoriented state, he could only flail and snarl and send out random attacks, trying to defeat this foe with pure desperation.
It wasn’t long before even the weak humans seemed to decide that there was enough wrong with him that they could approach, and then he was reliving his childhood nightmare - trying ineffectually to flee as enraged mortals chased him down with whatever rough tools they had available. Mobei-Jun’s senses grew hazy as he tried to flee and tried to fight, as cold iron bit into his flesh, the sensation almost welcome if only because the metal quenched some of the agonizing fire in his veins.

He was going to die.

He was going to die and his uncle was going to inherit the title of lord, of ‘Mobei-Jun’, that person would get his wish and know that, in the end, a pack of murderous humans had indeed done what he’d once wanted them to do when the were children…

And then it stopped.

Mobei-Jun lay bleeding in some unknown human settlement, dizzy and dying, and listened as the rabble spoke of building a pyre to burn him on.

At this stage, that would indeed finish him off.

He wasn’t sure when most of the humans dispersed to go and attend to that task. He knew it was when he should escape, but he couldn’t even pull himself along to crawl. Through bleary eyes, he could see the single human that they’d left behind to watch him. Pathetic. The reedy little figure darted nervous glances towards him, and then elsewhere.

And then, the human suddenly broke out in a run, and moved towards him.

Mobei-Jun couldn’t even brace himself for another attack. He was surprised to feel hands on him instead of more sharp, cutting metal, but even so, it took him a while to realize that he was being…moved. Dragged off? He still didn’t expect anything good. The human was mumbling, words that were hard to make out. Sometimes it sounded like apologies, sometimes curses, sometimes fretful worrying about how he was going to ‘explain this’ to some other human.

Eventually, Mobei-Jun passed out.

When he came to again, he was in an indoor space.
It was night.

There were wooden beams up over his head, and there was something relatively soft beneath his back. His temples throbbed, and his body still felt weighed down by too much heat. Weak from blood loss and the utter taxation of his healing abilities. His movements were slow and clumsy. He turned his head, and took stock of the space he was in. It looked like some kind of storage room, or… no. A workshop? Or shed. There were tools and a desk, and strange items scattered about.

But the most striking thing was the utter absence of butterflies.

No matter where he looked, he couldn’t see a single one. Not even in the corner of his eyes.

It made no sense.

Even in the unlikely event that he had somehow been rescued or assisted, why would the curse have ended?

He still hadn’t figured out the matter to his satisfaction by the time the door nearby opened.

A human came in. Mobei-Jun’s eyes narrowed. He recognized the clothes more than the face - he had not been very coherent in his previous state - but… yes. That was the human who had dragged him off. The one with the mob which attacked him.

Had he brought Mobei-Jun here?

Saved him from the pyre?

Why?

Obviously the situation was suspicious, but Mobei-Jun didn’t even know what to suspect. Was the man even human? Had he… dealt with the curse, somehow? When the strange little man realized that the demon lord in the room with him was awake, he let out a pathetic sound and jumped in
place. The water he was carrying sloshed in its basin.

Mobei-Jun narrowed his eyes, and shifted some more.

A damp cloth fell from his head.

He looked from it, towards the basin of cool water, and then to the fresh cloths resting on the sides of it. The faint scent of medicinal herbs drifted up from the cloth that had fallen.

Lacking any idea of how to approach this situation, he could only stare at the strange human who was... by all appearances... his rescuer.

“Ah!” the human said. “Ah, g-good, my king is awake!”

‘My king’?

“You know me?” Mobei-Jun asked.

The human hesitated.

“Uh, well, no, we haven’t met,” he admitted, shuffling in place. “I suppose it would be better to say I know ‘of’ my king? The great Mobei-Jun, of course, is pretty... known. In the world. Or, not unknown? I mean it’s not every day that an ice demon wanders into town, and I guess I just assumed if one did he must be the one ice demon I would... know about... ah, right?”

The human was trembling like a rabbit. Mobei-Jun wondered if it was some kind of deception. An act? Playing meek?

“...I am Mobei-Jun,” he conceded.

The human nodded too many times, as if all too eager to agree, and then moved towards the side of the sleeping pallet. Mobei-Jun watched warily.
“How is my king feeling, then? Any pains? Are there more injuries he needs treated? The curse should be gone, he’s not still seeing butterflies, right…?”

He scowled.

The human backed off, looking frightened. And nearly dropped the water basin again.

“How do you know of the curse?” he asked. How could some lowly human even identify such a thing? Mobei-Jun had been forced to go to experts even in the demon realm to discern its origin!

“W-well, it’s the Butterfly Curse, of the Crimson Rain That Seeks The Flower, right?” the human nervously replied. “That’s where all those silvery butterflies came from. That curse is dangerous, but it’s actually not that hard to cure, in the end. A person afflicted just needs someone to show them compassion. I wasn’t sure it would work, but when I brought my king here and began tending his wounds, the butterflies vanished. So that seemed… like it had…?”

Mobei-Jun’s frown deepened.

He recalled what the Ghost Sovereign had said. That the curse could be cured, but not by Mobei-Jun himself.

“You are claiming to have saved me,” he said, his voice harsh in his frustration and confusion. “Why? Who are you?”

How would a lowly human know of such things?

Though, the matter was pertinent to the dealings of ghosts. And humans often shared in those dealings. It was… possible, he supposed, that information on the Ghost Sovereign’s abilities might be more commonly encountered in the human realm than the demonic one.

The little human wavered for a moment. Then he seemed to find something akin to his nerve.
"I-I did rescue you, though! Doesn’t my king remember? It wasn’t easy to get him away from the
 townsfolk, after all! And my brother already suspects something, with all the blood left behind. I
 had to go and clean it up and I needed to clean the path from the outskirts first so that the other
 villagers couldn’t follow it, and then I told them you’d overpowered me and escaped, which they
 believed embarrassingly easy considering you were a bloody lump of meat and I am a cultivator…
 well, self-taught, but I know how it works! And I haven’t done half bad, although I’m maybe not a
 fighter, I guess, so okay it wasn’t too unbelievable and it’s good that they bought it, but anyways
 the point is that I had to bring you around the house to get to my workshop, and my brother
 definitely noticed the big trail of blood, and that’s gonna be a Conversation, so really, I have gone
 to a lot of trouble for my king and I have definitely saved his life!"

The human folded his arms and nodded to himself.

Mobei-Jun twitched.

A moment later, his ‘rescuer’ was back to cowering uncertainly.

“Please don’t kill me,” he squeaked.

Human behaviour was bizarre. Here this tiny creature had apparently saved his life - a move that
 practically exuded arrogance and confidence in his own skills, for who would save a life they
 couldn’t also take if need be? - and yet, he was cringing in obvious deference to Mobei-Jun’s
 power.

A weakling, then. One trying to ingratiate himself. The sort of pathetic leech that would just affix
 its mouth to the most promising target. He’d encountered such beings before, of course, lackeys
 and peons with no honour or integrity to speak of.

And yet…

Such creatures rarely mustered up the nerve to take risks. By the sounds of it, this one had…

…Humans were strange. Mobei-Jun couldn’t pretend to understand them.

“What do you want?” he asked, instead. He held out little hope for a plain answer. Even ghosts
couldn’t give them, it seemed.
The human waved his hands at him, as if to ward something off.

“Nothing!” he insisted. “This servant is merely a... a great admirer of Mobei-Jun’s! I’d only wish to serve my king, it’s no trouble at all, really!”

Serve him, hm?

With a heavy internal sigh, Mobei-Jun took stock of the situation. Distasteful as it was, it would seem he was... indebted. And with his strength so depleted, it would be foolish and pointless to waste energy on condemning his rescuer. Even if the man was only a weak human - despite claiming to be a cultivator, the energy around him was far from fearsome - then that was just all the more reason not to sully himself with his death.

“Very well,” he agreed. “You may serve me.”

Matter settled for the time being, Mobei-Jun laid back, and closed his eyes.

~

The second time it happened, Mobei-Jun was taken unawares by an enemy he knew to be wary of.

It was his uncle’s doing, of course. Little though he could prove it. While his uncle’s primary strategy was to wait for his time of ascension and strike then, impatience ran through his particular branch of their family tree. Every so often, the man would send assassins, and equally often, Mobei-Jun would dispatch them with enough ease to make a statement about the matter.

Not that he could ever officially point to his uncle; but even so, everyone was well aware of the nature of the situation.
Sometimes it was even advantageous. A demon lord without rivals to thwart was a demon lord whose power might remain unproven, and therefore, might invite even bigger threats and calamities upon himself.

But most of the time it was just annoying.

Very rarely, it was actually dangerous.

When the poison had been administered, he couldn’t precisely say. That was troublesome, because it would make it difficult to prevent a repeat incident in the future. However, the symptoms began presenting themselves not long after one of his skirmishes with the southern tribes. Wounds he incurred refused to heal themselves, or else healed only very slowly. Mobei-Jun’s regenerative abilities were being impeded.

Elder Lady of the Poisons confirmed it for him, charging the steep price she usually did. But Mobei-Jun already knew the type of poison. It was one that only worked on demons of his own nature, and one that was, therefore, a closely guarded secret of their clan. What he needed was the remedy.

“The recipe for the antidote is simple enough,” the elder informed him. “But one of the ingredients is particularly difficult to come by. Regrettfully, this elder will only be able to assist Mobei-Jun if he can acquire a spirit stone that has been held in the mouth of an ancient fish for more than a thousand years.”

His expression darkened at the news.

“And where am I to find such a thing?” he demanded.

Elder Lady of the Poisons shrugged.

“If I could drum up a steady supply, would I need to bother you about it?” she replied. “There aren’t many immortal fish in the demon realm. I suggest investigating the human world, first. Maybe start with the Ghost City… uh, perhaps through a proxy, rather than in person. Considering.”
Mobie-Jun scowled.

But in the end, he could only leave with what information the elder had given him.

The human realm, hm?

He had little enough use for the human who had ostensibly pledged his ‘service’ to him after his disagreement with the Ghost Sovereign. What use did he have for some odd, weak human? It was tempting to discount such beings out of hand, although, he had certainly learned the folly of disregarding them entirely after the Butterfly Curse.

The man was pledged to him. Mobie-Jun didn’t expect him to know anything, but if the human wished to serve, he could have the opportunity.

Deciding as much to himself, he concealed his demonic aura, and returned to the town where the human resided. All the little buildings looked mostly the same to his eye, but even so, he remembered the work shed where he had been hidden for several days of recovery. The house it was attached to was one of the nicer buildings in its area. Bigger, better made. Mobie-Jun found it quickly enough, but to his irritation, the human he was looking for was nowhere to be seen.

When a servant approached him, he made his inquiries. What was the man’s name…? He’d given it, somewhere in the midst of all his rambling...

“Where is Shang Qinghua?” he demanded, as he recalled it.

The servant, in a manner not unlike the man he was searching for, jumped like a startled rabbit.

“Oh!” she said. “Um. Is this… one of his gentleman friends…?”

Mobie-Jun narrowed his eyes.

After a few seconds the woman seemed to calm down, and sighed to herself.
“Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, young sir, but Mister Shang no longer lives here. He’s been married off.”

“Married off?” Mobei-Jun’s frown deepened. This was inconvenient. His servant was no longer where he had been assured of finding him.

The woman nodded.

“His brother made arrangements with Lady Qi. To see him looked after, of course. Mister Shang’s always required a lot of looking after. I hope he’s doing alright, living in an estate like that. They have very firm rules of conduct, and Mister Shang’s a little… eccentric. But, the dowry was very large, so, I’m sure he’s enjoying all the peace and quiet and having his own servants and things. He’ll adjust. Surely.”

Mobei-Jun glared at the house for failing to simply produce what he required. The human had been married off to a ‘Lady Qi’, then? And the servant describing the situation seemed oddly disquieted about it, as if trying to reassure herself with her own words.

Annoying. And inconvenient.

“Where is this estate?” Mobei-Jun demanded of her.

She frowned at the question.

“Look,” she said. “It wouldn’t be good for someone like you to just go up to that place and ask for him. Mister Shang has a reputation as a member of Lady Qi’s household to maintain, now. It’d be better just to forget about it. Send a letter, if there’s something important that needs to be said.”

His eyes narrowed.

“Where?” he asked, more firmly.

The servant ceased to defy him, and finally provided him with directions.
This ‘Lady Qi’ was a cultivator, it seemed. Mobei-Jun considered the matter as he made his way to her estate. It was large, though not the largest noble home he had seen. Or raided. Still, considerable enough to give him some pause. He wasn’t entirely confident in his ability to pass as a human beneath the assessing gazing of trained cultivators; there were too many small details that might betray him. An entire compound would not be a challenge he wished to take on in his current state, either.

The simplest thing, of course, would be to abandon the matter. But he dismissed that notion as soon as it occurred to him. He had gone to enough effort - he was going to speak to the human. The bandaged wounds on his body were making him impatient, seeping pain into his senses and provoking frenetic energy in return.

Nevertheless, Mobei-Jun waited for the cover of nightfall, then opened up a portal and stole his way onto the grounds of the estate.

Once inside, he began his hunt for the human.

Many demons had senses that exceeded that of humans, falling more into the range of hyper-specialized animals, or beyond that. Some lines had particularly good hearing, or senses of smell, or the ability to detect certain types of energy. They were boons that could become weaknesses under the wrong circumstances, since it was particularly easy to impede, for example, sensitive hearing, by ringing loud bells or trapping an opponent in an area with a lot of noise. Mobei-Jun’s line had the primary gift of their elemental control over ice, but their vision was also fairly good, and their sense of smell was middle-of-the-road. The ability to open portals was an inheritance from his mother’s line, an advantage which served him very well, and which also granted him some exceptional spacial awareness.

None of that was particularly good for tracking.

Mobei-Jun gritted his teeth as he was left to more or less skulk around in the shadows and peer through windows, glowering at some sleeping human faces and distant lumps in darkened corners, and wondering if he’d even recognize the right human if he saw him.

It was more luck than skill that availed him in the end. As he made his way past a simple courtyard with little outdoor space to speak of, some clouds cleared a path for the moonlight. On a single little bench, Mobei-Jun spotted a human. He was dressed in thin robes - the weather was warm enough to permit such things - and had his hair down. He was twisting something around in his hands, and muttering quietly to himself.
Impatient, and unexpectedly relieved, Mobei-Jun quickly assured himself that no one else was around, and then strode directly over.

The human froze as his gaze landed on Mobei-Jun’s boots. Then it trailed slowly up him, seeming to take in his entire figure, before Shang Qinghua finally looked at his face.

He dropped whatever it was he’d been fiddling with.

“My king!” he squeaked.

“You were not where you said you would be,” Mobei-Jun objected, letting his irritation show.

“Shh, shh!” Shang Qinghua admonished, to his continued annoyance. “Please, my king, if someone hears there will be trouble! Come inside!”

Mobei-Jun’s frown deepened as he found himself hurried into the small door next to Shang Qinghua’s bench.

The interior was not grand, by any means. In fact, it was barely better than most servants’ quarters. His frown deepened. Shang Qinghua had been married off with a substantial dowry… and this was where he was living? He had seen human spousal chambers and courtyards before, they were usually not so… dingy. Particularly not in estates of this level of wealth. His own palaces had spaces designated for his future spouses. Betrothals made for him from birth, more or less, to safeguard the political alliances of the clan.

They were nicer. Even comparing the disparate standards of demons and humans.

“This place is ugly,” he said.

Shang Qinghua tittered nervously and flapped his hands at him.
“Please, my king, your deep voice is really masculine and imposing and perfectly suitable for a demon lord but we need to be quiet,” he insisted.

Then he hurried around the room, thrusting items away and moving objects around, lighting a lamp, and pulling out a chair from underneath a small stack of paper. Mobei-Jun ignored the man as he gestured towards the unsuitably small seat, and settled onto the bed instead. It was marginally better. He swallowed back a wince as some of his wounds pulled. Or at least, he thought he had swallowed it back.

Shang Qinghua’s brow furrowed.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Mobei-Jun glared.

“Oh!” he said, then. “The Poison of Blood Running Like Water. My king is afflicted?”

Mobei-Jun’s eyes widened, marginally.

“You know it?”

How was that possible? Once again, he found himself wondering if Shang Qinghua could even be as he seemed. But no matter how he looked, or reached out with his senses, the man seemed entirely human. Perfectly ordinary, not even so bland as to be suspiciously unremarkable. He was not a great beauty, but he had long fingers and a pleasing enough face, and his timidly shrunken frame did seem to belie some decent strength. Otherwise, he would not have been able to rescue Mobei-Jun in the fashion he had.
But despite his inexplicable knowledge, Shang Qinghua only nodded blithely at the question.

“The fish my king seeks can be found in the mountains north of the town where we first met. There is a lake that was formed by the run-off from the icecaps, I can draw my king a rough map…”

The man looked at him questioningly.

When Mobei-Jun nodded, he then hurried over to the small desk in the room. He plucked up a brush and began to draw. Mobei-Jun stood up, and went to go and look over his shoulder. His gaze fell towards the side, after a moment, and he took note of the papers lying around. Erratic words and brush strokes fell across them, forming odd sentences and bits of prose, fragments of poems. Some of the words caught his eye, half-buried beneath the rest.

And then they were all happy and safe.

Definitely nothing really terrible happened.

I’m sorry.

“Here!” Shang Qinghua finally said, drawing Mobei-Jun’s attention back as he held up a crudely drawn map. “Obviously it’s not perfect but that should get my king to the right general area. The fish is pretty clever, I mean it’s immortal and reeeally old so it’s had time to figure some stuff out, but I’m pretty sure that if my king just freezes a block of ice around it, there won’t be much it can do? So maybe try that.”

Suspicion overrode his curiosity. He accepted the map.

How did this human come to know such odd things? First the Butterfly Curse, now the Poison of Blood Running Like Water. Was his knowledge actually reliable? Or was he just making up an answer in hopes that it would appease Mobei-Jun? He could hardly afford to go hiking through unfamiliar terrain to some far-flung lake, only to find that there was no fish after all. Some farce of ‘oh it must have been killed since I last heard of it’ would not return to him the time wasted on the venture.
Shang Qinghua had known about the Butterfly Curse.

“Where did you get this information?” he demanded.

The man was not skilled in disguising his agitation over the question.

“Books?” he suggested.

Mobei-Jun gave him a flat look.

Was he telling him or asking him?

“Books?”

“...Yes. Definitely books. I read a lot.”

Motioning outwards, Shang Qinghua indicated the copious amount of paper which riddled his pedestrian living space.

“Where is the book that contains this information?” Mobei-Jun asked.

“Um,” Shang Qinghua replied.

There was a long, awkward pause. Then the human coughed.

“I don’t still have it,” he said.
“No?”

“No. Uhm… I didn’t, didn’t get a chance to bring much when I came here. My brother owned… most things. Technically. He’s probably sold off all of it by now, including my books.”

The human’s expression slipped and fell towards genuine sadness. It was uncomfortable enough that Mobei-Jun found himself surprisingly disinclined to press the matter. Why had Shang Qinghua not brought all of his belongings with him? Was this a marriage or an exile? He frowned, once again looking at the room around him. There actually weren’t many books, he realized. There was a lot of paper, but the majority of it had clearly been written on by the room’s occupant himself. Only three books rested on one of the narrow shelves, along with some scroll cases.

…but that any of it was relevant to him, in the end.

He reached out and grabbed the fragile human by the throat. Shang Qinghua’s eyes widened considerably.

“My king!” he squeaked.

Mobei-Jun’s grip was not serious, of course. He brandished the map.

“If the fish is not there, I will come back and kill you,” he said.

Traditional parting words for these sorts of exchanges.

Shang Qinghua shook like a leaf, and nodded desperately as he clutched Mobei-Jun’s hand with theatrical fright. He was over-doing it, but then again, that seemed to be his inclination.

“It’ll be there, I promise, it will definitely be there! Please don’t kill me!”

Giving it a moment more, Mobei-Jun nodded in satisfaction, and then let the human go.

With no reason to linger any further, he gave the room one last distasteful look, before he folded
the map into his pocket. Then he left. Proceeding silently through the shadows of the small space - which was not difficult, this part of the estate had no view to speak of and was wedged fairly close to the perimeter walls - he made his exit without drawing notice. When he was confident in a lack of inconvenient witnesses or cultivators nearby, Mobei-Jun opened up a portal, and exited back in the human town where he had first sought his quarry.

It took him two days to find the mountain lake.

The fish was there. It had the spirit stone he needed. As advised, Mobei-Jun froze the water around it, and then retrieved the block of the ice from the lake. The fish itself proved quite tasty, and energizing in the quality of its antiquated flesh; the spirit stone was rife with natural energy, and even made the Elder Lady of the Poisons look twice when she saw it.

Mobei-Jun did not feel relief until the antidote was coursing through him, and the wounds that had begun to fester finally, instead, began to close.

Shang Qinghua was correct.

That human… hmm. Maybe Mobei-Jun had somehow stumbled upon a valuable servant after all.

~

The third time was after an ambush.

Cultivators, of course. He had crossed paths with a veritable nest of the wretched little creatures. They were no match for Mobei-Jun, but one of them had a spiritual weapon that was strong enough to wound him. The biting star dug into his flesh, its functions alien and very disquieting in the amount of pain it caused. Before long, he found himself tasting blood with every breath he drew. Even as he moved away from his enemies’ corpses, he knew his state was not good.
He had enough energy to open a portal, perhaps two at most, but where to go? His uncle was in residence at the main palace. The northern one would be safer, but it had minimal staff at the moment. No experts who might be able to deal with an unfamiliar human weapon.

Mobei-Jun didn’t recall coming to the decision, but as the pain grew, he found himself opening up a portal that lead to neither of his ancestral homes. Instead he staggered into a dingy room in a human cultivator’s estate… almost as soon as he did it, he concluded that his mind must be suffering some ill-effect from the weapon, because that was a very unsound decision.

Shang Qinghua was in the room, of course. Because that was where he had gone. To the weird little human who knew too many things. At least about poisons and curses.

Would he know about weapons?

Mobei-Jun wondered, with the lightheaded disorientation of bloodloss, if he could place a bet on it. The gambling tables of the Ghost City would probably take his wager. He would bet on the third time proving true - well, in a sense, he had just staked his life on it.

“Holy shit!” Shang Qinghua squawked.

The portal closed behind Mobei-Jun. He didn’t think he’d be able to open another. Scowling, he reached over and smacked the human to make him be quiet. It had the opposite effect; more squawking and then whimpering and cowering ensued, and that wasn’t what he was after. Frowning, he tugged the human back up by his collar, and then pointed at his mangled, bloody side.

“Fix this,” he said, because demon lords did not say ‘help’.

Shang Qinghua looked at the injury. His eyes widened to the size of dinner plates.

“Holy shit, my king!” he blurted, repeating himself.

The pain from the weapon surged. Mobei-Jun gasped, and let the human go as the room spun around him. The pain was a white-hot lance through his internal organs. Blood dripped down his chin. He remembered choking on it, sputtering, and Shang Qinghua’s flailing and cursing, and droplets of red spattering across pages with messy calligraphy.
The next thing he remembered was waking up.

It was night again.

Mobei-Jun was not dead.

Promising.

He’d probably won his imaginary bet, in that case.

Waking up a bit more thoroughly, he became aware of several things, then. One was the extensive amount of bandaging on his side. The weapon had been removed; he could tell just by the feel of it. But the wound was not one that even he could heal easily. There were traces of heat to it, and to his own senses. Muddy, slow - sick. Not unlike when the Butterfly Curse was killing him. The rise in his body temperature was the taste of death, just narrowly avoided. It made his senses dull as his torso ached with residual injury.

The next thing he noticed was the body lying next to him.

Shang Qinghua’s small room still had a bed large enough to accommodate a married person, and the expectations of marriage. But not by a wide margin. Thus, the human lying next to him on it was close enough for physical contact to be unavoidable.

Shang Qinghua was still fully dressed, and on top of the blankets. One of Mobei-Jun’s arms was trapped in his grasp, and his cheek was pressed against his shoulder.

The human was drooling slightly.

For a moment, Mobei-Jun considered rejecting the obvious implications of this arrangement, and pushing the other man away. He wasn’t interested in power-grasping weaklings who thought they could attain a better position for themselves by seducing him. In fact, his overall interest in sex was - for a demon - not very high. The betrothal contracts he’d been saddled with since childhood were something to dread more than anticipate, and he had never particularly sought to make any ‘passion’ matches for himself. Such entanglements just seemed to open one up to a whole new
range of attacks and betrayals.

But…

His gaze drifted over Shang Qinghua’s lax, sleeping features, as he considered things from a new angle.

This human was interesting. And had, once again, successfully saved him, and failed to take advantage of his vulnerability. There could be any number of explanations for that; it didn’t mean that the odd little man was reliable. But, it didn’t mean that he wasn’t, either. There were… points in his favour.

Mobei-Jun stared at his slightly parted lips, at the faintest hint of moisture lingering at the side of his mouth. His features really were not bad. Great beauties were easily ranked, and this human would not place highly among them. But he was interesting to look at. Even in sleep, his brow twitched a little, and his lips trembled, as if still trying to express his over-abundant emotions. He was neither too soft nor too harsh in traits. The more he looked, the more Mobei-Jun found himself deciding that, in fact, Shang Qinghua was very pleasing to the eye. Like a painting of something that was not so simply beautiful as a flower or firework display, but far more lovely than one would assume at a glance. More mysterious, even dangerous, and fragile.

Like a spider. One of those tiny ones that jumped.

Perhaps it would be wise to avoid making any rejection or acceptance too hastily…

He was still turning the matter over in his mind when Shang Qinghua’s features scrunched up. Slowly, the man’s eyes fluttered open. He tilted his head, and met Mobei-Jun’s gaze in the darkened bedroom.

With a soft yelp, he flung himself away.

Definitely one of the spiders that jumped.

“My king!” he squeaked. “My king is… is, ah, awake! I was just… lying nearby, my apologies, I didn’t mean to… please don’t kill me!”
Mobei-Jun frowned.

Didn’t mean to…? Had the man climbed into bed with him or hadn’t he?

“You were sleeping on me,” he said, brusquely.

Shang Qinghua waved his hands at him.

“I would never presume!” the human insisted. Confusingly. Had he climbed into bed with him or not? Obviously he must have, so why deny it? Mobei-Jun hadn’t even rejected him yet. Was his manner really so timid? Or was this ‘playing coy’?

…It was annoying.

“Sit down,” he grumbled.

To his continued annoyance, rather than moving back towards the bed, Shang Qinghua grabbed a chair and sat in it instead.

“How is my king feeling?” the human asked. He fidgeted extensively with his sleeves. His hair was askew from lying on it. It would be better if he took it down. Mobei-Jun’s fingers twitched, before he blinked, and then frowned more fiercely.

“Fine,” he snapped.

Shang Qinghua nodded. Why was he nodding?

“That’s good!” the human said. “Is there any sharp pain anywhere? I think I got all the pieces of that weapon to retract but if I missed one, it would be hurting a lot…”

“No,” Mobei-Jun told him. “…No pain.” Just aching, but he could tell for himself that it was
More nodding came in response.

His eyes narrowed, as he waited for Shang Qinghua to demand repayment for this extensive service of saving his life. Or to voice some claim, express some power over him. Time inched by as the human looked at him and then darted his glance away, and then got up and began fussing around with random things. Twitchy.

“Ah, my king is lucky, hardly anyone ever actually comes in here,” Shang Qinghua told him. “But he shouldn’t stay too long, just in case!”

Again, Mobei-Jun glanced around the room.

“What about your servants?” he asked.

Shang Qinghua gave him an incredulous look.

“What servants? I’m just a concubine, my king, Lady Qi’s third one in fact; and I’m not her type. I barely rank above a servant myself, actually…”

That didn’t seem right. But then, very little of this actually made sense of Mobei-Jun. Wasn’t Shang Qinghua’s dowry considerable? Why stay living in this place, if his esteem was so lowly? Was he actually in love with this Lady Qi? It didn’t seem like it, his words were not spoken with any particular reverence or affection…

Glancing at him, Shang Qinghua waved a hand at him again.

“Lady Qi’s not even at the estate right now,” the human assured him. “First Wife is a cultivator too but she’s away with her, they’re both attending a few nighthunts in Lanling. It’s almost morning, so I’ll have to go show filial respect to some of my in-laws, but as long as my king stays quiet it’ll be fine. The servants all know I don’t have any favour, so they avoid coming here unless it’s to steal things, to be honest. And they don’t have a reason to try thieving right now, I haven’t got much that’s worth stealing…”
Mobei-Jun blinked.

Was he robbed? Was that what happened to his dowry?

“Tell me about Lady Qi,” he demanded.

Shang Qinghua blinked at him, perplexed by the question. Then understanding seemed to cross his features.

“Of course!” he said. “My king wants insider information on the noble cultivators, right? This servant can provide it! Absolutely! But… apart from the nighthunts in Lanling, there’s not much to report right now. I could tell you about Lady Qi’s particular cultivation methods… I should probably write it down…”

So saying, Shang Qinghua lit a lamp, and moved over to his small desk.

Mobei-Jun’s head was starting to swim a little. With a disgruntled sound, he leaned back, and closed his eyes. Then he shoved the blankets away from himself. They were trapping heat. Reaching a hand up, he pushed open the top of his robe, too, and only let out a breath of relief when he felt some cooler air against his skin.

At some point, Shang Qinghua squeaked and knocked something over. But he didn’t try to climb into the bed with him again.

Strange man.

~

By the fourth time, Mobei-Jun had realized that Shang Qinghua was not an asset to be discounted -
even if he was also not one to be easily explained.

Among demons, there were sometimes individuals who cropped up with latent or unexpected talents. Gifts from their bloodlines that didn’t manifest consistently through the generations, or spiritual abilities gleaned from being born under certain rare circumstances, or hitherto unknown powers that came from the interbreeding of particular demonic types. He did not know if humans had something similar, but he couldn’t see why they wouldn’t.

Shang Qinghua, he thought, was a ‘rare’ individual. He seemed to have a talent of knowing things.

Moreover, it was not a talent that anyone else seemed to recognize.

The little human was quickly becoming Mobei-Jun’s secret, special resource. Even if it was also confusing at times. Despite numerous opportunities, Shang Qinghua had yet to take advantage of his weakness, or extort his life debts. When he was asked for information, he provided it. He showed extensive deference towards Mobei-Jun, despite also being bold enough to save his life.

It made sense to provide him with a token that could bring him directly to Mobei-Jun, if needed.

The man was swiftly becoming his most useful informant. Despite all odds and the unlikely nature of it all, he could even call him a ‘trustworthy adviser’.

So when one of his excursions to the eastern reaches of the demonic realm ended with a qi-leeching parasite burrowing deep into his flesh, and only breaking off at the neck when Mobei-Jun attempted to remove it himself, he did not waste much more time before ripping open a portal to Lady Qi’s estate.

It was evening, but not late. The sky was still strewn with the colours of a setting sun.

The sight he was met with inside brought him up short.

Shang Qinghua was lying on his bed.

The human was naked. But the impact of his nudity was secondary to the mess of red marks that
were scattered across his back and backside, some of them dripping blood down his sides, others forming angry welts that looked livid and painful against the human’s skin.

Mobei-Jun stared.

Shang Qinghua had been beaten…?

He was Mobei-Jun’s servant! How dare someone…

His eyes narrowed, and his lips pursed as he recalled to himself the entire situation. Yes, Shang Qinghua was his servant. But he was also here, married to that Lady Qi. There were others with the authority to treat him as they pleased. And a beating like that showed signs of extensive interaction - perhaps the little human had earned his lady’s favour?

For some reason, though, it just seemed… wrong.

It was too much. And there were no signs of the kind of care that would be required after such vigorous interactions. Just a basin with some water and a rag that had fallen to the side, as it seemed Shang Qinghua had tried to attend to his wounds himself, before giving up in exhaustion. Mobei-Jun put the matter of his pained sword arm aside - the barbs from the parasite’s mouth were still buried in his flesh, but it was not critical - and instead quietly approached the bed.

He reached out a hand, and brushed his fingers across Shang Qinghua’s sweat-slicked brow.

Humans were always warm. But this seemed too hot.

Sick, Mobei-Jun’s instincts told him.

It was hardly his job to play nursemaid to an injured servant. He wasn’t the one who inflicted this upon Shang Qinghua, it was beneath him to provide the courtesy that was owed from another. Perhaps it was even some test of strength - perhaps Shang Qinghua had obtained the opportunity to rise in rank, and interference would cause more trouble for him.

But… if the human died, Mobei-Jun would be out a valued servant. He didn’t owe Qi Qingqi’s
The courtesy of respecting their affairs, either.

Reaching down towards the water basin, Mobei-Jun lifted the bloodied cloth. He wrinkled his nose at the scent of it, and searched around the room for a moment, before he found some clean ones. The water was fine, at least. He dipped a finger in it to cool it, careful not to freeze the liquid solid, before he turned his attention to the human on the bed.

The wounds would not heal well like that.

Carefully, Mobei-Jun set about cleaning them.

Shang Qinghua didn’t wake entirely. His eyes fluttered open a few times, and he made pained sounds, but after a minute the human just buried his face into his pillow, as if in some futile effort to escape from the sensations. Mobei-Jun found himself frowning again. Humans… didn’t take pain well, did they? He was only cleaning the wounds, but he did not think Shang Qinghua was exaggerating his negative reactions to it all. The man was too disoriented for such displays.

When he had finished mopping up the blood and carefully cleaning between the lash marks, Mobei-Jun scowled a moment more.

Then he opened a portal again.

It did not take him long to retrieve some supplies - a servant had brought some healing salves and bandages to his chambers in his absence, anticipating the need of his own injuries. Mobei-Jun gathered the basket of items up, and then returned to Lady Qi’s estate. Shang Qinghua had not moved from the bed. Good. Setting down the basket beside it, Mobei-Jun acquired a liberal amount of healing salve, and carefully began applying the medicine to the wounds. The pungent odor made him wrinkle his nose.

It was only as he was halfway through the process that it occurred to him that, perhaps, demonic healing agents would not necessarily work the same for humans.

He paused, and checked the places where he had applied the salve again.

It didn’t look bad, however. The redness had gone down, and Shang Qinghua’s breathing was less disturbed. After hesitating only a moment more, Mobei-Jun decided to continue. He didn’t know
what else to do, and as the sky continued to darken, it seemed obvious that no one else would be coming to attend to the matter.

An hour later, just as he had finished applying bandages over the salve, his assessment was proven inaccurate. Sounds drifted up from the door to the interior chamber. Narrowing his eyes, Mobei-Jun considered his options. There was only one obvious recourse. He lifted the basket up, and quickly jumped into the rafters at the top of the room. The rickety beams strained to hold his weight; he tried to press most of it into the roof, as he wedged himself into the upper corner.

Fortunately, it was dark.

An unfamiliar figure entered the room. A servant, by the looks of things. He was carrying a tray that held some bandages, a bowl of some medicinal substance, and some water. Another, second human followed in after him, carrying another tray with different items on it; including a needle and thread. They both paused as they saw Shang Qinghua.

“Someone already came?” the first said.

The second swore.

“Why didn’t they tell us? Could have saved us the time!”

“Well, Second Wife said to leave him for a few hours. Whoever it was, they’re risking her wrath.”

“We should probably find out…”

Reaching over, the second human lightly shook Shang Qinghua’s shoulder.

“Third Concubine?” he asked, in a deceptively gentle voice. “Third Concubine, who tended your wounds?”

Shang Qinghua blinked awake, blearily, and stared at the two servants.
“Oh. Thank you,” he murmured.

“No,” the servant scoffed, with a little more impatience. “Who tended your wounds?”

“Giant iced cream…” Shang Qinghua said, as his eyes drifted shut again.

The two servants exchanged looks.

“...We can just say we did it anyway,” the first decided, with a shrug. “Save us the work. I’m going to go have a drink, seems I’ve got a few spare hours now. Want to join me?”

The second hesitated only a moment, before nodding.

“Yeah, sure. I guess there’s no point trying to stir up trouble about it.”

Mobei-Jun watched as the servants took their trays and, without even bothering to check the bandages he had put onto the human, or his method for attending to Shang Qinghua’s wounds, simply left the room again.

When he was confident that they had gone and would not return, Mobei-Jun swung himself back down to the floor.

He made his way over to Shang Qinghua’s side.

To his surprise, the human actually turned and looked at him. His eyes were glassy, but he no longer seemed to be feverish. As Mobei-Jun examined him, the human’s expression wavered. Reaching out, Shang Qinghua surprised him again by taking hold of his hand. Then he brought it to the side of his face, and let out a sigh of relief.

“Cool…” he murmured.

Mobei-Jun’s eyebrows climbed up.
He could… permit it, he supposed.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

Shang Qinghua said something entirely incomprehensible, and then let out another sigh. That medicinal salve could cause some odd behaviour once it came into the bloodstream; the plant in it that relieved pain was also somewhat intoxicating, Mobei-Jun knew. It was a popular ingredient in certain local wines as well as in medicine. When Shang Qinghua nuzzled his hand and then let out something suspiciously like a giggle, he concluded that the effect was probably stronger on humans.


Mobei-Jun’s eyebrows nearly reached his hairline.

He knew he was aesthetically pleasing, by most standards, but being called such by Shang Qinghua was surprisingly… effective. Even though the human was clearly not in his right state of mind.

“You should rest,” he said.

He made no move to reclaim his hand.

Shang Qinghua sighed, and then made an unhappy sound.

“Don’t like sleeping on my stomach,” he complained.

Mobei-Jun’s lips twitched.

“Your back is injured,” he said.

“Yeah,” Shang Qinghua murmured. He tried to nod, but it wasn’t a gesture effectively
accomplished. “Was by the pond. Just walking, but then First Concubine fell in. Second Wife said I pushed her. I didn’t! Doesn’t matter, though, walked right into the trap...”

Mobei-Jun’s fingers twitched. After a moment, he gave into impulse, and brushed them carefully against the human’s cheek. Some of the tension left Shang Qinghua’s body, and his grip on Mobei-Jun’s wrist relaxed, as he leaned into his caress.

“Lady Qi had you beaten for pushing someone?” he asked, bewildered.

“Lady Qi’s at the palace,” Shang Qinghua said. “Second Wife’s in charge. She’s mad, ‘cause of the thing with the accounts book. S’not my fault... my king... please don’t hit me, I don’t want to be hit anymore...”


“You don’t like to be hit?” he asked.

Shang Qinghua made an odd sound.

“Who likes to be hit?” the human countered. “Hurts...”

“And this is always a negative thing? Humans consider it as such?” Mobei-Jun checked.

“...Yeah... ’s punishment...”

Tilting his head a little, Shang Qinghua blinked at him.

“Demons don’t,” he said, as if remembering something. “Right, right. That was dumb. Why did I do that?”

The thread of the conversation seemed to have veered away from the comprehensible, but Mobei-Jun had gleaned some important new information from it. He finally withdrew his hand, and folded his arms to think. Human customs really were different. Shang Qinghua stared at his chest,
frowning and blinking, and then reached out a hand. It flapped towards him until he grabbed his 
wrist, and then pointedly pulled his touch back to his face.

“Gentle. Feels good,” the human said. “Good touch, my king…”

Mobei-Jun swallowed.

He stroked Shang Qinghua’s cheek, and then petted his hair. The human finally settled down 
again.

“Why’s the room spinning?” he asked.

“I gave you demon medicine,” Mobei-Jun answered. He felt… bad. It was not a good feeling, to 
have done something in ignorance of its harmfulness. Surely the small strikes he had delivered to 
Shang Qinghua had not been perceived so badly? A few affectionate bruises here and there… he 
was certain he had seen humans hit one another in positive context, striking playful blows… hadn’t 
he? Or was there some different nuance that he was missing?

Shang Qinghua giggled.

“Whee,” he said.

Mobei-Jun gave his head a pat. The human flinched as his hand came down, as if in anticipation of 
pain.

Something in his gut twisted unpleasantly.

“...I won’t hurt you,” he said.

Shang Qinghua squinted at him for a moment. Then his lips wobbled. Then he sniffed.

“You’re too good for him, my king,” he said. “I don’t care what I wrote. Don’t marry him.”
It seemed they were back to delirious ramblings.

“Never should have… you were too good a character for that…”

To Mobei-Jun’s alarm, the human started to cry then. Not simple tears of pain, either, but sniffling, extensive bawling, that sent shudders through his entire body, and made his face turn very red. His glassy eyes took on an additionally fragile look. Mobei-Jun froze in place. He had no idea what to do.

It occurred to him that, in interacting with a human, he had probably never known what to actually do.

“Don’t cry!” he snapped.

Shang Qinghua cried harder.

“I’m sorry my king!” he said. “Don’t marry him, don’t do it, my king won’t be happy! Just stay away from him! Don’t… don’t…”

Looking around, Mobei-Jun found himself completely at a loss. After a moment, he hesitantly patted Shang Qinghua’s head some more. As gently as he could manage. His words made no sense; it was probably half a dream. Delirium.

“Alright,” he agreed. “I will not marry… him?”

A tremendous breath of relief escaped the trembling human. Shang Qinghua sniffed again, but finally seemed to subside. His eyes slid shut.

“Good,” he murmured. “My king… my king…”

Mobei-Jun ventured a few more pats.
When Shang Qinghua had finally quieted, he settled back for a while then. Frowning and turning his gaze over the small room for the thousandth time. It seemed that every time he came to this place, something fundamental in his worldview shifted. Or, no, not to this place - it had happened in the work shed, too. It was whenever he came to this person.

He was agitated enough that even the pain from the dead parasite had faded to background noise. He needed to consider matters more, he decided. With one last glance to make certain that Shang Qinghua had settled down, he opened a portal again, and left.

Mobei-Jun ended up pacing his rooms until dawn. The throb of pain from his injury served as a sharp counterpoint to his thoughts, as he considered the matter further. Humans were not as durable as demons. It made… some sense, he would concede, that damaging their bodies would be a more universally negative experience for them. Pain was unpleasant, but it also brought with it the rush of clarity, and adrenaline, it could heighten one’s focus and even bring latent abilities to the fore… it was like alcohol. Undoubtedly, alcohol was a poison with unpleasant effects; but there were enough pleasant side-effects to make it exciting, worthwhile, even addictive.

Was it not the same for humans?

He had seen humans drink. Seen them fight. Seen them show off battle scars, and grin menacingly under the weight of fresh wounds.

Perhaps it was not entirely different. But still different in some ways?

The complexities frustrated him. By the next day, he was agitated enough that, without much thought, he opened another portal, and stormed back to Lady Qi’s estate. Or rather, Shang Qinghua’s room in it. He would get explanations. Frank, clear, and concise! And if they made no sense, he would wait and demand more until they did!

The human was sitting up. Mobei-Jun paused as their gazes locked, and he immediately forgot what he had come for.

Shang Qinghua squawked, stumbled, and fell from his bed.

“My king!” he exclaimed. “W-what are you doing here?!!”
Hastily, the human grabbed a nearby blanket, and threw it over himself. As if to hide.

Mobei-Jun hesitated.

“What are you doing?” he countered.

Shang Qinghua stuck his head out from underneath the blanket. Apart from his feet, the rest of him was covered.

“Nothing!” he insisted. “Nothing at all, my king, I was just… changing! Getting dressed! I’m naked, don’t come in!”

Naked? Well, yes, he was, but Mobei-Jun had obviously already noticed that last night. Although he had not gotten a front view. And ‘don’t come in’? Was he not already in the room to begin with? A huff of concern escaped him. Perhaps Shang Qinghua was still intoxicated…?

“My king, please at least turn around! This servant is not dressed!” Shang Qinghua cried, fretfully.

What business did he have sounding so wronged? Mobei-Jun had not done anything. Not even the hitting he hadn’t realized was a bad thing to begin with! But the second thought made him hesitate. It still felt… bad. He didn’t want Shang Qinghua to dread his presence. Hadn’t the human promised to serve him? Surely he couldn’t think that badly of Mobei-Jun if he had…?

With a silent glare, the demon lord turned around, as requested.

He heard Shang Qinghua let out a sigh of relief. Then there was some sounds of fabric moving around.

Demon healing salves acted quickly. Mobei-Jun nevertheless frowned. If he moved too much before the wounds had healed, Shang Qinghua would tear them back open again. However, if the salve worked as well on him as it did for Mobei-Jun himself, then most of the injuries should have closed. He risked a glance back over his shoulder, and caught sight of the white bandages on Shang Qinghua’s back. None had been bled through.
A soft breath escaped him.

It was probably fine, then.

“Alright, my king, this servant is decent,” Shang Qinghua told him a moment later.

Turning, Mobei-Jun gave him an assessing look. He seemed pale and there were dark circles under his eyes, and the scent of sweat and medicine was still thick around him. But he was moving freely enough, and had pulled on two layers of robes, and tied his hair back with a simple thong.

As he subjected Shang Qinghua to inspection, the human returned the favour. His gaze stopped at Mobei-Jun’s arm, and widened.

“My king!” he exclaimed.


Shang Qinghua flailed at him.

“What ‘what’?! My king has a Venomous Leech Snake’s head embedded in him!”

Mobei-Jun gave it a cursory glance. It did look worse, he could concede, since his flesh had started trying to heal over it.

“It’s fine,” he said.

Shang Qinghua gave him an odd look, and then shook his head.

“Are you shitting me, my king?”

He blinked.
Human aside, Mobei-Jun decided then and there that this one in particular, at least, did not have a normal reaction to the prospect of pain. His eyes narrowed. Almost immediately, Shang Qinghua begged forgiveness for his ‘rude speech’, and then began flailing. Definitely, his back must have healed, or else he would be in too much pain for such things. With unhappy noises and insensible mutterings, he bade Mobei-Jun sit on his rickety little chair, and then pulled a clean pair of pliers out of his desk.

“How did this even happen…?” Shang Qinghua asked him, tiredly, as he cut away Mobei-Jun’s ruined sleeve.

“It bit me,” Mobei-Jun replied, dry.

The response earned him a blank look, and then a head shake.

“It sure fucking did,” Shang Qinghua mumbled. “Would it kill my king to actually explain the circumstances? No, nevermind, I don’t want to know anyway. Trekking off doing demon business in some monster-filled jungle… goddamn barbed and serrated teeth… I never imagined it like this, for the record, this is not what was in my head… fuck you, past me…”

Definitely he was still a little intoxicated. That was nonsense towards the end. Mobei-Jun still only gritted his teeth as Shang Qinghua determinedly closed the pliers over the stubborn bits of the Leech Snake’s skull, and began yanking it out.

Unfortunately, the remains did not want to come in one piece. The process sent burning flares of truly unpleasant pain from his nerves as Shang Qinghua yanked, and apologized, and then yanked some more, removing barbed and serrated teeth, pausing every so often to wipe away the copious amounts of blood being produced.

And also the venom. And… pus.

…Possibly he should have attended to the matter with more haste.

Shang Qinghua’s muttering and mumbling had a definitively dire quality to it as he finally pulled the last tooth free, and then dropped the pliers resoundingly onto his desk.
“My king!” he said, sweating again. “You - ! if I - ! Don’t leave such injuries unattended like that, even a demon of your strength can still suffer from a rotting poisonous monster head embedded in his flesh!”

Mobei-Jun blinked.

Shang Qinghua paled, and then immediately began to cower.

“Not that I would presume to tell my king what to do!” he insisted.

At the cowering, he found himself frowning. But the frown just seemed to make it worse. Shang Qinghua flinched when he reached a hand towards him. Mobei-Jun hesitated, and then withdrew it again. Uncertain in ways he disliked.

“You’re not in trouble,” he said, gruffly.

Shang Qinghua paused.

“I’m not…?” he checked.

Mobei-Jun shook his head.

“Oh!” Perking back up, the human let out a breath of relief. Or perhaps exhaustion. While Mobei-Jun glanced at his now-healing arm, Shang Qinghua slumped against the side of his bed.

“Ohay,” he said. His limbs trembled slightly. “If my king doesn’t need anything, this servant is… tired. Now. Performing emergency surgery with pliers is very tiring, even for someone in full health probably. Not that I’m not in full health! Because I definitely am. Haha... I think I’m going to just lie down for a bit…”

He crawled back into his bed.

Mobei-Jun watched as he lay on his side, rather than his back. He stood up, of half a mind to insist
on checking Shang Qinghua’s wounds, too... but when he approached, the human looked nervous again.

Pausing, he held himself back instead.

“...Rest,” he decided.

He could always return at night.

Shang Qinghua nodded, and didn’t even seem to notice when Mobei-Jun cleaned up the remnants of the monster skull and blood before he left.

~

After that, Mobei-Jun stopped keeping track.

If there was a strange problem, the most efficient way of solving it - or finding out how to solve it - was to simply go to Shang Qinghua. However the human knew the things he did, his information was more reliable than any other source. There were only a few times when he was forced to beg ignorance. In addition to Mobei-Jun’s visits, the human also made regular excursions to deliver information on the comings and goings and inner dealings of the human cultivation world.

It was, in fact, *invaluable* information.

With it Mobei-Jun was able to counter many more opponents than he otherwise would have, and also leave his rivals struggling to keep pace whenever they ran afoul of pitfalls that he had been warned to avoid. His power was rising, not insignificantly, and most of his success could be laid at
the feet of the strange little human, this person he had met purely by chance.

Shang Qinghua was worth more than his weight in gold. He was unique. Impressive. Irreplaceable.

It grated to leave him in Lady Qi’s estate.

Taking him away would have been so easy. Mobei-Jun considered it many, many times. It was not fitting to leave a valuable servant at the mercies of human cultivators, even if said servant was also a human himself.

But.

Shang Qinghua had been married off with a considerable dowry. If he wished to leave, he ought to have possessed the means? Even apart from that, it would be a simple matter for him to go to one of Mobei-Jun’s palaces, and then never go back to the Qi estate. All the servants were warned against so much as breathing too heavily on the little human. If he so much as asked, Mobei-Jun would give him a set of rooms and a study and whatever supplies he needed within a heartbeat. The human was not without recourse to his situation. Yet, for some reason, Shang Qinghua always returned to Qi Qingqi. Who barely seemed aware of his existence. Even as Mobei-Jun noticed him hiding secret caches around the estate; investigating them revealed that they only contained bits of money and stray goods. Emergency supplies. Nothing dangerous to Mobei-Jun’s holdings.

Clearly, the human was planning something. With his extensive and mysterious knowledge, Mobei-Jun could not pretend to know what it was… and could not deign to interfere, either.

No matter how frustrating he found it.

But temptation was another matter. As time passed, Mobei-Jun became more and more certain that he had to hold onto Shang Qinghua, and not let another steal his loyalty away. If the man was a demon, matters would be much simpler. Mobei-Jun could fight him, demand his submission, and then shower him with luxury and favour, entwining their dealings with one another until their affairs were one and the same. Mobei-Jun’s success would become Shang Qinghua’s, and vice versa. With almost the entirety of the northern reaches pledged to his clan, Mobei-Jun’s strength and influence would grow, and Shang Qinghua would…

What?
Enjoy a seat as his most influential adviser? No, that would only invite trouble. Shang Qinghua was not a fighter. He was a sage, of sorts; his value lay in his knowledge. But holding any true position of influence in Mobei-Jun’s inner court would bring challengers.

The concept seemed unsatisfying anyway. Mobei-Jun’s thoughts could not help but drift to the night when he had awoken to find the human lying beside him, in bed. The move had not… bothered him, as such. Even though Shang Qinghua had not made any such overtures again. He was a human, and married, so such standards were probably different? And yet, physical closeness carried implications that seemed to obvious to deny. Shang Qinghua touched him, tended his wounds, and ever since Mobei-Jun had limited himself to gentle forms of contact, had not rebuffed any of his own overtures. He praised Mobei-Jun's beauty - or cursed it, sometimes - and often seemed to become aroused by his presence.

Mobei-Jun pondered the situation.

Plenty of demons took on human consorts. Generally as concubines. It was a safer position than a spousal one; spouses could be challenged, they had political authority. Concubines were more limited, and therefore, only targeted as a means of shaming or challenging their liege. But…

Someone like Shang Qinghua deserved the authority and power that came with the title of ‘husband’.

Moreover, Mobei-Jun had little doubt that the man could use it.

Could be perfect for the role, actually. Even lacking the usual political connections, his knowledge and trustworthiness alone were exceptionally well-suited to keeping him forever at Mobei-Jun's side.

It would just fall upon him to thoroughly and utterly protect Shang Qinghua. And to find the right overtures that could be made in this situation, so that when the man’s plotting came to fruition, he would choose Mobei-Jun. To that end, he realized, he needed to make plans. Probably should have been making them sooner, in fact. As it stood, his clan would be heavily resistant to the idea of him marrying a human. Particularly one with limited cultivation skills, and no exceptional heritage. One of his ancestors had kidnapped a crown princess, once, and had to fight tooth and nail to take her as Second Wife. And that human had vastly outranked Shang Qinghua in terms of tangible value, even if no one could compare to the man where intangible value was concerned. Mobei-Jun needed more subordinates who were pledged to him above his clan. He needed to make more statements of power and authority, to demonstrate that he was strong to stand not only above other demons, but also to challenge and test the limits of the human world, too. Detractors would call him soft. Tianlang-Jun himself had been taken down over the matter of his predilection towards human culture, after all. His 'weakness'.
Mobei-Jun needed weapons against such attacks. Reminders that would make his enemies hesitate. Allies who would not be deterred by his commitment to a human.

And there was also the matter of his betrothal contracts. He had never greatly enjoyed the prospect, but he liked them even less now that the matter of Shang Qinghua had arisen. Spouses and concubines often competed for favour, and challenged one another for rank and status. Fulfilling his contracts would be the equivalent of introducing enemies to Shang Qinghua into his own home.

But they were not so easily broken, either.

Abruptly consumed with the matter, Mobei-Jun paid a visit to the senior servants charged with safeguarding the related paperwork, and confiscated his betrothal agreements for review.

Three of the agreements he could nullify out of hand, he assessed, with some relief. One of those belonged to a retainer who had fallen from grace - it probably should have been dissolved sooner, but the senior servant insisted that the young nobleman involved was a ‘legendary beauty’.

Was Mobei-Jun supposed to care?

The other two were from families that had also made arrangements to transfer the contracts to his uncle in the unlikely event that he attained the title of clan leader instead. Mobei-Jun curled his lip - it was old paperwork, arrangements made by elders who deluded themselves into underestimating his distaste for his uncle. Rivalry was one thing, but it was high time he consolidated his power base, and stopped tolerating this nonsense opportunism.

“Nullify these contracts, and put out a summons for these two family heads to come to court,” he ordered. He’d kill them himself.

The senior servant acquiesced, with some ill-disguised curiosity.

“What about the others, my king?” she wondered. “Are those contracts to come to fruition?”

“I am still reviewing them,” he said, disapprovingly. Reading the room, the servant nodded and
then hastened from it, to send out the necessarily summons. Mobei-Jun turned his head back to frown at the two remaining contracts.

These were not so easily discarded.

The noble lineage of the sky clan was one which his family had been attempting to marry into for generations. Winged demons possessed unique lineage quirks, ones that would be... potentially quite valuable to pass along to Mobei-Jun’s scions. The sky clan had also been at odds with the north for centuries, on and off. His grandfather had brokered a contract for him that was part and parcel of securing a ceasefire... moreover, this contract was Mobei-Jun’s exclusively. Filling it would give him a powerful advantage over his uncle, because the sky clan would have an interest in backing his claim above his chief rival’s. If his heir was a product of the union, that backing would strengthen considerably; the sky clan would be very interested in seeing one of their bloodline succeed him, in the fullness of time.

Of course, that advantage could also become a liability. Demons were immortal, after all. Eventually, the sky clan might get impatient to see a scion of their blood take his position, and given their propensity for treacherous behaviour...

The ideal strategy would probably be to fulfill the contract, but produce no heirs. That would balance matters in perpetuity as sky clan was kept in check by the prospect of seeing one of their own in his clan’s line of inheritance, while also denying them an actual figure to rally behind or manipulate. That was the logical answer, but he still did not like it.

Mobei-Jun was still frowning at the particulars of the arrangement when the door to his study opened.

“My king…?”

Shang Qinghua!

For one inexplicable moment, Mobei-Jun almost shoved all the contracts off of his desk.

Then he caught himself.

What was he thinking? This was nothing to be kept secret. If anything… if Shang Qinghua was to
be involved in his affairs, then this was something he ought to know fully about.

Clearing his throat, Mobei-Jun nevertheless found himself glaring in agitation at the paperwork in front of him.

“Come in,” he bid.

“My king, I have the information you wanted about Lord Yue’s spring tournament,” Shang Qinghua said. He also sounded nervous, for some reason; barely concealed anxiety marred his expression as he hurried over, and presented a ‘full report’, as he tended to call such things.

“What’s wrong with it?” Mobei-Jun asked him, narrowing his eyes at the suddenly suspect papers.

“Nothing at all, my king!” Shang Qinghua replied, fidgeting. “The report is pretty comprehensive, actually. Ha! Of course there’s nothing wrong… say, what is my king looking at…?”

Reaching out, he almost grabbed one of the pages on his desk.

Mobei-Jun slapped a hand over it.

“Nothing!” he insisted, too.

Shang Qinghua jumped.

“Oh, sorry, my king! This humble servant shouldn’t have presumed!” he blurted, cringing.

Had he recognized the nature of the contracts?

Mobei-Jun looked at his cowering expression, and hesitated. Enmeshing their affairs… even if he could not involve himself in Shang Qinghua’s mysterious plans, he could still draw the man into his own dealings… surely that was considered a universal overture in its own way?
And… he needed counsel.

*Good counsel.*

Even if there was little to no chance of Shang Qinghua knowing enough about demon politics to be of use. He had learned never to bet against the man having some unlikely insight or piece of information.

“Sit,” he decided.

Shang Qinghua gulped, and dropped to the floor.

Mobei-Jun sighed.

“In the *chair.*”

“Right, yes, of course my king…”

Once Shang Qinghua had positioned himself into the chair across from him, Mobei-Jun silently handed him the betrothal contracts. The human peered at them for a moment, before his eyes widened. He glanced up at Mobei-Jun, and then looked back down, and leafed through the relevant agreements.

“My king is looking at… betrothal contracts…?” Shang Qinghua surmised.

Mobei-Jun couldn’t even be surprised. Those papers were written in ancient demonic script. How would a human know how to read it? It didn’t matter. Of course he knew. His gift was ‘knowing’.

Rather than bother asking, he just nodded in confirmation.

With a slight frown, Shang Qinghua looked a the papers in question again.
“These are for… the Second Young Mistress of the second branch of Sky Clan, and the Fifth Young Mistress of the golden demons’ main branch?” he surmised. So, he could definitely read them in detail, then. Mobei-Jun inclined his head in confirmation.

“Is my king thinking of getting married?” Shang Qinghua asked.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

An oddly conflicted look crossed the human’s face. Mobei-Jun reconsidered his answer.

“I do not wish to marry either of them,” he clarified. The contract with the golden demons would also be difficult to break - their clans had a longstanding alliance and agreement, and once again, the matter of his uncle was relevant to the issue at hand. If Mobei-Jun survived his ascension, in the event of his father’s death, then his uncle could finally be removed from the line of succession. Mobei-Jun wouldn’t even need an heir, he could simply appoint one of his younger cousins to that position for the time being, and happily rid himself of that scourge once and for all. But to be rid of him, he needed somewhere to send him. Few demons had sufficient means and ability to contain someone of his uncle’s standing, and leave Mobei-Jun relatively confident that he wouldn’t usurp them somehow.

The golden demons’ clan leader had an appetite for fetching ice demons, and was powerful enough to handle his uncle. She had expressed interest in him a few times, as well - ideally, Mobei-Jun could marry his uncle off to her, and happily wash his hands of the man as he disappeared into the machinations of her considerable inner court. Golden demons were known for their pettiness as well as power, however, and if he offended them… It would be bad idea on numerous fronts.

Shang Qinghua’s frown deepened.

“Then, my king has someone else in mind?” he asked, nervously.

“Yes,” Mobei-Jun confirmed. He sighed. “These contracts cannot be easily broken, however.”

Pursing his lips, Shang Qinghua nodded in agreement.
“They are advantageous matches,” he said. “My lord shouldn’t worry about them too much. Sky Clan’s Second Miss and the Fifth Miss of the Golden Bloodline are well acquainted with one another. They rescued one another from human cultivators a few years ago… if, erm. If Mobei-Jun is not interested in them, I doubt they would mind? Their stations don’t permit them to maintain the relationship they would like… so…”

Mobei-Jun’s eyebrows went up in surprise.

“They are bonded?” he guessed.

Shang Qinghua coughed.

“Not officially,” he said, with a shrug. Yet more things he couldn’t know… but that would undoubtedly prove to be true. “My king, if I may suggest, marrying them for purely contractual reasons shouldn’t bother these two. Particularly if my king is willing to turn a blind eye to where they pass their evenings. Although, Sky Clan’s Second Miss will be pressured into producing an heir for my king at some point… that, um. That could cause problems later on…”

Mobei-Jun considered the matter afresh, with this new information. Interests of that nature would certainly decrease the amount of trickery for his attention, but it couldn’t do away with it completely. The situation would have to be carefully managed, in the event that he upheld these contracts.

However…

He was gaining more and more faith in Shang Qinghua’s ability to manage it.

“I will consider the matter more,” he said, before finally turning to the report on Yue Qingyuan’s tournament. The human cultivator was one among several who had gained notoriety among the demonic noble circles. He and his new husband had recently humiliated Sha Hualing as well. Disrupting this event, where the human cultivators hunted demonic prey and, by necessity, meddled in their affairs, was an opportunity to make a strong statement. Especially if he succeeded in some regard where Sha Hualing had failed.

“My king…” Shang Qinghua said, hesitantly.

The human paused, and then looked down again.

“Just that… just, my king should be careful of who he meets, when making trips to the human world,” he said, shifting nervously in place. “There can be people with unexpected skills, and unknown natures, and it can be hard to tell at a glance what someone is really like. My king must make his statements, but, he shouldn't... make assumptions about anyone he meets.”

That, he had learned very well.

Was Shang Qinghua worried? Did he think Mobei-Jun would fail to challenge the likes of Yue Qingyuan?

“Do not doubt my strength,” he scolded.

“This humble servant would never!” the human exclaimed.

Good.

~

Tianlang-Jun’s halfbreed was a vicious, feral thing.
Mobei-Jun was surprised. The young man had seemed capable enough of civil speech when he had first glimpsed him, standing next to that human cultivator he seemed driven to protect. But since unlocking his demon blood and bringing him to hell, it was as if he had let a rabid wolf loose into his home. Luo Binghe fought anything that came near, spoke in snaps and snarls, and only calmed when he was thoroughly exhausted. Even after Mobei-Jun had made it clear that he was going to be trained, not killed, the wild behaviour barely abated.

It was disquieting. Luo Binghe had been raised among humans - was this some side-effect of human rearing coming into play? He wanted to ask Shang Qinghua, but with a rampaging demonic youth barely contained on the grounds, it was not safe for the human to be anywhere nearby. Luo Binghe was fast, and while he was untrained, his potential power seemed almost limitless. Mobei-Jun needed to either get him in hand or kill him. The potential advantages of allying with an heir of Tianlang-Jun’s were vast - even bowing to one would grant him more gains than his own actual title. But a mindless being of destruction was another matter entirely. If he could not regain his sense, then it would be better for everyone if Mobei-Jun put him down.

So far, while the potential was still too appealing to discount, the latter situation was looking more and more likely. Luo Binghe was vicious, remorseless, and barely capable of reason.

That was why going to check on his new project, and finding Shang Qinghua standing within striking distance of the thing, immediately put his heart into his throat.

Luo Binghe’s eyes were red. The demon mark on his brow was shimmering, but not yet glowing.

Shang Qinghua was standing across from him. The human’s posture was wholly submissive. His hands were outstretched, and he was speaking quietly, as if to a frightened animal.

“-Shen Qingqiu’s not dead, though…” Mobei-Jun heard him say.

Luo Binghe’s body language changed.

In a flash, Mobei-Jun crossed the room, grabbed Shang Qinghua, and flung him out of range. He was barely in time to stop Luo Binghe’s claws from ripping out the little human’s throat. Shang Qinghua yelped from being thrown. Luo Binghe switched targets, and with a cry of hatred, immediately started trying to rip Mobei-Jun apart instead. Unprepared for a fight, Mobei-Jun was stuck at a disadvantage as the young halfbreed landed three good blows in quick succession, before he could get a decent guard up. He didn’t hesitate to use his ice, freezing Luo Binghe’s limbs; but the ice shattered as Luo Binghe powered through on sheer force. The halfbreed's demon mark shone bright red. A column of black qi swept outwards from him, trying to rip Mobei-Jun apart.
Ending the fight required him to break all four of Luo Binghe’s limbs, and leave him wheezing furiously on the ground.

Mobei-Jun wavered in place. By no means uninjured himself.

Then he bent over and coughed up a lungful of blood.

“Shit,” Shang Qinghua was saying, quietly. “Shit, shit, shit, my king, what the actual fuck…”

Mobei-Jun motioned angrily at him.

“Get out!” he snapped.

“But you’re hurt-”

“OUT!”

Shang Qinghua ran to the courtyard exit, before he turned back, wringing his hands in distress.

“My king!” he called, plaintively.

Mobei-Jun let out an aggravated growl, and staggered over towards him. Luo Binghe would not take long to heal. He motioned at the room’s guards, glaring daggers at them - who let Shang Qinghua in? That was no accident, he’d have their spine for his mantle - before he grabbed the human by the scruff of his neck, and furiously dragged him down the corridor. Forgetting himself for a moment as his instincts continued to scream that Shang Qinghua and Luo Binghe were still in too close of a proximity to one another.

“Do not go near him,” he finally gritted out, once they reached an empty room.

Shang Qinghua nodded hurriedly.
“I didn’t think he’d be so… uh, touchy?” he ventured.

Mobei-Jun narrowed his eyes.

Then he bent over and vomited up some of the excess fluids from his internal regeneration. The blackened blood pooled hideously on the floor. He grimaced - bending over that time made him aware of his dislocated shoulder. Reaching up, he popped it back into place.

Shang Qinghua waved his hands anxiously at him.

“Come sit down,” he said. “I’ll get some medicine for my king to drink…”

Reaching out, Mobei-Jun caught his wrist.

“No,” he said.

He wasn’t letting Shang Qinghua wandered around until he figured out precisely who had tried to kill him via Luo Binghe.

“But my king-”

“Stay with me.”

Shang Qinghua’s expression wavered between various states of anxiety and annoyance. Mobei-Jun stared him down.

“Stay where I can see you,” he said, more gently.

Shang Qinghua’s eyes widened. Something in him seemed to shift in understanding - and then, surprisingly, in determination.
“My king…”

“You understand?” he asked.

“Yes. I won’t… won’t let anything bad happen,” the human promised. Reaching out, he patted at Mobei-Jun’s shoulder with a tentative hand. “Just sit here, my king. I’ll call someone and have them bring some medicinal things instead. Don’t worry… this servant will take care of the situation.”

Mobei-Jun’s brow furrowed. Take care of the situation…? He only needed to stay beside him. What was he talking about?

More plans that Mobei-Jun couldn’t know the nature of?

He thought of the statue in the shrine that he had destroyed, not long before they met. The beautiful, unknown figure, which the Ghost Sovereign claimed to worship as a god. Sword in one hand, flower in the other, expression mysterious but not... bad. Shang Qinghua wasn't a god, but... for some reason, he made Mobei-Jun think of one. And not in a bad way.

“Stay away from Luo Binghe,” he warned.

Shang Qinghua patted him again.

“Don’t worry, my king, this servant has no intention of fighting a feral half-demon,” he said.

No. He supposed not. Shang Qinghua was many things, but suicidal did not seem to be among them. With a sigh through gritted teeth, Mobei-Jun subsided, and let him to go to the door to call a servant and request some items brought. His tension only eased when Shang Qinghua came back to sit beside the chair he’d slumped in.

Somehow, this man was always finding him in vulnerable positions.
 Somehow, Mobei-Jun couldn’t bring himself to mind.

Chapter End Notes

Shang Qinghua's POV will probably come around at some point, too, of course! But probably it'll either by LBH's POV, some gratuitous smut, or the IWYWMH Bing-ge vs Bing-mei extra. ^_^~ Thanks for reading and commenting you guys!
Behold, the fruits of insomnia! Hope you guys like angst and pining! :D

Luo Binghe knew the exact moment when he realized he loved Shen Qingqiu.

It hadn’t happened right away, of course. When he was younger, his master had been cold and distant and more preoccupied with himself than with anything around him. Luo Binghe had still been grateful to him for rescuing him, and had done his best, but time and again it had only felt like he was failing to help. Back then he had wanted to get along with his aloof and impressive master - he just… hadn’t.

But then Yue Qingyuan had married Liu Qingge. And Luo Binghe had braced himself for his master’s rage and bitterness and ire, he’d expected the worst, only…

Shen Qingqiu had changed.

Luo Binghe didn’t have the right words to describe the change. Every time he tried, he failed. It wasn't complete but it was fundamental, not a single hair on Shen Qingqiu’s head was different, but something in him had become… utterly unlike how he was before. Importantly changed. Some of the kitchen servants had even joked that the man was possessed, that only Shen Qingqiu could be taken over by some demon spirit and have that be an improvement, and Luo Binghe had been angrier at the implication that his changed master was a demon than the assertion that he was so thoroughly terrible before.

In the end, he didn’t know what the change was, exactly. Whether it was just that Shen Qingqiu had fallen out of love with Lord Yue, or that his heart had broken and pieced itself together, or that some qi deviation had actually knocked his kindness loose from some place where it had gotten stuck before. It didn’t matter. As the days passed and the new behaviour stuck, Luo Binghe couldn’t even imagine his master going back to his old ways. He barely even thought about those days, unless he had to.
The morning he realized the consequences of this change was bright and clear, and Luo Binghe had gone to the kitchens especially early to try and get a good breakfast for his master. Shizun had to bribe the household staff to be nice to him, which seemed wrong to Luo Binghe on so many fronts, and it had made him increasingly wary of letting any of the other servants handle his master’s affairs. None of them were trustworthy. They still tried to skimp on some things, too, knowing that Lord Yue was too busy paying attention to his new husband to notice. Or care.

So Luo Binghe had gone before dawn to see what was actually in the kitchen stock. He’d happily found a fresh supply of lotus seeds from Yunmeng, but there wasn’t enough time to simmer a good breakfast dish or soup with them. He’d overheard some people in market talking about roasted lotus seeds, so he fetched a pan to test that instead. There was a supply of plain congee left from overnight, but Luo Binghe wrinkled his nose at the scent - he didn’t know exactly what was wrong with it, but he’d learned to trust his senses on food from a very young age. Even if he didn’t know why exactly something struck him as ‘bad’ or ‘good’, his nose was rarely wrong. He put the lid back on the pot and left the supply be, and instead found some decent broth, mushrooms, and bamboo shoots for a quick soup. Shizun liked meat with his meals, but since Luo Binghe had taken to raiding the kitchen, the head cook had started locking up and hiding the quality meat supply. Luo Binghe could always smell it, though. This time he hunted around until he found a nice piece of pork that had been secreted away. He sniffed it to check, but it was good. Satisfied, he carefully cut the meat and cooked it until it was tender. Shizun also liked his food seasoned, the way Luo Binghe preferred it, too. Some people didn’t like it that way, but he’d never understood why. That his master shared his taste was something that overjoyed him.

He let himself do what seemed best as he sniffed the available herbs and spices and stole little bits for the soup and pork.

When the lotus seeds had finished roasting, Luo Binghe tasted one. They needed seasonings too, he decided. He thoughtfully mixed a few good-smelling options together, and then tossed the warm seeds in a bowl with the resulting spice mix. He set them aside to finish the rest of the dishes, and the tea. When they were ready, Luo Binghe carefully added the cooked pork slices to the soup, poured the soup into a serving dish, grabbed a bowl of plain rice, put the roasted lotus seeds into a box for snacking, and grabbed the tea service, too.

Just as he was leaving the kitchen, the head cook appeared to head in. The light in the sky was grey. She rolled her eyes at him, obviously displeased.

“Why don’t you just get your master to use the kitchen in his own courtyard?”
Luo Binghe ignored the jab.

He’d thought about that, actually, but in the end, the private kitchen for their courtyard was very tiny and hadn’t been used in ages. Not since before Luo Binghe had come to serve. Even if the First Husband allotted them some funds for it - which they’d have to request - they’d need a lot of supplies and equipment for him to make anything other than the simplest dishes there. And Shizun was already using some of his money from selling his treasures to get extra food from the market. Luo Binghe was afraid that if they had their own kitchen, Shizun would just try to supply it out of his own pocket.

And why should he? His master was still a master of this estate, even if he’d been demoted. Yue Qingyuan was supposed to support him. It was shameful for a man of Shizun’s status to be pawning off his possessions in order to buy food. Was Lord Yue good for anything?

If it came to a little more inconvenience for Luo Binghe, or Shizun being more and more cut off from his rights as a member of the household, then there was no contest. He’d take the snide remarks and paltry attempts at sabotage every time.

Luo Binghe was thinking deprecating thoughts about all the kitchen workers as he quietly made his way into Shizun’s rooms, and set out the breakfast tray. With a glance towards the bed, Luo Binghe carefully lifted the lid from the serving bowl of soup. He wafted the scent to where Shizun was sleeping before he replaced the lid to keep warm, and watched in satisfaction as the man started to stir.

“Binghe?” he called.

“Good morning, Shizun!” Luo Binghe replied, keeping his voice quiet.

Sitting up in bed, Shen Qingqiu ran a hand down his face, and smacked his lips lightly. His expression was soft, and he smelled sleepy.

“What’s for breakfast?” he asked, in a muddled voice. “Smells nice…”

“Begging Shizun’s pardon, it’s just some simple soup with pork and rice, and a few roasted lotus seeds for snacking later,” Luo Binghe said.
“Sounds perfect,” Shen Qingqiu nevertheless assured him.

In the past, his master preferred very light breakfasts and tended to eat only an hour after he’d woken, and he’d never eat anything cooked by Luo Binghe’s hand - if he knew it was by his hand, anyway. But since they had shared that midnight chicken, his master had taken to eating anything Luo Binghe brought him straight away.

And there was another change, too.

As with every morning, Luo Binghe set out a tray for one and dutifully served his sleepy Shizun. And as with every morning since the wedding, Shen Qingqiu grabbed the extra bowl he always requested, and put half of everything into it before insistently handing it to Luo Binghe.

“Soup first, then rice,” he said that morning, since there was only the one extra bowl.

“This is Shizun’s breakfast…” Luo Binghe weakly tried to protest, but only got a stern look of disapproval for his efforts. No matter what he said, Shizun was so stubborn! He had to make double portions of everything, because even though it wasn’t supposed to be his food, no matter how much there was, his master always gave him half of it.

Resigned, he could only dig in, and secretly admit that he relished sharing meals. It was much nicer than quickly eating whatever he could get his hands on while running from one task to the other.

Shizun sipped his soup and sighed in satisfaction.

The sunlight coming in through the windows was soft grey, growing warmer by the minute. It cast green shadows where it passed through the foliage outside. The collar of Shen Qingqiu’s robe was loose, still somewhat mussed from sleep, and it revealed the long line of his neck, the pale skin of his throat and chest. The sense of peace and tranquility in the room was wonderful. Luo Binghe felt some of the persistent worries that dogged his steps move back, as if they weren’t really permitted to come into this place. He paused with his bowl halfway to his mouth, lost in the thought. Then Shizun looked back towards him and smiled.

It was a tiny, special sort of smile. The sort of expression that seemed like it could only have been prompted by the person it was being directed at.
A hand came down to gently pat his head.

“It’s good,” Shen Qingqiu told him.

Then he went back to eating, and Luo Binghe stared at nothing and everything in the room, his heart full with the realization that he… he loved this. He loved this morning. He loved his Shizun.

He’d felt love before. He’d loved his mother. This was different, but, Shizun was a different person - and he wasn’t a fool or a small child, he knew not all loves were the same. At that moment he wasn’t entirely sure what kind of love he felt, but he knew it was there. And that, since it had come, it would probably never leave either. No matter what happened, some corner of his heart would always belong to Shen Qingqiu. Some part of him would always live in this quiet moment, would always think of it when he wanted to find peace and calm.

It ached. A good ache.

He thought that if this could be what every morning of his life was like, then he would live happily.

~

*Don’t touch him.*

Luo Binghe bit the inside of his cheek to keep the words from spilling out, while he watched Yue Qingyuan settle a hand onto Shizun’s bare skin. The lord was being gentle, but after what had happened, how could that gentleness seem like anything but a mockery? His mind kept repeating the scene of Lord Yue kicking Shizun, and his eyes kept flitting to the poultice he’d placed so carefully over the wide, purple bruise, and then up, to the tense line of Shen Qingqiu’s shoulders.

Shizun had said to remove his hand! But Lord Yue just touched him again!
Luo Binghe could only glare at the floor, to keep from rushing over and pushing the lord away. Frustration simmered under his skin. Yue Qingyuan was a powerful and accomplished cultivator. He could bat Luo Binghe aside with hardly any effort, could kill him just like *that*, but still, he thought he should try. Except… if he made too much trouble, then Lord Yue would have him sent away.

And then who would look after Shizun?

Luo Binghe couldn’t do anything, but he could do even *less* if he wasn’t there to at least try to help.

It burned. It burned like the sting of failure he’d felt when his mother got sick. The familiar, crushing realization that he was too small, too weak, too *insignificant* to do anything other than just keep his head down and try to survive. He glared at the floor, but he didn’t leave the room. Even though he had been told to. He could pretend to be too stupid, say he’d just misunderstood, but if the only thing he could do would be to stand there and make sure someone was *watching*, then that was what he’d do.

He wasn’t going to leave Shizun alone with a person who’d attacked him.

*Go away,* he thought, viciously. *Just go away and leave him alone, don’t touch him, go away!*

When Yue Qingyuan finally left, Luo Binghe let out his breath and realized he’d been holding it for a long time. He could taste some blood in his mouth, from where he’d bitten his cheek.

On the bed, Shizun looked unhappy and uncomfortable.

He looked as helpless as Luo Binghe felt. It was a frightening pill to swallow. Against his lord, even Shizun could hardly do anything.

*I’m sorry,* he thought, as he quietly approached. The poultice for the bruise felt as though it had been sullied, somehow. The whole moment of healing and relaxation was tainted by the unwelcome of intrusion of the person who had hurt Shizun in the first place.

It was pure impulse that had Luo Binghe reaching over to smooth a hand over the spot that Yue
Qingyuan had touched.

Too bold! he thought to himself, almost as soon as he’d done it. He didn’t have any business touching Shizun like that! Hadn’t there been enough of people touching him without permission?

But as his hand smoothed over the same spot, the tension in Shen Qingqiu’s shoulders finally seemed to ease up again. His eyes slid shut. Luo Binghe swallowed, and reluctantly withdrew his touch in order to lift up the herbal poultice. Underneath the mire of his frustration, he felt a sudden flicker of hope.

If he could comfort Shizun…

It wasn’t much.

‘Not much’ was still better than ‘nothing at all’, though. And until things changed, it was all he could do.

~

Yue Qingyuan was alone in Shizun’s room with him.

Luo Binghe still lingered as close to the rooms as he might, and tried to listen. He couldn’t hear anything. But if Shizun shouted or screamed, he would be able to tell. His fists were clenched at his sides, his gaze locked on the door. He wasn’t sure if he was trying not to think about what might be going on in there, or if he was so that when it was finally over, he’d be able to think of what to do to make things better again.

What if the lord was ‘insisting’?
It had been years since Shizun let Lord Yue into his bed. Long enough that Luo Binghe had let himself grow a little complacent with the idea that, unless his master conceded, then Yue Qingyuan was probably not the kind of person who would force the matter. But coming at night, like this, which such a determined look on his face, commanding that Shizun’s servant being sent away...

His fists clenched further.

He should go back inside. He still wasn’t a match for Yue Qingyuan but the thought of… of…

What could he do?

Maybe he could light a fire. Then an alarm would go up and everyone would rush to put it out, and surely the lord would need to be informed, and he’d figure out who had set it but first he would need to go attend to it. There’d be a window of opportunity. Luo Binghe could take Shizun and some of his things and they could run.

Where to, though?

He didn’t have any place to take Shizun. And he knew firsthand how hard it was to end up on the streets with nothing.

Maybe he could go get Liu Qingge?

First Husband would probably help Shizun, even if he wasn’t liable to get jealous over Yue Qingyuan’s ‘attention’ these days. But it wasn’t as if the man could do much, his position was better than Shizun’s but he was still subordinate to the lord, too. Barging into the Second Husband’s rooms while he was being visited would require a very good reason anyway.

Time was passing. More than would be needed for a quick visit or word of conversation.

Luo Binghe had just resolved to light the fire and go with that plan when the door finally opened, and Yue Qingyuan emerged again.
The two of them regarded one another for a moment.

If the lord was surprised to see his husband’s servant waiting so close by, he didn’t show it. His expression wasn’t precisely pleased, but it wasn’t angry. He closed the door behind him. Luo Binghe gave him an assessing glance over, and permitted himself a little bit of relief - Yue Qingyuan’s clothes weren’t the least bit out of place, and his hair was still up. He might have still done something, but it was looking less likely.

He was ready to go in and check on Shizun when the man motioned at him, however.

“You,” he said. “Come with me.”

His tone brooked no argument.

Luo Binghe still hesitated for half a beat. He wanted to check on Shizun, to see what state he was in. Yue Qingyuan leveled him a look that reminded him just how much power the man still wielded, however, and without patience, began to walk down the path that would lead to his own courtyard.

With little alternative, Luo Binghe fell into step and followed him.

“Lord Yue has need of this servant?” he asked.

He tried to keep his tone polite, at least. If he got punished for insubordination, that would be bad.

Yue Qingyuan’s lips twitched downwards.

“There is an issue we need to discuss.”

That didn’t bode well. Luo Binghe’s mind raced with the possibilities as Yue Qingyuan led him to a quiet corner of the estate. The night was getting dark, and cold, and it didn’t escape his notice that there weren’t a lot of servants or people around. The bustling activity of First Husband’s courtyard was still going as he pushed his apprentices through the night, but that wasn’t close by; everywhere else felt silent and dark.
However, when they finally reached the lord’s courtyard, Yue Qingyuan had Luo Binghe brought into his study. The lord’s personal servants were still around, and the lamps were lit. He motioned for Luo Binghe to sit, and then produced an odd stack of papers.

“Does A-Luo know that this lord was a little younger than he is now when he and Second Husband got married?” the man asked him, tone pleasant enough.

Luo Binghe couldn’t keep from frowning. He directed his expression towards the surface of the desk instead.

“Yes,” he said, because he did know that. He’d read the letters and knew that Shizun and Lord Yue had gotten married as soon as they were of an age.

“It’s time for A-Luo to be making such considerations himself,” Lord Yue said.

Luo Binghe froze in place.

No.

“This servant would like to remain at his master’s side for a few years yet,” he said.

Lord Yue smiled at him. It wasn’t sincere.

“That’s fine,” he nevertheless replied. “This lord just wanted to make certain that A-Luo was aware of his options. Several inquiries after him have already been made, but some were misplaced. It is this lord’s opinion that A-Luo should be making the most informed choices for his own future at this point in time.”

The stack of papers was pointedly moved in front of him.

Luo Binghe stared at it. Then he looked back up at Yue Qingyuan.
The man nodded as if in encouragement.

“These are the offers that have been made for Luo Binghe. Some are quite interesting.”

“This servant wishes to remain at his master’s side,” he repeated.

“If that’s his choice, then this lord won’t protest,” Yue Qingyuan replied, folding his hands. He nodded at the papers again. “But A-Luo should know what he is declining.”

The two men stared at one another for a moment.

Their gazes locked.

Without breaking eye contact, Luo Binghe picked up the stack of papers in front of him, and then deliberately tossed them into the trash bin next to the desk. The candle he knocked over was an accident, because he wasn’t looking at what he was doing. But he didn’t regret it as the flame hit the parchment, and a whoosh of fire sparked up on a particularly thin, dry page, and began consuming the contents of the bin.

And also the bin. Which was wooden. Thick enough not to be a problem yet, but...

Lord Yue sighed. He raised a hand, and pinched at the bridge of his nose.

“Alright,” he said. “Put out the fire, please.”

“Right away, Lord Yue.”

“And then come back, this conversation is not over.”

Luo Binghe’s lips thinned, but he did as he was told. He took the bin outside to extinguish with some water and let the smoke dissipate, before returning to Yue Qingyuan’s study. The man was sitting upright again, and he looked calm. But there was some tension lingering around his shoulders as well. He subjected Luo Binghe to a long, assessing stare as he took a position standing
across from his desk.

“Loyalty is an admirable trait,” Lord Yue told him.

"When it is merited,” Luo Binghe replied.

Awkward silence followed for a moment.

“...If there is nothing else, then this servant has duties yet to attend to…” he began, wanting nothing more than to get out of the study and back to Shizun’s courtyard.

“If A-Luo wishes to remain by his master’s side, that can be arranged,” Yue Qingyuan told him.

He frowned, immediately suspicious.

Lord Yue regarded him steadily.

“Loyalty is an admirable trait, and there are few people who have extended it so thoroughly to Second Husband,” he continued. “This lord will be frank. Your eighteenth birthday is approaching. Matters will be changing. Keeping you on as a member of this estate is a possibility, perhaps even one that could be achieved permanently. This lord would be willing to make concessions, in light of your loyalty… provided that he could trust this loyalty to extend towards himself as well.”

Luo Binghe frowned.

Staying with Shizun permanently sounded good, but he wasn’t a fool. Lord Yue knew that was exactly what he wanted. The important part was what he meant by ‘loyalty extending to himself as well’.

“This servant is listening,” he allowed, as his tension and suspicion heightened.

“A-Luo’s end goals and this lord's own are not so different,” Lord Yue said. “We both want to look after Second Husband.”
Luo Binghe fought back a glare.

If Yue Qingyuan wanted to look after Shizun, then he could do so! Who was stopping him? Luo Binghe had never seen the man making Shizun breakfast in the mornings or dinner at night. He’d never seen him scolding the servants for neglecting their master. It was Luo Binghe who helped Shizun in and out of his carriages, who brought him cool drinks when the weather was hot, who ran his baths and brushed his hair and walked with him through crowded market streets to make certain that no one tried to steal his coin purse.

Yue Qingyuan, as far as he was concerned, was just an irritatingly interfering landlord, and he had been ever since the day he married First Husband.

Why did he even have to butt into their business? Why this, when he had ignored all the other problems that Luo Binghe and Shizun himself had been handling all along?

“Second Husband is safe here,” Lord Yue said, cutting into his thoughts. Luo Binghe tightened a fist at his side. “This lord has known him for a long time. Whatever A-Luo might think, this place is still the best place for him. And… Second Husband has told this lord that he wishes for his apprentice to know freedom and happiness. These are things which, potentially, may be granted to him here. So. If A-Luo would consider promising his loyalty to this lord, it’s possible that a compromise could be reached. One that would work in favour of Second Husband's happiness.”

Luo Binghe took a moment to parse out what was being said.

“This servant’s loyalty is to his master,” he insisted.

Yue Qingyuan sighed.

“Yes, but Second Husband’s loyalty is to his lord,” the man replied, patiently. “A-Luo cannot keep on in this world by promising himself to this lord’s own husband, it’s not how things are done. But. If he promises himself to this lord, then he may remain by Second Husband’s side, and attain a measure of power and freedom.”

The turn in the conversation threw Luo Binghe completely.
What was Lord Yue saying? He wanted Luo Binghe to serve him? Not indirectly, but first and foremost? But Luo Binghe didn’t have any rank or noble status to become some kind of retainer, and even then, it wouldn’t be typical for someone of Yue Qingyuan’s status to have such an alliance with a person from outside his family. Cultivation skills or no, Luo Binghe was just a servant. He could stay on as a member of staff, of course, but that would lessen his ‘power’, not heighten it. Becoming Lord Yue’s personal servant would also just mean he had less time to focus on Shizun instead. His best prospect for a life outside of constant servitude lay with marriage, the only way…

…The only way this made sense was if Lord Yue was offering to marry him.

Luo Binghe reared back in shock.

As if following the direction of his thoughts, Yue Qingyuan raised a forestalling hand.

“This lord has no interest in A-Luo’s physical charms,” he said, quickly.

Luo Binghe’s nauseating disquiet eased up just a fraction.

“What are you saying?” he couldn’t help but blurt, manners forgotten.

Yue Qingyuan regarded him for a moment, and then shrugged.

“Consider it another offer. Burn it like the rest, if you desire,” the lord finally said. “Though unless you do agree, this lord will not write it down. But, as Third Husband of this estate, A-Luo would be well-looked-after. He could continue to spend his days looking after Second Husband, as he liked, and would be able to exert better authority over the staff and management of estate affairs. And as said before, this lord has no interest in prevailing upon him for any consummation. The matter would be one of strategic social positioning. A-Luo would commit his skills and intelligence to the betterment of this household, and would extend his considerable loyalty to all its members. Which would also be in Second Husband’s best interests, since… as it happens, most people in this household seem to like him best of all anyway.”

A self-deprecating smile graced Lord Yue’s lips, then. There and gone a moment later.

Luo Binghe might have felt bad for him, that Liu Qingge so clearly liked Shizun better than he
liked Lord Yue. He might have. But, actually, he didn’t. Not even a little bit.

The offer still stunned him, though. He didn’t know what to say. Marry Yue Qingyuan? It wasn’t something he’d ever even thought about. Some of the maids gossiped about things like that. There were lords and ladies who sometimes noticed particularly pretty servants and decided to take them on as concubines. But that wasn’t Lord Yue’s style, and even if it had been, Luo Binghe never suspected that the man liked him in any particular way. Lately, in fact, they hadn’t been getting along at all.

Luo Binghe wasn’t very good at disguising his dislike.

Thinking of it strictly as an arrangement, though… on the one hand, he could see where it made sense. If it meant he could stay with Shizun, that he could act in Shizun’s interests, that he could still see him every morning when he woke up…

There were worse things he’d do, to keep that.

…Even so.

Marrying Yue Qingyuan would put him even more thoroughly under the lord’s power. There wouldn’t be much of a way out, in the end. And the thought of marrying this oathbreaker made his lip want to curl. He could make any promises he wanted, but in the end, what was to stop him from breaking them? Just like had done with his promises to Shizun?

“Think about it,” Lord Yue advised him. “There’s plenty of time still. That’s why this lord wanted to have this discussion now, in fact. A-Luo can even bring it up with Second Husband. Consider all of his options.”

Luo Binghe managed a nod, his whole body still tense. When the lord gave his dismissal, he didn’t hesitate to leave. His thoughts were all jumbled. Bring it up with Shizun? What, tell Shizun that his lord husband had offered to marry yet another man? And that this man was his own apprentice?

Was it a trap? Was Lord Yue trying to sow the seeds of distrust between them, by getting him to mention such a thing? Shizun may have fallen out of love with his oathbreaking lord, but that didn’t mean he was immune to hurt. He still obsessively puzzled over the deterioration of Lord Yue’s marriage to Liu Qingge, after all. Just that evening, he had looked so grieved by the idea that his heart had been cast aside for what was, it seemed, such a brief and shallow fling. He might put on a
good front for others, but he wasn’t truly indifferent.

How would he react to the idea that Lord Yue was prepared to marry Luo Binghe?

Moreover, how would he react to the idea that Luo Binghe was seriously considering accepting the proposal?

His frown didn’t abate all the way back to their courtyard.

Shizun’s bedroom was dark. Worried thoughts jumbled in his mind for attention. It would be rude to wake him, but after the events of the evening, Luo Binghe didn’t think he would get any rest at all if he couldn’t at least reassure himself that the man was alright. Quietly, he slipped into the room. The sounds of gentle breathing were the only thing to break the stillness. With barely enough light to see by, he silently padded across the floor, and stopped at Shizun’s bedside.

His master’s sleeping posture was really terrible.

He had somehow contorted himself diagonally across his bed, with his pillow scrunched up under his neck, and his arms akimbo. His hair had gone everywhere - Luo Binghe had neglected to tie off the end for easier sleeping - and the light inner robes he was wearing had opened. There was a line between his brows, as if he had gone to sleep with heavy thoughts.

Luo Binghe’s fingers itched to reach over and smooth it out.

He kept his hand firmly by his side, before taking one last moment to confirm that everything looked normal. The bed smelled of Shizun and sleep and not a trace of Yue Qingyuan. With a silent breath of relief, he made his way back to his own side room, and quietly shut the door behind himself.

He couldn’t tell Shizun, he decided. Not until he had more ideas and information. What if it upset him too badly?

What if it… made him change again?
It wasn’t worth the risk. Not when he didn’t even know what he was going to do for certain. Luo Binghe’s birthday was still a long way off, and there were cultivation events to deal with in the meanwhile. Something else could happen, something to change their fates…

It probably wouldn’t. But it could.

Settling into his room, Luo Binghe didn’t even bother trying to sleep, and instead took up a position and decided to meditate for the rest of the night.

~

The only thing keeping Luo Binghe alive was his anger.

It boiled in his veins like black fire, and hollowed out his stomach with the insatiable hunger to kill. Time passed in blurry hazes of red. Blood, pain, and violence. His moments of clarity were rare, but they felt sharp. Like knives poised above his targets. The peace of his days was gone, but that made sense - that was only fitting.

They had died on the same jagged ice that Mobei-Jun had speared through his master.

No more Shizun. No more peace.

Luo Binghe wiped the blood of the lesser demon that had challenged him that day off of his rough-hewn sword. He’d claimed the weapon from a fallen enemy. It was demon make - cheaply done, and already falling apart under the strength of his blows. But the edge could still cut. That was all that mattered until he could find something better. Or it broke. Whichever happened first.

A nervous voice reached his ears. Calling his name.
“Luo Binghe!” the owner cried. “Hey! Hey, hey there… buddy… you, uh, remember me, right?”

Luo Binghe turned, and spotted a human man heading his way. His mind vaguely itched in recollection. Mobei-Jun’s human. He could smell the ice lord’s energy on the man, some item or other that he carried. It made his lip curl in distaste. Mobei-Jun. When Luo Binghe killed him, it would not be a graceful death. As he had done to Shizun, so too would be done to him. A hundred times over.

But his human lackey was barely even worth his energy.

“Go away,” he said, and went back to wiping off his weapon. He glared at the slain demon. Nothing of value there.

Shizun’s voice tutted in the back of his mind.

_Binghe should have avoided that fight. Why waste energy on such fruitless opponents?_

_But Shizun, he challenged me! I can’t afford to lose face around these beasts._

_There will always be challenges. Binghe’s strength is true, it proves itself. He doesn’t need to defend his reputation so vehemently._

The scent of the human world clinging to Shang Qinghua’s skin made Luo Binghe’s chest ache. It almost smelled like the air in Shizun’s courtyard. The soft, clear scent of green things and running water and paper and ink, open canvas set out to paint a scene in the dewy morning air...

“You remember how this dear Uncle Shang of yours told you that… a person was alive, and you kind of… freaked out a little?” Mobei-Jun’s human asked him.

Luo Binghe’s softened mood immediately hardened again. He leveled a glare at the man.

“Speak his name again, and it will be the last thing you do,” he snapped. He’d seen Shizun fall. It wasn’t enough to watch such a thing, but now the likes of this Shang Qinghua was trying to use it to manipulate his hope towards some other end. Some scheme. **Liar.**
The man raised both of his hands. It was only then that Luo Binghe realized he was carrying some odd parcel about his person.

His eyes widened minutely.

That scent… it wasn’t just *like* Shizun’s courtyard…

In a flash, Luo Binghe moved, and grabbed the oddly wrapped object which had caught his eye. Shang Qinghua relinquished it without a fight, squeaking and flailing and nearly falling over himself to keep out of his reach.

“Take it, take it, I brought it for you!” he insisted. “Please don’t kill me!”

Luo Binghe pulled off the ungainly wrappings, and stared at the familiar scabbard. The weapon inside of it was bright and true as ever as he unsheathed the blade half an inch.

“…Xiu Ya…”

The ache in his chest grew to a burning pain. What was this wretch doing with shizun’s sword?! Had Yue Qingyuan just thrown it away? Let some filthy rat steal it to pawn off like ill-gotten goods? If Shizun’s sword could be taken, then was he even properly entombed!?

*You left him.*

*You left him pinned to that tree, for scavengers and demons to take…*

His eyes squeezed shut. It wasn’t his choice. But the results were still the same. His grip on Xiu Ya was tight, hands near trembling from rage, as he fixed his glare on Shang Qinghua. The man nearly wet himself, and promptly backpedaled away. He tripped and fell.

“It’s from him!” he said. “It’s a message from him. Things are just like I tried to tell you!”
“Where did you get this?!” Luo Binghe demanded, ignoring everything else as his blood-stained hands held Xiu Ya’s sheath. He was filthy. Too filthy to be holding Shizun’s sword, but he was damned if he would let it go or see anyone else touch it. Mobei-Jun's lackey wouldn't get it back!

“From him!” Shang Qinghua insisted again. “He’s not dead! Can’t you tell? Please young master, look at the sword closely! That’s a spiritual weapon! Does it look like its chosen wielder recently died?”

Luo Binghe halted.

Slowly, his red eyes turned back towards the weapon in his grasp.

Xiu Ya…

He drew the sword completely, and stared at the bright, lively blade.

It… it was… it was fine. Beautiful as ever. His mouth went slack, and his hands began to tremble for different reasons as he beheld the single, shining sword. A treasure incongruent to all the mire and darkness of the place it was in. Luo Binghe stared until his eyes watered, while Shang Qinghua quavered on the ground, and the blackened desert beneath his breastbone felt as though it had been graced with a few droplets of rain.

“Shizun…”

His gaze turned back towards Shang Qinghua.

“If this is a trick…!”

“It’s not!” the man assured him, ducking his head and raising his hands. “Young master, how could I pull off such a trick? That is your shizun’s sword! He gave it to me to bring to you himself. When I told him you were alive, he nearly raced off to come here on his own-”

“No!”
Shizun couldn’t come here! If he was alive, then he needed to stay that way, and stay far from the likes of Mobei-Jun or any of the other ilk that festered in this realm!

“Only nearly!” Shang Qinghua hastened to assure him. “He’s fine, this humble servant swears it! He’s back at Yue estate, hale and whole. He was badly injured during the tournament, but it was nothing the healers couldn’t fix.”

“I saw him pierced through the heart!” Luo Binghe protested, because he had.

“It was close,” Shang Qinghua told him. “Forgive this servant’s impertinence, young master, but after suffering so many blows to the head, is there not even the slightest chance of having seen it inaccurately…?”

Luo Binghe thought back.

At the time, after seeing Shizun get beaten so badly, and then watching him suffer such a terrible injury, he had not seen any room to doubt the outcome. It was what he had feared with a wretched, clawing terror from the first moment that Mobei-Jun laid a hand on Shizun, and as he failed to defeat the demon, all of it seemed to unfold exactly like the worst case scenario.

But Shang Qinghua had a point. Thinking back on it, he could barely tell where memory and nightmare had begun to bleed together with regards to that incident.

His eyes fell to Xiu Ya’s blade again.

The sword still felt like a welcome friend in his hand. Shizun had always freely let his apprentice wield it, if there was some reason to justify the action. Where some cultivators guarded their swords so assiduously that even touching them would be a grave insult, Shizun had only laughed and said that if it made sense, then of course Luo Binghe should make use of perfectly good weapon.

But if Xiu Ya was here, then… Shizun was defenseless.

Eyes widening in a sudden new fear, Luo Binghe sheathed the sword again. He lifted Shang
Qinghua from the ground, and furiously pressed it into his arms.

“Take it back,” he ordered. “You’ve left Shizun without his sword!”

Shang Qinghua yelped, and then flailed incoherently at him.

“Take it back?! Young master, do you know how many risks I took to bring it here?!” he said.

“I don’t care. Shizun needs Xiu Ya-”

“Young master!” Shang Qinghua interrupting desperately, surprising him with his boldness. The man looked on the verge of panicked tears. “This humble servant really cannot return it! He’s expected back at the Qi estate in a few hours. There’s no way for him to conceal such a treasure from prying eyes! If young master gives this humble servant Xiu Ya, he will be caught with Shen Qingqiu’s sword. What will anyone think about how a simple concubine came to possess the sword of Yue Qingyuan’s second husband? I met him in secret! If anyone finds out, does young master know what they will say about his Shizun’s conduct, to have met in secret with someone like myself?!”

Luo Binghe froze in place, once again thrown for a loop.

This…!

His eyes narrowed in anger.

“You’ve endangered Shizun!” he accused.

Shang Qinghua actually started to cry, then.

“This humble servant had no choice!” he insisted. “That person was dying of grief sickness over thinking Luo Binghe had perished. Of course I had to tell him it wasn’t the case!”

He…?
…Grief sickness?

Luo Binghe’s grip went slack.

Shang Qinghua hurriedly escaped from it, and then tried to straighten himself out a little.

“This humble servant informed that person of Luo Binghe’s situation,” the man hastily said. “Naturally, he also asked if this servant could bring back proof of his own continued existence to assuage Luo Binghe’s doubts on that front. This servant never expected he would be given Xiu Yu as proof of life! But he couldn’t refuse. Young master, your shifu wishes for you to preserve your own life, and knows the danger here is far greater than anything he might face. That sword is his faith and regard for you, as much as he could send with this lowly servant on short notice!”

Luo Binghe was reeling.

Shizun…

Shizun was alive. Shizun was alive, but he’d been dying anyway. Dying because he’d believed that Luo Binghe was dead, and the knowledge had pained him enough to break his heart. But now he knew the truth! Would he be able to recover? But he’d sent Xiu Ya to Luo Binghe. And he was doubtless weakened from his ordeals, and alone, with only that useless lord to depend on. And… Liu Qingge, probably. Who… would help, he could concede. If possible. But even so, for Shizun to sicken and suffer, and not have Luo Binghe to help him… what state was he in…?

Shizun had sent him Xiu Ya. Weak and vulnerable, he still gave up his only defense to help him.

Luo Binghe trembled in place.

What could he do? What he could do? There was only one path ahead that he could see. With Shizun’s sword, he would avenge Shizun’s suffering. And his own. He would fight his way back to his master’s side, and… and…

A plan started to form in his mind. The words he’d been hearing, about his ‘bloodline’ and ‘potential’ finally latching onto a concept that mattered, as more than just the offensive chatter of
the demons he wished to kill. Before him, he suddenly realized the opportunity that had been laid out. These demons that had troubled himself and Shizun… they would make their amends for it in more ways than one.

They would be his path to rescuing Shizun once and for all!

Reverently moving Xiu Ya to one hand, Luo Binghe leveled a more speculative look at Shang Qinghua.

The man watched him warily in return.

“Don’t make trouble for Shizun,” he warned. “His position is vulnerable right now. He doesn’t need anyone endangering him further.”

“Ah, young master… your shifu is safe at his home, and you are… fighting your way through hell…” the human said, uncertainly. “This servant would venture to say that young master has a more of a need for a good sword than his shifu, just right now.”

Luo Binghe scowled.

“Without his sword, Shizun must depend on the likes of his lord and lord’s First Husband to help defend him from anything that might happen,” he said. “He can’t lose favour. Don’t do anything to discredit him.”

Shang Qinghua gulped, but then hastily nodded.

“Absolutely understood, young master, this humble servant will guard that person’s reputation as if it were his own. Better, even!” he promised.

Luo Binghe gave him an assessing look for a moment, and then nodded.

“Keep to your word… and I will repay this favour,” he finally promised.
After all, this odd human had brought him Shizun’s message, and potentially even saved Shizun’s life. As the fire in Luo Binghe’s veins began to cool a little, and prevailing despair gave way to unexpected hope, he found himself much more capable of recalling things like debt and kindness.

_Don’t make unnecessary enemies, or needlessly alienate potential allies_, Shizun’s voice reminded him, in the back of his thoughts.

_This servant understands._

~

Hell was still hell, and pain was still pain. It had gotten both harder and easier to bear, somehow, since Shang Qinghua brought Xiu Ya to him.

The gleaming blade sliced through the thick hide of the GeckoPhant he was fighting. Finally finding purchase on a weak point of its thick grey scales, he could finally gut the monster and be done with it. His chest heaved, exerted but uninjured this time, while his massive prey let out a terrifying bellow and fell over. It didn’t take much longer to die. Thick, oozing blood spurted from the wound. Luo Binghe’s eyes gleamed as he pressed his lips to Xiu Ya’s gore-spattered blade.

“Thank you for the meal, Shizun,” he said.

Then he set about carving up his kill. Xiu Ya’s blade wouldn’t dull easily, but Luo Binghe still used a nicked shortsword he’d scavenged earlier for the menial work, not daring to insult Shizun’s sword unless absolutely necessary. In this case, it certainly wasn’t. Luo Binghe slid his smaller blade under the thick, armored scales, and skinned his kill with was much brute force as finesse. He carved out chunks of the meat and ate them raw as his worked, setting aside the pelt - too split by wounds for a full piece, but still good enough to trade for something - and then harvested the tusks and suction cups.

His mouth was bloody and his mind was distant as a figure approached him, heading down the slopes of the bone hill nearby.
“Young master!” Shang Qinghua called.

Luo Binghe glanced around. This close to the palace, there wasn’t much to worry about. He’d lured the Geckophant out himself. But it always paid to keep an eye out.

“They said young master was around here,” Shang Qinghua greeted, breathing heavily from exertion and carrying…

Luo Binghe stilled.

Then he jumped over the carcass remains, and pointed his bloody knife at the human.

“What is Shang Qinghua doing with the blanket from Shizun’s bed?!” he demanded.

He couldn’t smell it past the gore and offal from his kill, but he recognized the material at once. That was Shizun’s own blanket! He’d hand laundered it himself! Shang Qinghua nearly dropped it. Nearly dropped it on the filthy ground, before he seemed to realize what a bad idea that would be, and caught it instead.

“Young master’s shifu sent it with me!” he declared, hurriedly. “He insisted! It’s a care package for young master! And there’s a letter, too!”

Luo Binghe halted, weapon still pointing accusingly, but furious energy vanishing in a puff of smoke.

Blinking, he looked down at himself. Then at the scraps from his kill. Then at Shang Qinghua and the… ‘care package’…

…The scavengers could have his scraps, he decided. He was too filthy to touch anything from Shizun right now. Motioning at Shang Qinghua, he started back towards the palace.

“Don’t drop that! Keep pace!” he demanded.
Shang Qinghua muttered some deprecating things, but Luo Binghe didn’t care to listen, and the man did as he was told.

Not bothering to wipe the blood from his face, Luo Binghe projected an aura of general menace and threat that kept most of the grounds clear for them, while Shang Qinghua staggered nervously behind him. The human didn’t falter too much, at least - he was probably accustomed to dealing with such ambiance around Mobei-Jun, too. Luo Binghe led him swiftly into the stark chambers he’d earned, since rising in Mobei-Jun’s ‘esteem’.

Or rather, since he’d broken every bone in the demon lord’s body.

Soon he would be strong enough to finish the job. Then he would set out to reclaim his birthright from his father’s tomb. Alone, most likely - but that didn’t daunt him. He’d accomplish whatever he had to in order to achieve his goal.

But that was for later. For the time being, he just ignored Shang Qinghua’s stammering as he led him into his room, and motioned for the man to go sit.

“I need to clean up,” he said.

“Er, right,” Shang Qinghua agreed.

Luo Binghe left the rooms again to head for the water pump. It was the nearest and quickest way to clean himself off. He scrubbed under his nails and through the bloodied strands of his hair, scraped the worst of it from his clothes, and then when he went back to his room, changed into something as clean as he could find. His skin felt icy from the chill of such cold water, but his blood was warm with excitement.

‘Care package’.

Shizun had sent a package to show his care.

Like someone might send to a lover who was away at war.
When he was clean, Shang Qinghua all but thrust the package into his arms, as if grateful to be rid of it. Luo Binghe narrowed his eyes at the ungracious treatment, and listened to the man babble about time and getting back and leaving. Despite saying so, however, Shang Qinghua lingered where he was. Watching as Luo Binghe turned his attention to the blanket and its contents.

As he unfolded things, he felt his breath catch.

Shizun’s blanket wasn’t freshly laundered. He could smell it. The material was soft from use, achingly familiar, and it smelled of sleep and of Shizun. It smelled like early mornings and dappled sunlight and soft, special smiles. Like home.

Luo Binghe set it carefully down on the seat beside him, and wondered if there was a way to preserve the scent before it faded. His throat was suddenly too tight to speak, and he turned back towards the other things; too keenly aware of Mobei-Jun’s spy in the room.

But the rest wasn’t any easier. There was a pouch of silver ingots - Shizun! Luo Binghe had little need for currency where he was. What was that man thinking? Giving his money away, what if he needed it? He probably did, at this time more than ever, with those ungracious estate servants and no one to go to the market for him, or cook him his favourite foods, or help him take care of the accounts…

Luo Binghe lifted up the bag, and carefully tucked it into his belt. He’d find a safe place to keep it, and then return it all to Shizun as soon as he could.

The biggest item in the parcel was wrapped twice over. Green lotus leaves formed a familiar casing that nearly made Luo Binghe’s heart stop altogether. He reached careful fingers out, and undid the wrappings just enough to confirm.

Chicken.

Shizun had sent him a whole chicken, trussed and wrapped in lotus leaves.

Just like the one that Luo Binghe had cooked for him the night of Yue Qingyuan’s wedding to Liu Qingge. The first meal they’d shared.
Shizun!!

He remembered!!

He remembered… that night… and he’d sent… he’d sent to Luo Binghe…!

His lips trembled, and something in his chest ached, something in his heart cleared, as he remembered sneaking in that rare meal. Determined to do something right, to help Shizun and live up to his faith in him. And he’d done it! He’d succeeded! That night, for the first time, Luo Binghe had done something completely right by both Shen Qingqiu’s reckoning and his own.

The message was clear.

Shizun believed that Luo Binghe could do this, too. That he would succeed again. That he could overcome these difficulties and save them, and that when he came to Shizun in triumph, Shizun would share the victory alongside him!

He swallowed heavily. His vision blurred a little. It took him a moment to even notice the small envelope that had fluttered free of all the unorthodox packaging.

His heart stilled at the sight of it.

Shang Qinghua cleared his throat.

“Young master will have to destroy the letter once he’s read it,” he said, apologetically. “If correspondence like that fell into the wrong hands, it would go very badly for all of us.”

Luo Binghe could only manage an absent nod of understanding. Shizun sent him a letter. He wanted to keep it, more than anything… his mind flitted to the box of letters from Yue Qingyuan, with a sense of resentful envy. But, he wouldn’t endanger Shizun.

He’d just have to memorize it instead.
Breaking the seal, Luo Binghe reverently opened the letter up.

Then he started to read.

~

There was no way to preserve the scent on the blanket.

Luo Binghe did the next best thing, and wrapped himself up entirely in it when he went to sleep that night. The scent of Shizun surrounded him. It mingled with the salt of his tears as he finally gave in to his emotions, alone in the dark of his room, and wept. He slept with Xiu Ya held to his chest, but the hyper vigilance that had kept him startling awake at the slightest sounds no longer had as fierce a hold on him.

Even the Elder Dream Demon seemed to sense that this was not a night to bother him. Not yet. In the morning, Luo Binghe would do as Shizun had asked, and take more steps to guarantee the success of his plans. But for that night, he didn’t want the intrusions or compromises. With the blanket and Xiu Ya, and his stomach warm from the whole chicken he’d devoured - cooked carefully beforehand, while Luo Binghe snapped and snarled at any demons who came too close at the scent - he felt as close to peace as he’d gotten since Mobei-Jun took him.

He felt like he could imagine Shizun lying on his straw mattress with him. Pressed to his chest, just like Xiu Ya. Luo Binghe’s breaths stuttered, but he didn’t chase the thought away. Instead he indulged in it. Imagining what it would be like to tangle their limbs together, and bury his nose in Shizun’s hair, and feel his bare skin warm beneath his hands. He drank in the fantasy, lost in the sheer comfort of it. He would never wish that Shizun was in this place, this dark palace with its lack of anything suitable to him, but, he couldn’t help wanting his presence anyway.

Shang Qinghua had told Shizun about him. *All* about him. Not just about him being alive, but his… his background, too.

Shizun knew he was a demon.
Shizun still sent him the blanket from his bed, rich with his scent, and the chicken they’d once shared, the silver from his purse, and a letter telling him to make the most of his cursed lineage. To seize his advantages, so that he could become a Demon Lord, and the only reason he would possibly want Luo Binghe to become a Demon Lord would be because it was the answer. Not just for himself, but for both of them.

Shizun… this had to be… because Shizun loved him too, right?

More tears spilled out, as Luo Binghe curled tighter around Xiu Ya, and finally fell into a deep and restful sleep.

~

“Didn’t I tell you not to make trouble for Shizun?!”

“Don’t kill me! It wasn’t my fault! I’m too young to die! Young master, this humble servant did his best, and young master’s shifu is fine, really, Yue Qingyuan went easy on him because he and Liu Qingge are now convinced that this servant has been taking advantage of his grief-”

“What did they do? What’s happened to Shizun?” Luo Binghe demanded.

Shang Qinghua was cowering in front of him. Mobei-Jun hadn’t put himself between him, but he was hovering close by just the same. His territoriality over the man was impeded only by his subordination towards Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe had no doubt that if he were anyone else, he wouldn’t have gotten this far in menacing the weird little concubine. And even if he tried to take action, he’d probably end up fighting both of them; Mobei-Jun’s submission forfeit over his bumbling minion.

But for the time being that line hadn’t been crossed, and as it stood, his anger over Shang Qinghua getting caught was the only thing keeping him from worrying more than he could take.
Adultery - sufficiently suspected - was considered just cause for execution, after all.

“Confinement, just confinement, that was his punishment,” Shang Qinghua told him.

On the one hand, that was definitely better than some of the alternatives. But on the other, Luo Binghe couldn’t say that his worries abated all that much. Confinement was difficult. The courtyard for it was sparse and sad, and it left Shizun greatly at the mercies of the estate staff. Who would be looking after him? What were his current servants even like?

Was he eating? Were the courtyard sconces being properly stoked? Was he cold? Lonely? Had he suffered any additional punishments? Visions of Shizun venturing out of his confinement, hungry and neglected, and trying to sneak into the kitchens, only to be caught and beaten black and blue for violating his punishment, pressed viciously at his mind’s eye. It was hard to remember that Yue Qingyuan probably wouldn't go that far. Harder to believe in it, to feel confident in some minimum standard of treatment without proof or reminder.

He needed to know more.

But Shang Qinghua didn’t have the answers. The man hadn’t even been able to avoid being caught. Luo Binghe felt a pang of guilt, even as he glowered at his cringing figure. He’d let this go on, accepting Shizun’s gifts, not barring Shang Qinghua from trying to meet with him...

It was his fault, too.

Little though he wanted to admit it.

For a moment he still contemplated taking it out of Shang Qinghua’s hide. He glanced at Mobei-Jun. The ice demon’s neutral expression was persistent, but his brows were furrowed, too. The betrayal of his agitation almost made the odds worse for Shang Qinghua. Even though Luo Binghe and Mobei-Jun had come to an understanding while raiding his father’s tomb, he had not forgotten just who was to blame for this entire fiasco. The only saving grace was that having his demon blood unlocked had opened the door for Luo Binghe to change his fate, and in so doing, change Shizun’s, too. Mobei-Jun's life wasn’t granted. For the time being, however, it was on loan - pending a discussion with the other person he’d wronged.

But part of Luo Binghe was sorely tempted to beat Shang Qinghua black and blue, and make
Mobei-Jun watch helplessly the whole while. He was strong enough to manage such a thing.

In the end, he relented.

“Get out of my sight,” he said.

Shang Qinghua practically flew to hide behind Mobei-Jun, who didn't hesitate to obey the dismissal. The ice demon only took the time to nod and keep his composure as they left, acting as befitting someone of rank and power - but he couldn’t completely disguise the faint tang of fear sweat, barely discernible from where Luo Binghe stood, and watched the pair leave.

When they were gone, he drew in a long breath, and let it out again.

Ever since he began training with the Elder Dream Demon, he had been trying to reach Shizun through his sleep. But it was difficult. Luo Binghe had many elements he needed - the will, knowledge of this target, a feeling of connection and a strong conviction to achieve his goal - but proximity played a role in such things too. It was always easier to manipulate the dreams of those who were close by. The demon realm and the human realm were technically different worlds. The borderlands was the place where the two worlds overlapped and crossed over, making it possible to travel from one to the next, but apart from them, there was no shared geography between the two places. And Shizun had no demon blood to tie him back to this realm.

Essentially, with Shizun in the human world and Luo Binghe in the demon realm, the distance between them was infinite. So that made things a little hard.

But under these new circumstances, Luo Binghe couldn’t afford to just assume things were fine. If he wanted to reach Shizun, the best option would be to make a trip to the borderlands. It was a bad time for it. Things were coming to a head on many of his plans, and the renovations were still underway, and he didn’t have enough subjects he trusted as thoroughly as he needed to in order to delegate some things. Traveling to the borderlands would also make him a more open target for some of the demon lords who weren’t too happy about his ascension, too. Those people had spies all over the place. Sooner or later, he’d run into trouble.

Nothing would matter if he lost Shizun, though.

“Sha Hualing,” he called.
The demonic noblewoman answered his summons readily, emerging from one of the side chambers.

“Yes, Lord Luo?”

“Grab a few lackeys you can trust,” he ordered. “We’re going on a trip.”

“At once.”

He could take this opportunity to test Sha Hualing’s loyalties while he was at it. The noble lady was among those who had wronged Shizun, after all - but who had also proven their worth after the fact. Luo Binghe wasn’t unfair. If she and Mobei-Jun helped enough to rescue and protect Shizun, then he would put in a good word for them later on, when their lives were in his master’s hands.

With a nod to himself, he checked Xiu Ya’s presence at his side, and then turned to set out.

One way or another, before he came back, he will have spoken to Shizun again for the first time in much too long.
Here, while we're waiting for the more substantial stuff to finish, you guys can have some smut! :3

Shen Qingqiu was not, generally speaking, a man who liked to be very busy.

He did like having things to do. Just lazing around all day had its perks, but too much of it got boring. However, if given the choice between just going about things in a leisurely fashion, while taking the time to indulge in occasional bouts of excitement or diversions onto other interests, versus hurriedly accomplishing one goal after the other, Shen Qingqiu would take the former option every time.

Luo Binghe was the opposite, on that front. It wasn’t that the man couldn’t take breaks or indulge in some relaxation, but being idle for too long would start to make him anxious. And, like most fictional protagonists, Luo Binghe chased the high of accomplishment like an addict craving his latest fix.

In retrospect, Shen Qingqiu should not have been so surprised to discover his husband’s praise kink.

But that was something he tried Not to Think About, especially not during daylight hours and times when he actually was busy, and would just be making trouble for himself if he let his thoughts wander anywhere near that direction.

The past few days he had to actually see to a whole host of matters that couldn’t really be delayed, or put aside at a whim. There were guests from one of the questionably-allied demon clans coming for the demonic version of ‘diplomatic talks’, and while Shen Qingqiu’s involvement in that was fairly minimal, he was still required to make an appearance. The visit hadn’t happened yet, but making an appearance meant not making an ass of himself, so he had spent the day figuring out what etiquette he should actually observe with this group. And what he shouldn’t put up with. That was usually the important thing with demonic diplomacy. Getting a handle on that required tracking down the demons that actually had the right information, and then making sure he had more than one source of said information for everything so that he couldn’t be tricked into offering
the wrong overtures.

Demons were, funnily enough, less prone to setting social traps than human nobles. But not by a wide margin.

He would have liked to have just asked Binghe, really, but the thing about Luo Binghe was that he was *ridiculously OP*. In demonic society, this basically meant he could make his own rules - and therefore very rarely had to adjust to other peoples' standards. Shen Qingqiu, on the other hand, was *just really strong* - which meant he actually had to moderate his behaviour to keep face and not unwittingly tarnish his reputation, or provoke a challenge. Not that Binghe would let anything terrible befall him. But it was better to avoid problems altogether, wherever possible, and not rely on that sort of thing too excessively. For one thing, it could still cost them an otherwise promising alliance to fuck it up badly enough. For another, he had his own pride and wasn't interested in needing to be rescued all the time.

Most demons who gave him a hard time were also indirectly trying to give Luo Binghe a hard time, too. Which brought everything back to that whole ‘reputation’ issue and matters of dignity and appearances. It was a balancing act. If Luo Binghe protected him too much, Shen Qingqiu looked weak, and ironically, ‘easier’ to target. If he protected him too *little*, Shen Qingqiu looked disposable, and again - easy to target. And reality wasn’t always in accordance with appearances. Hence the need for a lot of research - to make matters even more complicated, different demon clans often had different standards for things like ceremonial greetings, partings, guest and host exchanges, and so on and so forth.

Shang Qinghua swore up, down, and sideways, that he’d never put *this* much detail into his demon politics, and therefore couldn’t be blamed for something that was probably the result of a few passing sentences like ‘in demon culture there was a chaotic variety of traditions’. Shen Qingqiu grudgingly conceded that he probably wasn’t accountable for the *specifics*, but still. He could have just made them all unrealistically homogenized! Wasn't that what most authors did?

The thought left him internally grumbling every time he needed to ferret out the standards of a new horde of demonic nobility. Some things were consistent, but some clans took, say, saluting or kneeling or kowtowing in completely different ways. And gift-giving. Demons were rampantly inconsistent about the implications of gift-giving. Also, order of address. The last time they’d had guests Shen Qingqiu had greeted the wrong demon first and Luo Binghe had ended up fighting three of them before they all calmed down again.

And of course after running around trying to track down one of Sha Hualing's elders who’d had dealings with the relevant clan in the past, *then* there was a whole host of little matters to be seen to. Things that either himself or Luo Binghe could reasonably handle. But since Shen Qingqiu was moving about the palace, the steward flagged him down for them. It was just as well, Binghe had been running himself ragged the past week overseeing the palace renovations, among several other
matters, so however little he might have liked to attend to such tasks, Shen Qingqiu was at least glad
to get them out of the way.

In the afternoon, he had to meet with some of Binghe’s human contacts - or rather, supervise a meeting with them, which wasn’t something he could forego since most of the demonic retainers still had troubles with the whole ‘physically menacing the humans will not go over well’ concept. Shen Qingqiu would suspect them of being deliberately obtuse except that they really did seem to just fuck it up a whole lot.

So between one matter and another, it was later than usual when he finally returned to his
courtyard. Tired and ready to be done with everything.

Binghe would probably show up for dinner soon, he thought. His courtyard’s ambiance was quite welcome after the long day. It felt relaxed and tranquil when compared to the more demonic aura of the palace proper, a literal breath of fresh air in some respects. Ben Ben had fallen asleep in one of the flowerbeds. His tiny dog feet were kicking as he ran in his dream.

Shen Qingqiu watched him for a minute, determined he was fine, and left him to his nap. He sighed in relief as he stepped inside.

Then he came up short in surprise.

His rooms were not always impeccably kept in the demonic realm. It couldn’t be helped - demon servants weren’t naturally well-versed in how to attend to humans, and Luo Binghe being the way he was, he preferred to handle a lot of the chores and looking after of the place personally. But given how busy things could get, a little untidiness was inevitable. Especially since Shen Qingqiu was maybe, perhaps, not the absolute best at picking up after himself.

Maybe.

Even so, the neatness levels never degenerated very far. Both he and Binghe preferred to have things be clean. So it was rather noticeable, then, that a wealth of flower petals had somehow ended up scattered all across the floor.

The lamplight was low.
A sultry scent filled the air, like a delicate, floral perfume. Elusive but unmistakable. Enticing.

Frowning, Shen Qingqiu pulled Xiù Ya from his belt. Had some random succubus broken in…?
He made his way warily to the bedroom, and then towards the shadowy curtains of the bed.

When he saw what was there, every thought in his head abruptly turned off.

Alright.

So.

Perhaps a married man, upon coming home to find his chambers strewn with candlelight and flower petals and seductive fragrances, probably should not have jumped to the conclusion of ‘succubus’ before ‘husband’. But in his defense…

…He had no defense.

Luo Binghe was lying on the bed. His hair was down. He was dressed in a sheer golden robe. The material left very little to the imagination as he reclined backwards, with one leg bent, and a hand trailing the edges of the robe’s collar. He looked at Shen Qingqiu from under his long lashes, head tilted to permit the angle, as he bit his bottom lip.

There was some shimmery paint on his eyelids.

There was *paint* on his *eyelids*.

Shen Qingqiu put Xiù Ya back down. He didn’t need a weapon. Even though he was still fairly certain that a sex demon had gotten into his room, that sex demon was Luo Binghe, so, no stabbing. Right. His throat bobbed as he gulped, and tried to figure out where to put his eyes. On his husband? Probably? He was allowed to do that, he was pretty sure, but it still felt like it should be illegal somehow…

“Husband,” Luo Binghe said. He reached to his waist, and pulled the flimsy little piece of material that could barely be called a ‘belt’ away. The sheer robe fell open. “Husband has been so busy,
lately. This servant missed him, and thought he might deserve a reward for making so many efforts.”

His skin was glistening. Like he’d massaged oil into it and… he probably had… that would explain where the perfumed scent was coming from…

Shen Qingqiu was honestly so unprepared for this. Were they not going to have dinner, then?

Admittedly, the tone of his hunger had just completely changed, so for once he didn’t feel all that disappointed to miss an opportunity for Binghe’s cooking. Or, well, not very disappointed. His mouth was dry. He licked his lips.

Luo Binghe crooked a finger at him.

“Husband,” he called. Like a siren, luring him to his doom.

When Shen Qingqiu still couldn’t quite manage to move - he felt like his brain was still desperately trying to reboot or find the right file for dealing with this situation - Luo Binghe pushed his robe open a little further. The expanse of his revealed flesh looked firm but still inviting, somehow sweet. And he was already hard. His considerable length stood plainly at attention. The hand he’d been toying at his collar with slipped down towards it. An excess of oil glistened between his thighs, as the low light flickered across his skin.

“If Husband wants to watch, that’s fine too,” Luo Binghe purred.

Then he closed a hand over himself.

Shen Qingqiu moved without thinking. Some weird impulse, some undefined thought of want, drove him forward where the rest of his brain had failed him. He caught his husband’s wrist, and pulled it away from himself. Luo Binghe went utterly slack, letting him do as he pleased. The only falter in his submissiveness was the flash of triumph in his eyes.

It caught Shen Qingqiu’s attention, and before he knew it, he’d reached his other hand out to cup his husband’s cheek. Somehow that glimmer of triumph just made the whole scene that much more overwhelming.
“Binghe,” he said. His voice was rough, as though he’d already been wrecked.

Luo Binghe’s eyes widened. Triumph morphed into something surprisingly vulnerable, as his cheeks flushed, and his lips trembled just the barest amount. Shen Qingqiu tilted his hand and brushed his thumb across the plush surface of them, and tightened his grip on Luo Binghe’s opposite wrist, before he gave in to the stirring heat in his belly and leaned down to capture a kiss.

Some part of him wanted to scold his husband for pulling this stunt, and nearly knocking him senseless in the process. How was he supposed to live out the rest of his days knowing he could come home and potentially find this waiting for him? Binghe had just made years of future mischief for him! Now every time he was delayed at something, he’d have to think, ‘is my husband going to be waiting in bed for me, covered in oil and flower petals?’

He was going to have so many inconvenient boners! So many!

‘Irritation’ didn’t quite succeed at describing his sentiments, but it meant that his kiss was bolder and more assertive than usual. His gently bit at Luo Binghe’s bottom lip, and swallowed a moan from him as he swept his tongue reproachfully into his mouth, while he slipped his hand into his husband’s loose hair and even gave some of the locks a light, scolding tug.

Luo Binghe moaned again. His free hand came up to clutch at Shen Qingqiu’s back.

“Yes,” he murmured, when the kiss broke off. “Yes, yes, Husband please, Husband should use this servant however he likes…”

Shen Qingqiu shivered.

This man-!

“Don’t say such things,” he couldn’t help but scold. His own voice still sounded rough; nearly distressed. “Binghe could get hurt, making such bold offers…”

Luo Binghe chuckled, just a little.
“If Husband wants to hurt his Binghe, then Binghe will accept the pain with thanks,” he purred, running a hand up and down Shen Qingqiu’s back. The touch made him feel like a thousand electric ants were racing up his spine.

The words, on the other hand, made him balk.

“I don’t want to hurt-!”

The whole prospect of causing pain or doing damage nearly reversed the mood in on itself. But then Luo Binghe smiled at him, as if he had already known what his answer would be, and leaned up to press an incongruously sweet kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“That’s good too,” he said. “Whatever Husband wants, his devoted lord and servant also desires…”

Shen Qingqiu’s hand trembled a little where it was holding his husband’s wrist. Lord and servant were opposites! This man, always mixing these things up…

Sometimes, even living it, he had troubles fathoming how this life was real. How Luo Binghe was real. He leaned in to kiss him again, to remind himself of it. Letting go of his wrist, he rested his hands on the firm solidity of his husband’s shoulders instead. He was so strong. Touching him made it impossible to forget it. Luo Binghe was OP as hell, but he was also Binghe, with his vulnerable eyes and trembling lips, his tender heart that broke and bled and inexplicably beat so strongly for him…

Somehow Shen Qingqiu blinked and found himself kissing the life out of his husband, straddling him on their bed, pinning his arms down beneath him again. He was still fully clothed, while Luo Binghe’s sheer robe was only still ‘on’ him in the sense of the sleeves being bunched around his armpits, and the material being trapped under his back. His lips were getting redder and redder from kisses and nips, and his cock was pressed up against Shen Qingqiu’s thigh.


Shen Qingqiu tightened his grip on his arms a little, and with a soft sound that was suspiciously aroused, Luo Binghe obediently quieted.
He was definitely not thinking about why, but being fully clothed and in command of the situation while his husband was looking so debauched and vulnerable beneath him, all that power and strength equal parts evident and absent as his eyes raked across his naked skin… was… maybe doing things for him…

…Maybe.

Shen Qingqiu’s gaze flitted over the scene, before he leaned in again, and kissed his husband much more tenderly.

“Binghe,” he sighed against his lips. “…Binghe is… much too compelling…”

Luo Binghe whimpered.

The oil on his skin was definitely ruining Shen Qingqiu’s clothes, but somehow he couldn’t manage to care. He shifted, and his husband’s cock brushed against him, startling another ridiculously erotic sound out of the man beneath him. His heart sped up. The heat pooling in his stomach was becoming a familiar discomfort between his legs, but if he reached for his belt he’d have to let go of Binghe’s wrists, and he felt like he didn’t want to do that yet. Instead he ground their hips carefully together, and moved his mouth to trail kisses down the side of his husband’s neck.

“Husband, please,” the man begged. “Let me see you, let me touch you, please, please, please… Husband is too far away…”

Too far away? Luo Binghe, who did you think was sitting on you?

Shen Qingqiu surprised himself when a gentle laugh escaped him.

“Husband is right here,” he promised, spilling the low, intimate words into Luo Binghe’s ear.

“Too far away,” the man nevertheless insisted, curling his hands as if to reach for him. “Husband, put it inside me...”
Binghe was going to kill him. That was going to be how he died, he decided. One day Binghe would just say something while they were in bed together and his brain would short-circuit for real and he’d just be dead. Wouldn’t that be traumatic for everyone?

Tightening his grip, he gave him a reproachful shake.

“Who is in charge here?” he asked. “Is this evening a gift for me, or am I indulging Binghe?”

“Husband is in charge!” Luo Binghe hastily assured him. “Even if Binghe begs and begs, Husband doesn’t have to give him anything! Even if he cries, Husband can hold him down and deny him all night if he wants to!”

Who would want that!? He’d just feel like a bully!

Mollified, Shen Qingqiu tutted and leaned in to kiss his ridiculous husband’s forehead.

Despite thinking he’d go easy on him, however, the temptation to keep going in this weird direction was too compelling for him to completely ignore. His cheeks burned, and he privately scolded himself for being too perverted… but he also kept on rolling his hips in teasing motions, and pressing kisses to any part of his husband’s skin that tempted him, until Luo Binghe was twisting his hands in the sheets to keep from putting up some real resistance, and once again begging him to move things along.

The fact that Shen Qingqiu couldn’t actually force this man to do anything he didn’t want - that Binghe was more than strong enough to flip them over or stop him or even just grab him and put
him right where he wanted him to be - but wasn’t doing any of that, was just giving him everything, was…

Okay, yeah, it was *indescribably hot*.

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t stop the feeling of something fierce and possessive and desperate from rising up in himself in answer to this gesture. He bit down on Luo Binghe’s collarbone, moved his hands to press down against his biceps, sucked a bruise into the base of his neck, but also felt nothing akin to any sort of viciousness or sharpness; instead he was bursting with such a tender heat that, in the end, he gave up on holding Binghe down so that he could cup his face between his hands and pepper sweet kisses across his ridiculously beautiful face.

Under his ministrations, Luo Binghe trembled all over.

*I love you,* he almost said. The words got stuck in his throat, still too embarrassing to come unless he’d loosened it with a considerable amount of wine and some adequate time spent psyching himself up. Who really said such things? But he tried to say it in the kisses, instead, before even he couldn’t take it anymore, and he finally moved back to undo his belt.

Binghe let out a sound of protest as he sat back, hands reaching as if to pull him closer again.

“Please,” he called.

“Roll over,” Shen Qingqiu instructed. He didn’t think he could do this while he was looking the man in the face, it would be too much.

Despite the faintest hint of reluctance, Luo Binghe did as told, and rolled onto his stomach. Shen Qingqiu had to take a moment again, as he was treated to the back view. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and then finally started to strip. Luo Binghe squirmed as he heard the rustle of clothing. His head turned, trying to see, but his hair blocked his view. When he reached up to move it, Shen Qingqiu caught his wrist, and halted him instead.

Then he patted his back comfortingly, and let his hand trail down before he finished undressing.

He’d been avoiding looking at certain places, so it was only *then* that he noticed the distinctive, round base of an object nestled between his husband’s cheeks.
His brain melted again.

Binghe! That-!

He’d-!

The *entire time*, there’d been a… a… up his…!

Shen Qingqiu stared at the jade phallus that was apparently nestled inside of his husband’s body, and internally flailed. Panicked. Worried. Celebrated.Collapsed in shock and awe, built a shrine to Luo Binghe’s endurance, then dismantled the shrine so could scold his husband with every brick and plank he tore down. Most surprising of all was probably the little part of him that twisted in irritation, almost grumbling with the thought that if Binghe liked having his little toy up there so much, just *see* if Shen Qingqiu would put anything else in there that night! Binghe and his substitute dick could just enjoy themselves, apparently his own contribution wasn’t even needed!

He had to stop himself in horror when he realized where that thought had come from - it was definitely unreasonable to be *jealous of a sex toy*!

Luo Binghe started to tremble again.

“Husband…” he called, plaintively.

Snapping out of it, Shen Qingqiu calmed himself down. His hand was resting on Luo Binghe’s lower back. Lifting it up, he finally moved to straddle him again. He took a moment to gently push his husband’s hair aside, so he would be more comfortable, and then worked a pillow underneath his stomach, to help with the prone position. Luo Binghe tried to move onto his knees, but was easily stopped with a touch. On his knees was just… too pornographic!

When Shen Qingqiu’s own flushed cock settled against his backside, Luo Binghe’s trembling increased.

“Please,” the man whispered. His hands clenched against the sheets again. “Please, please, please…”
How could he possibly ignore that? It would take a heart made out of stone. Leaning down, Shen Qingqiu began to spread kisses across the back of Luo Binghe’s shoulders. He ground his hips down. His cock slid against the oiled skin of his husband’s ass, and pressed his husband’s own to grind into the mattress, in turn. He wasn’t sure if it would actually be any good, but the sound he got in return made a bolt of heat shoot straight through him.

It gave him the resolve he needed to finally reach for the base of the phallus.

Luo Binghe made a small sound as Shen Qingqiu carefully moved it. He pulled it out a little ways, swallowing at the stretched opening, the glistening lubricant and worryingly hard material of the toy. There wasn’t any blood though, thank fuck. If Binghe’d gone and hurt himself, he really would have to take this out and let him sit untouched for the rest of the night.

But his husband’s sexual functions were - to put it frankly - weird as hell, not only from being a demon, but also from being a demon in a gay fantasy novel. As Shen Qingqiu inadvertently tilted the phallus in his quest to check everything going on there, Luo Binghe clenched his thighs tighter, and whimpered.

“How’s it feeling?” he asked, worried.

Luo Binghe shook his head.

“No… ah… keep, keep moving it… please…”

Oh.

Shen Qingqiu let out a breath of relief that turned into a light chuckle, and experimentally pressed the toy around. More sounds resulted, each one stoking his own interest in return. There was a part of his mind that still tried to insist that this was honestly just way too embarrassing - he was playing with Luo Binghe’s asshole, they both probably looked ridiculous - but it was a tiny voice, and it sounded really petty and silly in its own way, too. Immature. Like a child trying to insist that kissing was ‘gross’.

He testing the stretch of his husband’s entrance, and in a fit of mingled curiosity and arousal, finally slid one of his fingers into the hole alongside the toy.
Luo Binghe’s gasped.

“Shi… Shizun…”

“Who?”

“Husband! Husband, ah!”

“Hm. If Binghe’s going to call this husband ‘shizun’, maybe we ought to make this a learning experience,” he found himself saying, as he pressed his finger deeper into the warm heat of Luo Binghe’s body. It was so slick and… flexible… “Let’s find out how much Binghe can take.”

Another plaintive whimper answered his suggestion.

Shen Qingqiu almost swallowed his own tongue, but he didn’t regret it. Maybe this would finally get the man to stop calling him ‘shizun’ in bed! It was weird! He needed to make an impression as deterrent, quite clearly. Without actually traumatizing or harming him, of course…

Satisfied with his explanation, Shen Qingqiu carefully moved his finger, stretching Luo Binghe’s hole and tracing the circumference of the phallus. Everything was still very slippery, and so hot it almost worried him. Binghe’s thighs trembled. He had to move one of his own legs between them to help keep them separated. The strong muscles clenched and relaxed against his own, while his husband drew in ragged breaths.

When he slipped a second finger in around the toy, Binghe gasped and shuddered.

“Too much?” he asked.

His husband’s hips twitched back in refutation.

“…No… ah…! Don’t stop!”
Shen Qingqiu was still careful as he gave him time to adjust. He worked his fingers in light, exploratory motions, marveling a little at the way Luo Binghe’s body adapted. He hesitated to take things any further, though. His ring finger teased the over-stretched entrance. Binghe’s breath caught. His index and middle fingers were pressed snugly against the jade phallus, which had been warmed by friction and body heat.

Very, very carefully, he started to push the third digit in.

The stretch was obscene.

A rush of worry overtook him, and he pulled it back out.

“Shizun!” Binghe protested. “Keep going!”

Withdrawing all of his fingers, Shen Qingqiu leaned up, and pressed a few more kisses to his shoulders.

“There’s no need for more testing,” he said. “Binghe is perfect, he could take it all. This husband knows. He’s done so well.”

Luo Binghe made a small, wrecked sound.

Reaching back down, Shen Qingqiu pulled the jade phallus out of him completely. He was about to set it aside when he finally took note of its full size.

Holy…!

Why the actual fuck? This thing was about as big as Binghe’s own monster cock! Shen Qingqiu gaped a little, and then double-checked it for any signs of blood. He moved back to examine Binghe’s hole again, which had the man squirming once more, incoherent pleas escaping him. The muscles of his entrance fluttered as they adjusted, finally released from their strain.

It was only when he remembered that Luo Binghe’s body could heal virtually any injury that he finally relaxed a little.
“Putting that thing in your body, just leaving it there without saying a word - is Binghe so reckless!? Is he so eager to be stretched full that this husband’s cock can’t satisfy him, and he had to go and shove a huge rock up there?!”

Luo Binghe flailed in sudden alarm.

“No!” he insisted. “Husband’s cock is the best! Nothing else even comes close!”

“If that were true, then why would Binghe impale himself on such a weapon?” Shen Qingqiu demanded, brandishing the dildo in a scolding fashion.

Wait. Gah! What the hell was he doing!? Hastily, he put it back down. Nothing good could possibly come from this line of conversation! Luo Binghe was just about red all over, and squirmed under his scolding in a way that was suspiciously unlike embarrassment. Fuck. This was another kink, wasn’t it? How many did he have?!

“Nothing else comes close to Husband,” the man repeated, abashed. His voice was soft as he looked down at the bedspread. “Husband’s cock is so warm and hard and fits inside me so well, having him there feels too good. Anything too similar to Husband just disappoints this servant, because it’s not Husband. This servant was only impatient. He wanted Husband to see he was ready and not hesitate to take him…”

Well.

Fuck.

Luo Binghe’s lips trembled. His eyes were wet. Shen Qingqiu knew him well enough to know he was putting things on a little, but that didn’t stop it from working anyway. With a silent internal scream he rolled the man over. To his surprise, his front was a mess. He blinked as he realized that Luo Binghe had come at some point in those proceedings, the end results were smeared across the blankets and his stomach.
But he was still hard.

Because of course he was, the ridiculous creature.

Shen Qingqiu patted his cheek comfortingly, resigned to his fate, and sighed when Luo Binghe’s arms settled around him and then hugged him tight. He grimaced as the mess pressed against his own skin, before he gave up on that, too, and only nipped reproachfully at the side of Binghe’s neck. Of course, being bitten didn’t actually do a thing to deter the man, as he shamelessly squirmed and spread his legs and somehow still begged for more.

Any more dragging things out, Shen Qingqiu thought, and they’d probably end the night with even more weird kinks coming out of the woodwork. It was too much for him! He used to think he was pretty conservative about these things, okay? Or at least, as far as sexual conservatism could go for a gay shut-in with access to the internet.

Pushing Luo Binghe’s carefully back again, he took a moment to kiss the tears off his cheeks.

“Does Binghe still want it?” he checked, all the same. The begging was an obvious clue, but still… he’d had that huge thing in him through all that; if it was Shen Qingqiu, he’d need at least a day’s grace before putting up with anything else… probably more…

Luo Binghe grabbed his own thighs and pretty much tried to fold himself in half, entrance bared and cock still flushed and heavy between his legs and - and - gah!

Shen Qingqiu may or may not have made a thoroughly embarrassing sound.

“Please, Husband!”

Yeah, they definitely needed to finish soon, before Shen Qingqiu discovered any new kinks!

Although an ominous voice in the back of his mind whispered that the ship had probably already sailed on that front…

Lining himself up, he didn’t waste any more time before starting to push in. He only batted gently
at his husband’s hands, in order to get him to loosen up his pose a little. Luo Binghe’s entrance
gave way easily, slick and still so warm, the fierce heat and yielding flesh enough to steal the
breath from Shen Qingqiu’s lungs. The utter lack of resistance also kept him from holding back
completely. He pressed forward, a hard thrust that fully sheathed him in a rush of pleasant
sensation.

Luo Binghe moaned and moved his hands to grasp at him. His legs wrapped around Shen
Qingqiu’s waist. His hips moved, and his mouth pressed against his skin, greedy for more.

Somehow, when Shen Qingqiu finally started to move his hips, even though he was thrusting into
his husband’s body as aggressively as he could manage, he really didn’t feel like he was in charge
of the scenario any more. If he ever had been. Internally, he sighed, rueful. Even like this, Luo
Binghe really did have him wrapped around his fingers, didn’t he?

With Binghe’s inviting heat around his cock and his mouth wet against his neck, he couldn’t
remember why there should be any problem with that.

Tangling his fingers back into his husband’s hair, Shen Qingqiu thrust harder. Moving erratically
until he finally hit the spot, that good good spot that made Luo Binghe’s voice break in pleasure.
Then he tried his best to hit it again, and again, calling on every ounce of stamina he could find.
His other hand closed around the considerable girth of Luo Binghe’s straining erection. He felt a
rush of satisfaction when the man came all over himself again, the very definition of a ‘hot mess’,
trembling and squeezing down on Shen Qingqiu’s own cock in return.

Stars lit up his vision as he crashed over his own edge.

So good!

Too good!

With a shaky oath, his arms shook, and he crumpled onto Binghe’s chest.

Warm arms tightened around him. Kisses were placed haphazardly all over his face.

“Husband,” Luo Binghe sighed, in satisfaction. “Husband fucked me so well.”
Shen Qingqiu lifted his head just so that he could lightly smack his brow against Binghe’s firm pecks. Treating them more or less like a wall to bang his head against.

“Don’t say things like that…” he chided, breathlessly.

An unrepentant hum was his reply, and he knew for a fact that this sentiment would be in one ear and out the other. Luo Binghe stroked at him, lazy and finally sated, but then gripped him tight when Shen Qingqiu tried to move back and pull out.

“We’re filthy,” he insisted. Tired.

“Just for a while…” Luo Binghe wheedled.

Shen Qingqiu frowned at him. It wasn’t a very serious frown, but he still managed it.

“Who’s in charge here?” he asked again.

His husband relented, finally chastised. Not very chastised, but still. He let go and Shen Qingqiu disentangled them, grimacing at the mess before taking stock of the situation. There was no hope for the blankets, they’d just have to be cleaned tomorrow, but most of it was on their bodies anyway. Binghe still technically had his robe ‘on’, though it was little more than gauzy decoration. Shen Qingqiu nevertheless pulled it off to try and salvage some of it, and then poked and prodded his sticky husband into clearing the way for them, and making the short trip to the bathing chamber.

His legs felt like jelly and he honestly just wanted to lie down and sleep for a week, but he’d learned his lesson on that front when it came to Luo Binghe’s excessive amounts of semen and the end results of having it dry in the wrong places. It was like glue.

They made it to the bathing chamber without witnesses, as per usual. Luo Binghe was languid, even veering back towards smugly pleased as they cleaned one another up. Shen Qingqiu gently scrubbed his skin, cleared away the excess oil, and even wiped the paint from his husband’s eyelids.
It looked pretty. But he liked Luo Binghe’s face just as it normally was, too. No embellishments needed, even if they were… kind of interesting, every now and again. He smoothed his thumbs over Binghe’s brows and washed the sweat from his hair, and when his husband tugged him, he offered no resistance in straddling his lap.

Luo Binghe was ordinarily taller, but in that position, Shen Qingqiu had the height advantage. Binghe pressed his nose beneath his jaw, and let out a low, contented hum.

“Was it good?” he asked.

Shen Qingqiu almost cried.

Was it good?! How could he pretend not to know? This man just wanted him to say it out loud! His aims were transparent! Reaching over, he pinched Luo Binghe in reproach.

“Of course it was good.”

His husband chuckled. *Really* transparent. How was a person supposed to be properly ashamed of himself around this unabashed creature?

“Then, next time, maybe Husband will surprise his lord instead?” Luo Binghe suggested, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

With a blank face, Shen Qingqiu grabbed the bath ladle, and promptly dumped a scoop of water over this ridiculous man’s head. Then he tapped it against his skull in mock reproach.

“What is Binghe saying? Don’t just suggest something like that!” he scolded.

Luo Binghe laughed harder.

“But it would be so good!”

“Shameless!”
“Shizun~!”

“Don’t call me that when we’re discussing these things!”

“Husband, Husband would look so good, wrapped up in something pretty and waiting in bed just for me~!”

Thunk.

Shen Qingqiu tapped him with the bath ladle again.

There was no way. No chance. Definitely not. He didn’t have much dignity left, although he had some. Even if it was kind of rare for Luo Binghe to ask him for something like this… and he’d gone and done it himself first, too, just because he wanted to… and it wasn’t as if it would be bad, probably… in fact if he thought about it there were maybe some interesting possibilities there, but… no! No! Absolutely not!

Definitely not!

…Not right away, at least…

“...I’ll think about it,” he conceded.

Luo Binghe snuggled happily against him, and grinned.
Yue Qingyuan was disgusted with himself.


But he still couldn’t bring himself to look away from Shen Qingqiu’s young apprentice.

He didn’t even know how to begin to process what was going on in his mind. Shen Jiu - the boy’s name was Shen Jiu - looked nothing at all like... he looked nothing at all like the young man from Yue Qingyuan’s memories, the boy he had fallen into clumsy, unabashed love with when they were both sixteen and fresh-faced and still too jaded to be called ‘innocent’, even if they were still so ignorant of many things.

It was the name, he decided. It was the name, and the mannerisms. Shen Jiu behaved very much like Shen Qingqiu had when he was that age. Right down to the details of body language, little quirks and ticks that Yue Qingyuan hadn’t seen in so long, he would have imagined himself forgetting them altogether. And yet, when he saw this young apprentice speak and move, the expressions on his face, the look in his eyes...

It didn’t matter that the two men shared little to no actual resemblance. They were astonishingly alike. In fact, Shen Jiu seemed more like Shen Qingqiu had been as a young man than the adult version ever did these days. It arrested his attention completely, despite his best efforts to look away.

If Shen Qingqiu found out he was gawking at his apprentice like an old pervert, the man would kill him outright. And Yue Qingyuan would have trouble faulting his actions. He knew he had to leave before he made a spectacle of himself, before he ruined this boy’s debut tournament by subjecting him to a deluge of scandalous rumours or something equally undeserved. He had to put some distance between himself and this burgeoning fixation, if he couldn’t shake it out of his mind altogether.
But after that first encounter, it seemed as if Shen Qingqiu’s young apprentice was suddenly everywhere. At every event, around every corner. Yue Qingyuan couldn’t help but listen to him speak whenever he chanced to overhear him; his ears perked up every time he heard others mention him.

It was the name. That had to be it. It was the name, and the fact that the boy managed to take after his master so well. Shen Jiu. Just hearing it made him feel as though he was being transported back in time.

Even the tone of a lot of the talk surrounding him was unnervingly similar.

“My my my, Lord Yue, your ex-husband certainly has an eye for diamonds in the rough,” Jin Guangshan opined, from the spectator box where some of the top cultivation lords had gathered to assess the junior competitors. “First you, then that demon lord of his, and now this little minx. One wonders what he’ll pick up next.”

Yue Qingyuan couldn’t keep a frown of disapproval off of his face. He wasn’t actually a fan of this aspect of the proceedings, hanging around gossiping while the apprentices competed, but the First Prince was a spectator. And the emperor wanted an eye kept on him. The eldest living prince was the child of Noble Consort Wen, and the emperor’s most worrying heir. Not necessarily because of the man’s own disposition, but because of Wen clan’s interest in eventually putting him on the throne - sitting the First Prince on the throne, everyone knew, would more or less be handing the seat of power over to Wen Ruohan.

And Wen Ruohan wanted power very much. More than enough to work towards the emperor’s untimely demise in order to get it.

Thankfully, before he had to respond to Jin Guangshan’s observation, Lord Nie intercepted.

“Considering your reputation for diplomacy, Lord Jin, you’ve got no tact to speak of. Why are you talking to a man about his ex-husband?” Nie Mingjue demanded, ever ready to voice some annoyance with the Jin clan head.

Jin Guangshan chuckled.

“Oh, come now, it’s been years and no one even died during that scandal. How long are we supposed to walk on eggshells for?” he countered. Then he sighed, and patted Yue Qingyuan on
the shoulder. “Lord Yue’s just too much of a romantic. Plenty of fish are in the sea! My Yao-er’s just about of age, you know, he’s the type you like. And he’s been studying at Gusu, with those rare cloud blossoms. I had hoped Lan Xichen might make a bid for him, but at this rate, the Lan clan heir will be single until the emperor decrees a match for him. Takes after his uncle, I suppose. But what about it, Lord Yue? Why not come by the estate some time and let Yao-er play a song for you?”

Jin Yao was the same age as Shen Qingqiu’s new apprentice. So, not really ‘of age’ at all.

“Stop trying to pawn your bastards off onto the man,” Nie Mingjue interjected again, frown deepening.

“Bastard? What bastard? I took his mother into my harem and gave him my name, didn’t I?” Jin Guangshan replied, narrowing his eyes in his own disapproval. “But if you want to put your own suggestion forward, has that little brother of yours outgrown his ‘baby fat’ yet? I hear he’s learning fan dances, that must be a sight…”

“Watch your tone.”

“What? I’m assisting in securing prospects for the poor boy. Didn’t Shen Qingqiu favour fan dancing in his youth? See, Lord Yue, as I said there are plenty of fish in the sea. Even some especially plump ones…”

“I think I see Lady Shi over there. Pardon me a moment,” Yue Qingyuan requested, and with a tight smile, decided to make his escape from that corner of the viewing box. It was barely remarked upon, as the lords Nie and Jin continued on with an argument that was more between them two of them in the end anyway.

In point of fact, Lady Shi was surrounded by her usual throng of friends and admirers, so he didn’t bother to try and make his way much closer. Instead he found a spot plausibly close by, and then let his gaze drift back towards the viewing portals.

Despite all of his resolutions, his eyes found their way to a particular figure once again. The young Shen Jiu’s technique was much better than Shen Qingqiu’s had been at that age…
The Qiu estate was a burnt wreckage.

Yue Qingyuan could only stare, heart in his throat, at the trashed remains of the place. The locals had done some work to clean things up, but not much. Few wanted to come close enough to start removing the burnt-out beams - looters had ostensibly died raiding the burned out building, caught in structural collapses that were blamed on malevolent spirits and lingering bad energy. The air around the estate certainly had a quality of resentment - strong enough to smell like smoke, even so long after the embers had stopped smoldering.

Everyone in town knew that all of the men occupying the estate had been killed. Cut down before the fire was set, though some had still been breathing, until the smoke and flames finished them off instead. No one knew the particulars of an orphaned slave boy who had been living there. The Qiu family had more than a few petty workers, bought from here or there. Anyone too insignificant to identify had been thrown into a mass grave.

Despite wariness towards the site, the bodies had all been retrieved. Even so, some part of Yue Qingyuan wanted desperately to venture inside. To search and search, as if he might still find…

But there is nothing. There is just a hollow corpse of a place, where he left Little Jiu behind.

He took too long.

The husk of the building haunted him. Even after his father’s servants had pulled him away, after the mentor he had been given admonished him for distressing his cultivation with ‘unwarranted fixations’, it still wouldn’t leave him be. No one would tell him where the mass grave site was. Yue Qi dreamed of digging it up with his bare hands. They said there were demons who knew the arts of raising the dead - not just as walking corpses or insensible monsters, but in ways that made them alive once again. In the dreams his fingers turned black with muddy earth. He clawed through it, again and again, until he could taste the grave soil at the back of his throat.

When he woke, Yue Qingyuan always reminded himself that there really was no way to do justice to the dead by bringing them back to life. Demonic cultivation was the realm of demons, after all,
and what a demon considered ‘life’ was probably far and away from any fate he should wish upon a friend.

It was better to let him rest. To hope his spirit would find his next life free of so much pain.

He always reminded himself.

But still, he dreamed.

~

Yue Qingyuan had learned how to move quickly indeed, in recent years; but he was certain he had never moved so fast before in his life as he chased the ghost he had glimpsed in the capital city’s streets. The roads were crowded. His servants were lost behind him, unable to keep up as their master moved with equal parts ferocity and grace, leaping over throngs of bodies, kicking off from a nearby building’s awning only to draw his sword and fly with a determination that had onlookers thinking the young cultivator must have spotted a demon in their midst.

His spiritual energy thrummed in warning as he drew his sword, the light doubly bright when the sun struck the blade. Drawing Xuan Su always evoked a strange sort of pain in him. Like the warning of pulled muscle, the first hint of heat that threatened to burn, or cold that could become dangerous after a minute more exposure. But it was powerful, too, such power that he had needed with haste and then regretted with bitterness and had been left only to live with, in the end.

But he could scarcely afford to think about all that. His focus was on the ghost, instead. The glimpse of a face he had caught. Against all reason saying it could only be a passing thing, that he must have been mistaken, a trick of the eye or a random coincidence… he could not let go. His determination only grew as the ghost proved its wiliness, slipping through crowds and down narrow streets, disappearing twice before Yue Qingyuan spotted him again. Until finally he veered down a side street where a cart had overturned, and as the ghost vaulted over the cart to avoid slowing down, Yue Qingyuan swooped in and caught him.
The curses that resulted were deeper than he recalled, the owner’s voice having dropped somewhat, but the sound was still unerringly familiar.

Ghosts didn’t age.

Yue Qingyuan tumbled with his quarry onto a nearby rooftop. His heart was beating so hard he thought it might crack through his ribs.

“Little Jiu!” he exclaimed.

The other boy froze up in the midst of trying to escape from him.

Wide eyes turned to meet Yue Qingyuan’s. The two youths stared at one another in equal amounts of shock. Shen Jiu was taller, he’d gone through another growth spurt. His clothes were ragged, dirtied at the hems from his mad race to get away from the cultivator who seemed to be chasing him. There was a weapon at his belt, there were bruises on his neck. A split lip. Yue Qingyuan raised a hand to his cheek. Shen Jiu flinched, and then stared as a thread of spiritual energy was gently transferred to him. Easing some of the pain that seemed rife through his being.

“Little Jiu, it really is… it really is…” Yue Qingyuan whispered. He felt, suddenly, as though his heart was made of glass. As though the slightest thing might break him apart on the spot. But also as if his heart was made of stone, and nothing would ever move him away from where he was right at that moment. Living in a world where his best friend wasn’t gone.

When he recovered from the shock, Shen Jiu’s expression twisted. His hands came up, harshly, and he shoved Yue Qingyuan away.

“Don’t speak so familiarly!” he demanded. “How dare you? Yue Qi, you bastard! You left me to rot!”

Yue Qingyuan’s glass heart broke. His stone heart didn’t waver at all. He couldn’t find the strength to resist Shen Jiu’s efforts to shove him aside, but in the end it just left him kneeling on the roof beside him, with his hands still outstretched towards him.

“Little Jiu,” he pleaded; as if he had forgotten how to say anything else.
Shen Jiu raised a fist. Poised to strike. Yue Qingyuan didn’t move. Punishments that were deserved shouldn’t be avoided; he’d take any beating his friend wanted to give him, but after another moment, Shen Jiu’s fist trembled and dropped to his side instead. The other boy’s gaze raked over him. Taking in the fine clothes, the bright light of Xuan Su hovering not far from them, the shadows underneath Yue Qingyuan’s eyes.

The more he stared, the more Shen Jiu began to shake like a leaf.

“...Who are you?” Shen Jiu demanded.

Yue Qingyuan shook his head.

“It’s Qi-ge, of course,” he said.

The snarling, sneering expression on Shen Jiu’s face twisted further. He looked angry. So, so angry. And he should be. But Yue Qingyuan only felt relief. He was furious, but he wasn’t dead. The liveliness of his wrath was so much better than the haunting dreams of dirt and death. Even if his friend lit him on fire, right at that moment, Yue Qingyuan would have only been too happy to burn.

“There was a homeless brat I called Qi-ge. This person before me is someone else,” Shen Jiu insisted. “What does he want with a lowly apprentice such as myself?”

Yue Qingyuan stared.

His gaze moved, again, to the bruises he could see. Shen Jiu was thin. There was a badly mended tear in one of his sleeves. The sword at his belt wasn’t a weapon worthy of even a base level cultivation apprentice - it lacked a sheath, and the metal had clearly blunted in some places. There were flecks of blood still trapped near to the hilt, too. Dried stains.

If Shen Jiu was an apprentice, whoever had taken him on was unlikely to be a reputable person.

Yue Qingyuan wanted to ask… everything. He wanted to know, how did he survive the attack? The fire? How did he come to be in this place? Was he looking for Yue Qingyuan? Did he even
know where to start with such things? He might have heard about his fortunes changing… but no, none of the rumours would have used his old name. No one called him that anymore.

He wanted to ask, but Shen Jiu’s eyes were filled with wrath and betrayal and, most alarmingly of all… fear.

It was the fear that gutted him.

“Qi-ge is still Qi-ge,” he insisted.

“Are you sure? Think carefully. That person owes me his life. Do you really want to pay his debts?” Shen Jiu sneered, and then spit. “Wouldn’t it be better for the young master to wash his hands of it, and go back to his good fortunes?”

Yue Qingyuan heard the contempt in the words. He stared up, a thousand defenses clamoring in his throat. He had meant to come back! He had done so, just as he’d promised! He hadn’t known it would be too late. He had only wanted to make certain he could give Shen Jiu a place, and could protect him, before he took him out from under the Qiu family’s roof. He had risked everything to do that, had found the quickest path to his goals only to suffer from his own ignorance, as his methods backfired on himself and in the end it took longer rather than happening more quickly…

The excuses died without passing his lips. Guilt ate him alive anyway. What did the reasons matter? In the end, he had still left his friend behind, and had not been there when he needed him the most.


Shen Jiu’s sneer wavered. Just a little. His fists trembled.

“Why should I?!” he demanded then, voice cracking. “I don’t know you! I don’t know any rich young noblemen! Aren’t you listening to me?! Just pick yourself up and go back to wherever you live now! Reputable young masters don’t hang around with-”

Shen Jiu’s rant cut off as Yue Qingyuan staggered to his feet, and abruptly flung his arms around him. He crushed the other boy tightly to his chest, only loosening his grip when it provoked an unexpected gasp of pain. But he couldn’t take it anymore. His eyes were watering and his heart
was breaking, his heart was determined, he had missed Shen Jiu so much and no one in his life really knew what it was like, how it was to live as he’d lived before. No one else really knew him but Shen Jiu did, he’d been there, he’d been always been there until he wasn’t and he’d been dead until he wasn’t and Yue Qingyuan was breaking, Yue Qi was resolute.

“Little Jiu!” he begged, not even certain what he was begging for.

“Don’t call me that!” Shen Jiu insisted.

“Jiu-er! A-Jiu! Qi-ge will call this person anything he likes, just please don’t go!”

“That’s not what I meant!”

The younger boy struggled weakly in his grasp, and Yue Qingyuan knew he should let go - he could feel the tension and discomfort radiating off of his friend - but he was still so afraid that he would blink and wake up.

But then finally Shen Jiu let out a burst of haphazard spiritual energy, and shoved hard, and Yue Qingyuan could only let go to avoid hurting him. His skin smarted from the strike, his shoulder and neck and the bottom half of his cheek stung from where the qi blast had struck. Shen Jiu looked angry, and then startled; and then he stared at the spots that Yue Qingyuan could still feel smarting, and visibly schooled his features into something neutral instead.

“Little… um, A-Jiu,” he tried, instead. “A-Jiu can hit me. It’s alright. If it makes up for anything, hit as many times as needed…”

Shen Jiu’s lips twitched downwards. His brow furrowed.

He folded his arms, and turned to glare off to the side of the rooftop. Thinking of running, so obviously thinking of running, but then a moment later he looked up at Yue Qingyuan from underneath his brows, and couldn’t disguise the conflict in his gaze. It made the young lord’s heart stutter in hope.

“...Why are you dressed like that?” Shen Jiu finally asked him, instead of trying to flee.
Yue Qingyuan almost crumbled in his relief.

“It’s a long story,” he said. “Would A-Jiu perhaps permit me to buy him a meal, while we talk…?”

It took some coaxing. Like winning over a stray cat. But that was always what it had been like with Shen Jiu, so Yue Qingyuan didn’t mind. In the end, the two of them made their way to a nearby restaurant, and Shen Jiu sat and listened and ate plate after plate of food while Yue Qingyuan explained what he could bring himself to speak about. Hedging around some matters and stumbling his way through others, even as his own questions were blatantly rebuffed.

It didn’t matter.

Shen Jiu was alive. In the face of that, nothing else seemed like it could matter at all.

~

Yue Qingyuan was thirteen when he met his father for the first time.

The elder Lord Yue was a… complicated person. He had amassed a fairly sizeable harem for himself, but seemed to have little capacity for managing it. Despite numerous attempts to produce heirs, most of his children had died before ever being born - their mothers miscarried, their seedpods sickened, their rituals failed. The majority of these crimes could be laid at the feet of the lord’s First Wife, who had borne him a sickly son not long into their marriage, and, fearing the child’s weakness, had schemed endlessly to ensure he would never face an ounce of competition from healthier siblings.

Machinations which had ultimately proved futile even for her own aims, when Yue Qingyuan’s elder half-brother ended up dying in his sickbed just the same. The details weren’t widespread, but
the servants whispered that the elder Lord Yue himself had not wished to be succeeded by such a sickly, weak-willed child; and that his father’s neglect had broken the boy’s spirit and contributed further to his poor health.

That, or it was poison.

When the imperial courts endured a massive scandal after a new method of ascertaining the legitimacy of various bloodlines was discovered, Yue Qingyuan’s father had turned his mind to the matter of Yue Qingyuan’s mother. A woman whom Yue Qi had barely ever known himself, before she died of malnutrition. She had been Third Wife, and according to unreliable rumour, had been the most beloved by his father for her good spirit and kind heart. It had spared her life when the First Wife had presented evidence of her supposed infidelity; and was ostensibly the reason why, when the new testing methods were discovered, the elder Lord Yue had tried to track her back down and ended up finding Yue Qi in the process.

He had been thirteen and in dire straits. Shen Jiu was locked in the Qiu household, and winter was coming. Their old master had vanished, having sold off most of the other children and needing to escape some trouble or other. The old house they’d been squatting in for years had finally started to come down, as the roof gave in and the support beams creaked in ominous threats, letting in the damp and snow.

Nowhere to go. No one to turn to. And then a bounty hunter had found him, of all things.

If Yue Qi’s blood hadn’t passed the test, he had no doubts that he would have been flung back onto the streets. Unwanted garbage again. But it had, and the moment it had, his - apparently - lordly father had cradled his face with withered, shaking hands, and wept in joy.

He had also given his First Wife a length of white silk to hang herself by, and disinherited his only other living child. Yue Qingyuan’s half sister, who was fifteen, was bartered off into a marriage that dissolved all ties to the Yue name and estate. She took her mother’s family name. Yue Qingyuan met her only once, as he tried to… do something about it all. It wasn’t his intention to rip a family apart, to make trouble for his sister. He didn’t need to inherit the lordship, really, it was enough just to have a place! But Yu Ziyuan stared at him with resentment and contempt, and such wounded pride…

The bitter twist of her lips reminded him so strongly of someone else, Yue Qingyuan could only look helplessly back as she sneered at him.

“I don’t need your pity. I’m a daughter of the Yu clan and I will be First Wife in Yunmeng. In the
hands of some common trash off the street, the Yue name will fall into disgrace anyway.”

“I could petition Lord Yue on Big Sister’s behalf—”

“Don’t waste your breath, and don’t associate yourself with me.”

It was strange to find her distaste, her sharpness, making him want to befriend her even more. But Yu Ziyuan had less interest in him than in the dirt under her own fingernails. He barely knew her a few days before she was gone; her mother returned to her maiden family home as well, on good enough terms with her relatives that they took her back in. She had been implicated in some of the events which discredited Yue Qingyuan’s own mother. He supposed he should have hated her, but too many things seemed to be happening at once, and Yue Qingyuan was accustomed to being an urchin. He wasn’t the type to feel bitter over what had been his base standard of living before; it just made him uncomfortable that his ‘good fortune’ seemed to cause death and dismay elsewhere.

His father wasn’t a young man. He had inherited the title of Lord Yue from his older brother - for many years he had been a spinster and low-level ministry official, working in support of the current emperor from behind the scenes. His older brother had sided with the emperor’s sister, who conspired to claim the throne out from under him. When her efforts ended in failure, all of her supporters were put to death. The elder Lord Yue had given up his brother’s name as part of the conspiracy, and had produced such sufficient evidence that the previous Lord Yue, and his heirs, and spouses, and apprentices, were all killed. A sprawling estate once home to so many people was emptied in a blood bath that stained the hands of Yue Qingyuan’s father. Who had then moved in, carrying the title of the new Lord Yue, and bringing with him the emperor’s favour.

The elder Lord Yue did not sleep well at night. He had been assigned an Imperial physician, in his declining years; Mu Qingfang was young and skilled, with steady hands and a gentle voice, but his eyes when he looked at the lord always held a hint of frost that was absent when he spoke with most other people.

And yet…

When Yue Qingyuan visited with his father, he found himself in the presence of a man who looked at him with warmth and approval, an unexpected depth of pride and relief he could not see the reason for. The old lord really did look at him as he might expect a father to look at his long-lost son. It was Lord Yue who had cast him out in the first place, whose actions had led to his mother’s death… if the rumours were to be believed, he had even poisoned his own firstborn son, and he had bartered off Yu Ziyuan as if she meant less than nothing to him. Yue Qi had never known this man growing up. The only things they had in common were their faces - where his half-siblings had resembled their mothers, Yue Qingyuan and the elder Lord Yue bore such strong resemblances to one another, a blood test might not have even been needed. It was hard to know what to think.
“My son,” Lord Yue had called him, in a moment that stole his breath away. A weak hand rested on his shoulder. “So strong and good. This lord will give his chosen successor everything. Every ounce of training to make his body strong, every tutor he could ever need to learn all the skills he requires. Take this token, and promise this father that his son will wear it always. It is a symbol of status in our family line.”

The token he was given was old and strange, but beautiful. The carvings on it weren’t familiar to him. His father cautioned against the envy of others and having the treasure stolen, especially while Yue Qingyuan was still so new to things; so he wore it on a cord around his neck, under his clothes. It seemed to harmonize with his spiritual pathways, but it didn’t interfere with his cultivation at all.

His father was true to his word. He gave Yue Qingyuan the best of everything. He was unfailingly kind, supportive, apologetic for the past and hopeful for the future. He looked as though Yue Qingyuan’s presence had breathed new grace into his life, and it was so hard not to love a father who treated him like that. Despite his lingering unease.

“My son. Everything we do now is for the future Lord Yue who you will become.”

The words were kind. They were true. He could tell that his father meant them, but for some reason, they still rested uneasily with him.

It was the life he was living, he decided. There was something inherently surreal about it all. He wanted to get out of the estate, wanted to walk through streets under his own power, out in the open. His father’s spouses and concubines either avoided him like plague or else tried to curry favour with him with a desperation that was disquieting on its own; it was no secret that the elder Lord Yue was declining, or who would succeed him once he was gone.

Most of the elder Lord Yue’s concubines were not well-connected people. Only a few of the lord’s spouses were. Yue Qingyuan was new to this world, but he wasn’t so out of touch that he failed to realize that a lot of them were just hoping he wouldn’t ‘clean house’ when his father died by having them all killed. Even the elder Lord Yue himself was shockingly blithe to the prospect, only telling him to handle things as he saw fit - to take the advice of his instructors and do what was in his own best interests.

Was his father even really capable of love? To marry someone and then treat them as so disposable, was he just too jaded by the machinations of his ill-managed harem, or was his affection for Yue Qingyuan only a paper thin matter as well - easily revoked at the slightest provocation?
The insecurity kept him trapped at first, despite his desires. He didn’t know what wrong moves might suddenly flip a switch and remove him from Lord Yue’s good graces, and Lord Yue’s good graces were the only things keeping him from dying of exposure. His mind drifted, often, to Shen Jiu. To the voice he had heard drifting through a locked door, wracked with sobs.

“I’m only here because of you! This is your fault! Qi-ge, they… they broke my legs…”

Distraught accusations and broken pleas. If Shen Jiu couldn’t walk, Yue Qi had nowhere safe to carry him to. Even if he was being mistreated, still, he was alive.

But there were advantages he could seize from his new situation that would exist regardless of his father’s nature. Cultivators could always find work. Moreover, they could learn skills that would let them survive the elements, and even sustain their bodies without food. To a child who had gone hungry most nights, the prospect held appeal well beyond immortality or martial might. When winter ended, his father sent him to Gusu for training, and to build up some social connections with the other cultivators there. For six months he couldn’t leave, and even if he could, he had no idea of the right direction to travel in to get back to the Qiu estate.

“I’ll come soon, he would think, at the end of most nights. I’ll come soon, Little Jiu, just be strong.

Be strong for now, and by the time I come, I’ll be strong enough for both of us forever.

But he had made too many mistakes. Tried to find too many shortcuts. It was one of the Lan clan children who had raced off to find the old master, after discovering him on the verge of qi deviation, bound to the spirit of his new sword. Six months of training became many months more of confinement, and when his mentor finally brought him back to the Yue estate, his father raised a hand and struck him so hard that even with his training, he saw sparks.

“Do you know what you risked?!” the elder Lord Yue demanded. “You could have destroyed your ability to cultivate any further! You could have died! What were you thinking?!”

Yue Qingyuan could only hang his head. When pressed for an answer, he didn’t even know how to begin to explain Shen Jiu to his father. Something… some little voice, in the back of his head, whispered that he shouldn’t. He wanted to love his father, maybe he even did; with all the desperation and awe of an abandoned child finally brought home and cared for. But his father, even if he loved Yue Qi, treated other people cheaply. He wouldn’t understand.
“I wanted to get strong faster,” he could only offer. A half-truth. The implication that he was worried for his father’s health, that he would need his strength for inheriting his titles, was plain. Inaccurate, nowhere near the whole picture… but enough of an explanation that no one questioned it further.

Yue Qingyuan had already been poked and prodded by healers, but at his father’s behest, he let Mu Qingfang check him over as well.

“Binding the young master’s spirit to his sword has weakened his hold on his body,” the healer pronounced; something Yue Qingyuan himself already knew. His father’s expression changed to something odd at the pronouncement, before it cleared away. “A qi deviation could be disastrous, so Young Master must take great care with himself going forward. His sword skills will also be impeded, despite their potency. I would not recommend drawing Xuan Su without great need.”

Yue Qingyuan nodded in understanding.

Some of the anger seemed to bleed away from the elder Lord Yue. Mu Qingfang prescribed a diet that would help him better attune his spiritual energy with his body again, going forward. When the healer left, his father scoffed at the diet, and tossed it aside.

“Healers are wise, but they put too much stock in food,” the lord opined. Then he sighed, and patted Yue Qingyuan’s shoulder. “Go rest, then. My son is confined to the estate for a further month, to make certain he doesn’t over-extend himself.”

Yue Qingyuan wanted to protest. Wanted to scream. It had been months on top of months; the weather was on the verge of getting bad again, his health was recovered, he needed to leave and find…

…but he couldn’t explain. And he had learned from watching with the other members of the estate that trying to would probably just extend his punishment. In the end, he could only nod, and mechanically turn to leave. Wondering if he might be able to slip out under cover of darkness. But, he feared, if he left now he would not be welcome to return. And there would always be more foul weather coming.

*Just wait a little longer, Little Jiu, Qi-ge will come and when he does, he will give you a future you could only dream about before…*
The memories of his shortcomings were hard to shake off. How badly he had failed on all fronts, and even still, Yue Qingyuan did not understand his father. The machinations of his harem made even less sense. The Yue estate often held the feeling of some strange, tarnished medley of ill-fitting things. It was bloodstained, but beautiful. Peaceful and full of hidden violence. His father ate lavish meals, rich food that Mu Qingfang warned him against - warnings that fell on deaf ears - while some of the concubines were regularly punished with starvation and beatings. Yue Qingyuan hated it. He would never have concubines, he decided. It was too cruel, too cruel to make that someone’s life, to treat them as little more than household pets.

It made him hesitate to bring Shen Jiu into things, even after finding him again. Even though that had been the whole point of it all. His friend never accepted his invitations to come back with him, and when Yue Qi knew he could only bring him in on his own favour - couldn’t protect him from his father, couldn’t guarantee the good treatment of someone with such low birth in the household - it made his insistence catch in his throat, and stay there. Even as he felt an undeniable pang of fear every time Shen Jiu left his sight again.

They snuck around. Yue Qi slipped his handlers and met up with his old friend in random corners of the city, and he knew that Shen Jiu was sneaking away behind his own mentor’s back. When they couldn’t meet up, Yue Qi left letters behind in spots where Shen Jiu said he would find them. He saved his allowance from the estate particularly for these outings, and always bought his friend a meal, always left coins with him. Shen Jiu had never been too proud to beg, but still, he couldn’t meet Yue Qi’s eyes whenever he was given coin.

“Qi-ge will give A-Jiu better things, too,” he promised.

Shen Jiu swallowed.

“This doesn’t make up for anything,” he warned.

The reminder burned. Made the guilt in him swell, made him ask Shen Jiu again - most of the time - to come back with him. But the other boy always refused, always looked uncertain and wary and fearful of the prospect.

“I lived in a fine household, as ‘favoured’ servant to the young master. I’m not doing that again,” he insisted.

If Young Master Qiu wasn’t long dead, Yue Qingyuan would have slain him with his own hands.
“I wouldn’t hurt you,” he could only swear, instead. “A-Jiu, I’m not like that.”

Shen Jiu scoffed.

“You haven’t been at it for very long yet,” he only said, and then left. Always leaving, but always coming back, so Yue Qingyuan could bear it. It was enough to ensure that if things got truly bad, Shen Jiu knew where he could go. And it was enough to feed him, to hand him coin, to bring him simple things that wouldn’t invite too many questions from the sketchy master his friend had taken up with - warm gloves, a hidden knife, a jar of wine, a pouch of emergency supplies...

It wasn’t finery. Not yet. They weren’t offerings that Yue Qingyuan could dazzle Shen Jiu with, but they were precious things that he knew would be useful. Things he remembered from having lived a hard life not all too long ago himself. He still only had one foot in and out of the door to his new life, and when he was with Shen Jiu, it made him feel more like Yue Qi again.

He dreamed, at night, of hurrying out of the estate with a bag over his shoulder, a lockbox from the treasury under one arm, his morals in tatters but his heart light as he stole into the darkness. In the dreams he always found Shen Jiu waiting not far from him. He would take his hand, and they would run, run, run, quiet until they were far enough away that Yue Qi could sweep the younger boy up with him onto Xuan Su. The blade would gleam like starlight as they raced through the sky. Shen Jiu’s arms would be warm around his neck.

They never spoke, in those dreams. It didn’t feel as though they needed to. But sometimes Yue Qi would tilt his head, and press his lips down against Shen Jiu’s - warm and soft - and then wake himself up as his heart beat fast.

Shen Jiu was his friend.

He didn’t… he wasn’t… he wasn’t sure, on the thought of kissing him. In the dream it made sense but when he woke up and thought about it, it made him feel nervous and a little bit wicked, a little bit scared. But excited, too. He thought he might die if tried it and Shen Jiu shoved him away, and thought he might fly if he tried it and the other boy kissed him back.

It was a feeling he put aside, for the time being. Some of the other young masters and mistresses he’d met were already tumbling with bed servants, ‘practicing their techniques’ they said, but the thought left Yue Qingyuan feeling sour and awkward. The idea of some pretty stranger in his bed held no appeal.
The idea of A-Jiu in his bed, though…

He felt at once like he wouldn’t know what to do, but also like even if he didn’t, it would still be good just to put his arms around the other boy and hold him. Like they used to on cold nights before. On warmer nights, sometimes Yue Qi would try it anyway only to be grouchily kicked for his troubles. He never thought he’d feel fond of those memories. But even having Shen Jiu kick him away still seemed better than the emptiness of his estate bedroom - and even that emptiness seemed better than the prospect of a stranger reaching out to touch his skin.

He only wanted Shen Jiu, he decided. He was probably a little strange like that, but it didn’t strike him as a problem. People seemed to get into more trouble when they wanted to sleep with all and sundry than if they didn’t. Even the elder Lord Yue seemed pleased that he wasn’t inquiring about such things or pursuing those kinds of matters. Anyway, it was safer overall to have his bedroom mostly to himself.

Himself and his dreams… at least until the first night that Shen Jiu flew over the wall and snuck in through a window.

“I’m sleeping here,” the other boy said. As if daring him to argue about it.

Yue Qi wouldn’t have argued. He was elated. Even though he wanted to ask why, wanted to ask Shen Jiu to stay until morning, wanted to throw his arms around him, he forced himself not to do any of those things. Shen Jiu friend narrowed his eyes critically at him, and with a challenging sort of manner, climbed onto the divan.

He didn’t protest when Yue Qi laid down too. Only turned on his side and put his back towards him.

“A-Jiu…”

“Don’t talk,” Shen Jiu snapped. A moment of tense silence followed. “If you talk, I’ll leave and won’t come back any other night.”

Come back…?
Yue Qi swallowed, and nodded in agreement. 

As long as Shen Jiu came back, there was nothing he wouldn’t agree to. Even though his mind raced with all the possible reasons for his friend to come here, to want to sleep in his bed. It was enough, he decided, that he had come here, and asked for something like this. If he could do that, then maybe Yue Qi really could keep him safe. Maybe Shen Jiu would let him try. 

~

Yue Qingyuan was sixteen when his father finally died. 

The old lord’s health had been worsening in the three years since his arrival. It wasn’t a surprise, but it still provoked a lot of complicated, conflicting feelings in his heart. He wished he had more time to get to know the man. And yet, he was also inappropriately relieved. But also intimidated - the mantle of lordship, the titles and authority, had all been passed on to him. The emperor himself wanted to meet with him. There were countless matters he needed to see to, and all of them seemed to pertain to the lives and livelihood of other people. The responsibilities were intimidating. 

The night after his father died, he fell ill. 

After a day of trying to help officially move the estate into mourning, Yue Qingyuan collapsed onto his own bed, not sure if he was more relieved or distraught but definitely tired. His limbs felt leaden and cold. It wasn’t quite dark out, and his personal servants hadn’t put the lamps on yet, but all he had the strength to do was get his head onto the pillow. 

Some hours later he woke up. It was fully dark. Someone was shaking him. 

“Qi-ge, wake up!” 

“...Wha…?”
He heard a breath of relief, so visceral it dragged him back to the time when he’d gotten sick in the middle of winter, and slept for three days. Shen Jiu had actually cried when he finally woke up. That small body practically vibrating against his own until the younger boy decided to get mad instead, and threatened to bite him if he ever slept so long again.

Yue Qi reached out and settled a hand on the other boy’s head, petting his hair in a habitual, comforting gesture, while the rest of his mind struggled to wake up. Something was wrong. He could feel it. Like knives in his chest, like ice water in his veins.

“...A-Jiu...?”

Was he sick? He felt sick.

Shen Jiu cursed, and then a trickle of energy began to ease its way into his spiritual veins. The grip on his wrist was too tight, was trembling, but Yue Qi couldn’t even muster the energy to protest a little. In a more coherent corner of his mind, he realized that he must have suffered a qi deviation. There was no reason for him to get sick, not with his cultivation level, and the symptoms were more like that than poison. The pain felt familiar, like when he’d bound himself to Xuan Su.

Xuan Su...

“...Sword...” he said.

Shen Jiu’s eyes locked with his own, and then the other boy let him go just long enough to snatch Xuan Su down from the wall, before he began crushing Yue Qi’s wrist in his hand again. Yue Qi wanted to tell him to stop, but the spiritual energy being transferred was helping too much. Xuan Su helped further, as he used his free hand to hug the sword to his chest. He could feel his heartbeats thumping, resonating; could feel the energy of the sword reaching out for his own. If his state was just a little worse, he thought, with sudden clarity, his own sword would have swallowed his spirit whole.

He shook his head a little, and let go of Xuan Su to close his free hand over Shen Jiu’s arm instead.

Eventually, the pain began to fade in earnest. Shen Jiu slumped, and Yue Qingyuan mustered enough energy to move his sword aside, so that it wouldn’t jab at him. His arm was crushed beneath the other boy’s weight. But it felt better to have that weight anyway. He turned his head,
tiredly seeking more of it, and rested his cheek on top of Shen Jiu’s hair.

“It’s alright,” he found himself murmuring, confused and habitual. “It’s alright, it’s alright, nothing bad is happening… nothing bad is here…”

As his voice trailed into indistinct mumbling, he fell asleep again.

The next time he woke up, he wasn’t completely sure what had roused him. He definitely still felt too tired to be awake. Part of him was sorely tempted to just roll over and go back to sleep, and he nearly did, but… there was no more comforting weight at his side. His arm trembled with pins and needles when he moved, painful enough to rouse him the rest of the way, even as nothing impeded his mobility.

In the dark of his room, he could faintly make out a ghostly flicker.

Yue Qingyuan sat up.

He’d barely, barely had time to see the light of a tiny spiritual flame reflecting on Shen Jiu’s face, before a rush of purifying energy surged up and snuffed it out. The ghost light died.

He gaped in horror.

“A-Jiu, was that a spirit?!” he demanded. His voice was rough from sleep.

His friend startled. With the ghostly flame gone, only moonlight lit the room, but it was enough to see Shen Jiu’s eyes widen. His expression twisted unhappily - ‘caught’ was written all over him, and Yue Qi knew that look very well.

“Go back to sleep, you idiot,” Shen Jiu hissed.

Yue Qingyuan moved to the edge of the bed instead. He frowned as his foot brushed against something.
His frown deepened when he looked down and realized that it was a broken shard of something. There were many broken shards, in fact. And a length of cord…

On suspicion he reached up, and confirmed that the token his father had given him was indeed gone.

Putting that aside for the moment, he refocused on the more pressing matter.

“Did… did A-Jiu destroy that spirit…?”

Shen Jiu’s expression turned conflicted. Guilty, angry, accusatory…

“He was going to possess you!” the younger boy snapped. “What was I supposed to do, leave it? You think I want to do that kind of thing? You think I’m a monster who’d just snap his fingers and destroy a soul for no good reason? That I’m just some - some vicious creature?”

Yue Qi boggled at him, lost. Everything still felt like half a dream, but too uncomfortable to really be one.

“This is your fault!” Shen Jiu told him. “You idiot! If I dirty my hands saving you, then it’s your fault!”

“A-Jiu…”

“Shut up! Shut up, you stupid - stupid - ! You just handed yourself over on a silver platter, wearing that thing, don’t you know anything? And don’t you dare judge me! Don’t you dare! It’s your fault!”

Shakily, Yue Qi got to his feet, and extended his hands out towards the younger boy. His heart sank further as Shen Jiu’s hands came up to roughly scrub at his cheeks. He was crying? Because of the spirit? Or because he was afraid he’d get in trouble for it?

“Okay,” he said, softly. “Okay, it’s Qi-ge’s fault. No one’s mad at A-Jiu, shh, it’s okay…”
For a minute he thought he’d be shoved away again. Shen Jiu’s breaths were rough, and the energy in the air felt downright toxic. Tentatively, he settled a hand on his friend’s shoulder. He held his breath. Braced for impact. But then Shen Jiu let out a sound like a wounded animal, and grabbed him instead.

“Qi-ge,” he cried.

Even though the situation was bad, Yue Qi’s heart couldn’t help but soar at being called for in such a way. He clutched Shen Jiu back.

“Shh,” he comforted.

“Stupid!” Shen Jiu snarled against him, gripping his inner robes so tightly that he heard a stitch rip. “Stupid, stupid, you’re so stupid…”

“En, Qi-ge is the dumbest, everyone knows,” he gently agreed, moving his hands in slow, soothing circles. He still wasn’t sure what had happened, and he didn’t like that it had caused Shen Jiu distress, but if it led to this… he wasn’t sure he minded it very much.

“Don’t they teach you anything?! No, of course they don’t! You wouldn’t be a fit animal for slaughter if they did. That pig! That evil old fucker! He deserved it, he deserved worse,” Shen Jiu hissed.

Who was he talking about? The spirit?

Inwardly, Yue Qi sighed, putting together a better picture of likely events as he woke up more. The Yue estate had a long and dark history, and his father had badly neglected his cultivation, so it wasn’t surprising that a few malevolent spirits could crop up every now and again. With the lord passing, doubtless a death on the estate had stirred some things up even further. A wicked spirit had tried to upset him, had probably taken advantage of his qi deviation, and had frightened the wits out of Shen Jiu in the process.

He added cleansing the estate to his mental list of things to do, and put it aside in order to focus on comforting his rattled companion.
After a minute, Shen Jiu pulled back enough to pin him with an unexpectedly intense stare.

“They’re going to eat you alive,” the younger boy murmured, with a voice of dawning horror.

Yue Qi frowned, and pressed a hand to his brow. Shen Jiu was clearly exhausted, had even loaned him his spiritual energy, and his training had thus far been handled by that sketchy master of his. There was nothing else of danger in the room. He could tell. If his friend was falling into errant thoughts or paranoia, then he might be on the verge of a qi deviation now, too.

“It’s safe now, A-Jiu, there’s no more danger,” he comforted.

The younger boy shook his head. But he didn’t resist as Yue Qi led him back to the divan. Yue Qi winced as his foot landed on one of the broken pieces of his father’s token. He wanted to ask what had happened to it, but as soon as he opened his mouth, he closed it again. If Shen Jiu had broken it somehow, asking would probably just upset him and make him defensive all over again. And most likely, Yue Qi had broken it himself with his qi deviation - the token was connected to him, after all. It might have even broken because of the deviation itself, the loss of internal harmony shattering the family treasure.

He spared it a single sigh of regret, before he tucked Shen Jiu back into the blankets, and slumped in beside him.

Really, a qi deviation was dangerous enough to him that he was lucky to still be alive, malevolent spirits or no. Reaching over, he gave in to temptation, and cupped Shen Jiu’s cheek with his hand.

“A-Jiu saved me again,” he murmured.

There was a moment of silence. His eyes slid shut, exhaustion winning out. Before he drifted off to sleep, though, he felt an arm curl possessively around him.

“Yes,” Shen Jiu said, in a quiet, fierce voice. Something soft brushed against his lips. “Qi-ge owes me his life. It belongs to me. It’s mine. Qi-ge is mine.”

He wanted to reply - a vague agreement was creeping up behind his lips, along with another soothing pat - but the need for sleep won out instead.
When next he woke, the warm and comforting weight was gone from his bed again. The voice calling to him also wasn’t that of one of the personal servants assigned to him by his father, but rather, one of the senior servants who worked for the estate. Yue Qingyuan felt heavy and still tired as he pushed himself awake. It was clearly still just early morning - the day after his father’s death, he wasn’t allowed to lie in a little? Nobles were so strange, sometimes…

But then the urgency in the senior servant’s tone registered.

“Young Master Yue, you need to come quickly! Something terrible has happened!”

Hastily, Yue Qingyuan dressed, and then rushed out to see what the matter was. He didn’t bother with any of his finery, just throwing on the training clothes he’d worn at Gusu, since his servants were nowhere to be seen and he couldn’t waste the time. He did stop and quietly call for A-Jiu, to see if the other boy was hiding somewhere, but there was no answer.

He didn’t linger. Some part of him was afraid that his friend had been caught sneaking around, and if that was the case, he needed to hurry to make certain that nothing bad happened.

When he got to the outdoor area of his courtyard, however, he immediately found out where his personal servants had gone.

The three boys lay dead on the walkway.

Yue Qingyuan froze in absolute shock. While he had seen dead bodies before, he had yet to kill anyone himself. He had barely even taken up his sword against walking corpses, in fact, although he had struck several of those down. Most of the bodies he’d seen were the kind that had been dead a long while; having died of exposure when he lived on the streets, or having risen again to cause problems that a burgeoning young cultivator might still be able to handle.

His personal servants probably hadn’t been dead for more than a few hours. Their throats were red slashes. Two of them had defensive wounds on their arms as well. They were in their nightclothes - by the looks of it, someone had killed them in their rooms, and then dragged them out where they could be found.

Glassy eyes stared up at nothing. The youngest boy was the same age as Shen Jiu.
Yue Qingyuan stared in shock, and for some reason, something tugged at the back of his mind. What was it that had happened at the Qiu estate? Someone had killed all the men before they burned the place down. He’d never gotten a straight answer from Shen Jiu on how he managed to escape that…

Swallowing, he shook the errant thought away. Last night had been a bad night. A malevolent spirit had even gotten into his rooms. Clearly, his father’s death had upset something latent in the grounds. It was a good thing he had attended to his training very well. He was grateful to his instructors at Gusu for drilling proper procedures into him, too, because it made it easier to push back the shock as he sent the senior servant to go find something to cover the bodies with, until they could be taken away.

New worries replaced his initial, stray thought. Had A-Jiu gotten away safely…?

Without hide nor hair to be seen of the other boy, there wasn’t much for Yue Qingyuan to do on that front. He’d just have to keep his eyes open and hope that Shen Jiu hadn’t run into trouble. In the meantime, he needed to make sure that the bodies were respectfully attended to, and also cleanse the grounds to the best of his abilities. The rest of the estate needed to be checked on, too, to make certain nothing bad had befallen anyone else. Yue Qingyuan wasn’t confident in his ability to handle a problem of this magnitude on his own just yet, either. He was due for a visit to the imperial palace, to pay his respects to the emperor as the new lord. While he was there, he would have to request assistance in making sure the estate was properly sanctified, and any lingering resentful energy was banished.

The guilt he felt as he looked at the dead boys couldn’t be assuaged, either. What a mess… 
The current emperor was not a young man, but he certainly looked it.

Jun Wu was a serenely handsome figure, who had more of the bearing of a saint than an emperor. While the man wore the expected finery to any grand proceeding or audience, and looked thoroughly remarkable in it, most of the time, his manner and bearing brought to mind something more of a very well-off cultivator than the leader of a nation. Only at a glance, however. The emperor’s actual bearing spoke very much of a long and storied life, and gave an impression of many secrets veiled behind his eyes. Yet, the veil itself felt fitting and benevolent; as if the great leader was only sheltering others from weights and burdens until they might be more ready to bear them, too.

In the grandeur of the Imperial Palace, the emperor seemed almost as though he was indulging the world with the finery around him. There was an air to him that said he was above even the golden pillars and extravagant carvings, so that one would never even guess that the palace was built upon his ascension, and not something he had inherited from previous, far more materialistic rulers.

When he looked at Yue Qingyuan, there was sympathy in his eyes. Not enough to endanger propriety, but enough that Yue Qingyuan felt certain that the emperor really did feel some kinship towards the mess of emotions in his heart.

They exchanged formal greetings, and the emperor invited the new Lord Yue to walk with him through one of his favourite gardens. Vivid flowers bloomed around a bejeweled pavilion.

“Lord Yue’s father has left him a burdensome legacy,” the emperor mused. “He must feel overwhelmed. It would be hard enough for someone so young to take on these responsibilities, but, Lord Yue has scarcely had time to adjust to his new life in the first place…”

Yue Qingyuan couldn’t deny it. For one, he’d be arguing with the emperor if he did. For another, it was true.

So instead he inclined his head in agreement.

“The emperor's sympathy is a balm to soothe any soul. This lord will do his utmost to fulfill his duties and serve his emperor,” he promised.

Jun Wu waved off his assurances.
“Worry less about serving for now, and more about the matters close at hand,” he emperor advised. “When there is a need for Lord Yue, he will be called. But tell me, what sort of aims does this new lord aspire to? What are his goals, and what is his wish?”

Yue Qingyuan hesitated. He didn’t want seem weak or indifferent, but he didn’t think that dishonesty would go over well, either. When the emperor was younger, it was said, he had achieved the title of Crown Prince by speaking earnest and heartfelt words of his desire to help the common man. The sentiments rang so true that even the previous emperor, who was not known for any preoccupation towards the average citizen, felt moved to tears.

Yet, it was also widely known - undeniable, even - that Jun Wu had held onto his title and preserved his seat of power by killing most of his own family, and sacrificing many other people in the name of that goal. For the sake of the common people’s best interests, though, demanding the lives of nobles who meant to scheme and conspire didn’t seem like an unfair trade. An emperor held innumerable lives in his hands.

Yue Qingyuan wanted to say that he would like to help people too. It was true enough, in its way; he certainly didn’t want to be an irresponsible leader, or cause harm. But…

Jun Wu looked at him with a politely patient expression.

“To be honest, my emperor, right now this lord’s only wish is to look after his friends and the people he is beholden to,” he admitted.

For a moment, he felt very definitely like he was being assessed. Even intensely. As if every fragment of his body was being portioned out, examined, weighed, and then carefully slotted back into place. To say it was intimidating was an understatement. But when it was done, the emperor tilted his head, and smiled at him.

“In that case, Lord Yue, we shall become friends.”
In the end, despite his many worries - and frustration with his many duties - Yue Qingyuan didn’t have to track Shen Jiu down.

A few nights after the incidents following his father’s death, the younger boy came clambering through his window again.

“A-Jiu!” Yue Qi exclaimed, and barely waited until he was down from the window before rushing to embrace him.

Shen Jiu made a face at him.

“Don’t think you can just touch me however you please, just because I’ve permitted some things!” he said. But despite saying so, he didn’t move away. And after a moment more of grumbling, he subsided, and even returned the hug. When Yue Qi finally pulled back, he anxiously checked Shen Jiu over. But apart from a few bruises here and there - which seemed inevitable - the other boy was fine.

“I was too worried. My personal servants were killed that night you came, did you have any trouble when you were leaving? Were you hurt?”

Shen Jiu’s expression closed off, and he folded his arms.

“No trouble,” he said. “But I saw a few rats. This place is full of them, you know.”

Yue Qi laughed in relief.

“Rats, I can handle,” he said.

“Don’t be too sure,” Shen Jiu muttered. Then he cleared his throat. “You should be resting, you damaged your cultivation.”
Reaching over, the younger boy grabbed his wrist and checked his pulse.

Yue Qingyuan wanted to laugh again. To be worried over by this person again, it wasn’t something he really had a right to. But he couldn’t turn it away. He felt a little giddy about it.

“The damage wasn’t too bad, thanks to a certain someone’s help. Does A-Jiu even know what he’s doing with that?” he couldn’t help but wonder. Reading pulses wasn’t even something he’d managed to learn yet, despite his studies.

Shen Jiu curled a lip and gave him a withering look.

“I know more than you,” he said.

“That still might not be much.”

“You think some fancy noble instructor’s going to teach you everything? I bet I’ve learned more running errands for my master than you have since you got here.”

Yue Qingyuan nodded in a placating fashion. He didn’t want to argue. But that topic did remind him of another worry - Shen Jiu’s disreputable ‘teacher’.

Now that his father was dead, as grim as it was to think of it that way, Yue Qingyuan was master of the estate. He wasn’t stupid enough to think that this gave him absolute power; there were still a lot of senior servants who knew more about running the place than he did, and he hadn’t inherited his father’s ministry position. He’d still have to rank highly in the next Imperial testing session and acquit himself well to earn an entry-level post. That meant that the estate would be subsisting off of his inheritance in the meanwhile. It wasn’t a strong position to be in, especially with his father’s concubines to look after.

His father’s remaining spouses had gone back to their maiden families, at least. Yue Qingyuan was glad that none of them had been turned away. But the concubines were another matter. Only one of them had left to go back to their original home. The others had nowhere else that would take them. The prospects for widows and widowers was bleak, they were often considered bad luck or ‘used goods’.
So there was that to consider. While the nature of it had changed, his father had still more or less left behind most of his complicated and quarrelsome harem. Technically, Yue Qingyuan was in his rights to just toss them all out if he wanted. He had no siblings to argue the point, no one to defend the well-being of these people, but how could he do such a thing? He knew what it was like to live with nothing. It wasn’t a fate he’d ever lightly consign someone else to.

However, on the whole, Yue Qingyuan’s prospects were good. He felt like he finally had something secure to offer.

When Shen Jiu let go of his wrist, Yue Qi reached out, and caught his hand.

“A-Jiu,” he said. “Qi-ge is lord of this place now. This estate is his home. It should be A-Jiu’s home, too.”

Shen Jiu met his gaze, only to quickly look away again. He snatched his hand back. Yue Qi fought to keep his expression from falling.

“What makes you think I want that?” the younger boy asked.

Yue Qingyuan shook his head.

“Because… why wouldn’t A-Jiu want it?” he countered. “A roof over his head, nice clothes to wear, good food to eat. Protection and safety. Just live here! A-Jiu wouldn’t have to do anything else if he doesn’t want to…”

Shen Jiu let out a bitter scoff.

“Oh good, another charity case for Lord Yue to support,” he sneered. “Don’t you have enough already? This estate is full of mouths to feed, how does Lord Yue plan to support yet another layabout?”

Yue Qingyuan hesitated.

It wasn’t that Shen Jiu didn’t have a point, but even so…
"Wouldn’t it be better than how things are now, at least?” he asked.

Shen Jiu’s sneer relaxed just a little bit, but not by much.

"Would it?” he said, sounding too serious for it just to be an act. “If I depend on your strength, what happens when that fails? Lord Yue certainly thinks little of my own prospects, but I haven’t just been sitting around, still waiting for him to rescue me somehow! I have an apprenticeship—"

"With what master?” Yue Qingyuan couldn’t help but counter, clenching a fist. “That disreputable bastard who’s been taking advantage of you?”

The sneer tightened back up again.

"Yes, him,” Shen Jiu replied. “Not all of us have the luxury of a secret noble bloodline and access to a bunch of fancy teachers—"

“But you do now!” Yue Qi argued, seizing his hand again. “If A-Jiu wants these things, then why not just have them? I’m not so hard done by that I can’t support such a thing! I’ll hire someone to teach A-Jiu formally. A proper master cultivator. Or I can send him to Gusu! That’s where I learned a lot of this. With this lord's backing, A-Jiu could have all the same training as a noble young master!”

Shen Jiu hesitated.

He pulled his hand away, and narrowed his eyes, but Yue Qingyuan could see that he had already struck a chord with him.

“You’d do that?” he asked, warily. “Just… let me go away, get enough training that I wouldn’t even need to rely on you after that?”

Yue Qi nodded.
“Of course!” he said. “I don’t want A-Jiu to go away, but if this is what he wants, then yes! I’ll help with all of it!”

“What if I don’t come back?” Shen Jiu pressed.

Yue Qi’s conviction faltered, just a little.

But then he mustered himself.

“If that’s what A-Jiu chooses, what can I do but accept it?” he said. "A-Jiu's not my slave."

His friend regarded him for a long moment. It was honestly hard for Yue Qi to tell what he was thinking. His expression was resolutely blank, not giving anything away. It took long enough that he began to feel a little worried. Part of him wanted to protest - he’d always wanted the best for Shen Jiu, and to look after him. Should it really seem so suspicious? But then he remembered the Qiu estate, and any protests died in his throat.

He didn’t have the right to Shen Jiu’s trust anymore.

He only had the hope that he could earn it back again.

Finally, the younger boy looked away.

“Alright,” he said. “I want training. I want to go to Gusu. I’m going to become a legendary immortal cultivator. The kind that people respect. I’m going to have power that's my own.”

Yue Qi nodded in understanding.

“Then, Qi-ge has every faith that A-Jiu will succeed,” he agreed.

Very, very tentatively, Shen Jiu glanced back at him again, and smiled.
It wasn’t forgiveness. But maybe it was reconciliation, just the same.

~

Years and years later, Yue Qingyuan watched a properly trained young cultivator make his way through several trials with technical finesse, and a considerable amount of underhanded thinking. He watched, incapable of looking away. And he knew it was entirely inappropriate, but for some reason, he found himself feeling the same way he’d felt when he’d unexpectedly glimpsed a dead friend in a crowded street.

He felt like he had been living in a world where A-Jiu was gone.

Until suddenly… he wasn’t.

Chapter End Notes

YQY’s POV was originally gonna be one chapter, but the flashbacks ended up longer than expected, so it's split into two! But the Bing-ge vs Bing-mei extra might be finished before the next part, since this was sort of an unexpected tangent. Thanks for the comments and support, guys, you're the best! ^_^
Sometimes, Yue Qingyuan dreamed of a world where Shen Qingqiu never stopped loving him.

Contrary to the soothing notion of the premise, these dreams were always nightmares. Nothing good ever truly happened in them, even when they seemed to answer some old and aching wish of his.

In the dreams, Shen Qingqiu never rescued Liu Qingge from his qi deviation. Which meant that Yue Qingyuan never struck him - which could be considered good, in one way. He’s always felt disgusted with himself for assuming the worst and striking his own husband like that. But as if to twist and distort the trajectory of his own desires, in the dream it was Liu Qingge who ended up suffering more instead; nearly dying from his deviation and requiring Yue Qingyuan’s direct intervention to save him, ending up bedridden for weeks instead of just a few days.

Sometimes he would dream that Shen Qingqiu was never poisoned - which again, was like a granted wish for his own desires, a balm for his regrets. But then Liu Qingge would be captured by demons. The message of the dreams seemed to be that, no matter what, one of them would have been forced to suffer in the course of being Yue Qingyuan’s husbands.

A thorough condemnation of his choice to break his vows in the first place.

Things would only get worse from there, too. This dream version of Shen Qingqiu still welcomed Yue Qingyuan in his bed, still looked at him covetously, and vied for his attention, and barely tolerated Luo Binghe. But even his sweetest words were only thinly disguising a pain that was apparent in his eyes; and his nails when they pressed against Yue Qingyuan’s skin always dug deep, as if to tear him apart. Yue Qingyuan wished he could have dreamed of never having married
Liu Qingge instead, but that relief wasn’t to be his. Even the words and actions he took felt somewhat out of his own control. Apologies he wanted to offer never passed his lips; he spoke like a man who had never learned the lessons of the past decade or so. His nights were filled with endless fights, a never-ending stream of catastrophes that seemed so big for a harem so small; and yet reminded him, mercilessly, of when he had been young and first inherited his title. Of how he had looked around the grounds of the Yue estate, and thought with conviction that he would not make his father’s mistakes.

In the night, he sat awake in the dark, and tried to figure out how it had all fallen apart.

It was his fault. That was the only thing he was sure of.

But at what point had he become a person who considered his own promises cheap, and easily broken? Maybe it started with the first promise he broke, when he failed to go back for Little Jiu. He could have gone back, he realized, with the gift of hindsight. His father wouldn’t have turned him out - the thought twisted his lips into a bitter smile. No, that person would have excused far worse things in order to keep Yue Qingyuan complacent and quiet. A grown man who had spent years dealing with the intrigues of court - however clumsily - could see what a desperate, foolish teenager could not.

He should have been willing to risk anything for his Little Jiu’s sake, regardless of his awareness of his father’s real limits and intentions. And yet, he had tried to be smart about it.

Ah, Yue Qi. A futile endeavour if ever there was one.

And so he had broken his promise to rescue the other boy - or at least, failed to keep it, despite meaning to. Maybe that was the first moment when part of him decided that his own promises were cheap. That he might break them even when he was trying and wishing so desperately to keep them, so perhaps it was simply better to break them on his own terms, than to wait for it to happen in the worst possible ways.

He had years to reminisce on how thorough his failures as a husband were. He was well-practiced at it; was accustomed to worrying over it even before he had committed his most grievous sin. It wasn’t only Yue Qingyuan who knew it, either. He still remembered the first time A-Jiu had stirred up trouble enough to draw the emperor’s attention. Jun Wu’s assessing eyes had turned over his husband, and Yue Qinyuan had never understood with such clarity then that this man could, with a single word, or even a gesture, take A-Jiu’s life.

Shen Qingqiu had looked calm as he knelt, but Yue Qingyuan could see the slight tremble in his
That incident had only been a minor one, at least. A-Jiu had been among a group of talented noble family members chosen to perform a fan dance, the opening for the festivities preceding a conference at the palace. Yue Qingyuan had felt proud of his husband, confident in his skills and eager to impress upon the emperor that the man he’d married was exemplary. But then there had been some scuffle among the dancers, difficult to see clearly, and one of the palace eunuchs had declared that from his vantage point, he’d seen Shen Qingqiu try to trip one of the other dancers.

For disrupting the proceedings and causing such an egregious display before the emperor, some punishment would not be avoided.

“Forgive this lord’s husband, it was an honest mistake. This lord will accept all punishments on his husband’s behalf, it is his own fault for not seeing to it that his husband was adequately trained in etiquette and comportment…”

Jun Wu had sighed, and after a moment, agreed. Shen Qingqiu’s face was white as he left; unable to dare speak a word, lest it make things worse. Yue Qingyuan got off lightly, anyway - disrupting an important ceremony like that was the sort of thing that lesser servants were executed for. A loss of rank wouldn’t have been unheard of either. Yue Qingyuan only had to endure several strikes of a lash; embarrassing for a lord of his status, but nothing he couldn’t recover from.

Afterwards, the emperor spoke with him privately.

“If Shen Qingqiu is not fit to meet the expectations of his new station, then it is only understandable. Not everyone has the right temperament for these things.”

“This lord’s husband is still learning, it is true, but it is this lord’s fault for accepting the request on behalf of his husband before he was truly ready for this level of ceremony. This lord should have declined it. It was his own pride that interfered.”

“It is clear Lord Yue loves his First Husband dearly. Alas, if those of us who hold lofty stations needed to only concern ourselves with love, the imperial harem would be empty.”

“...”
“...Lord Yue is young yet. There are far worse vices for young lords to indulge in than affection to their First Spouse, but only remember - youth does not last forever. And responsibilities cannot be ignored.”

Until his dying day, Yue Qingyuan would be grateful that Jun Wu was generous in his forgiveness. At least, compared to his predecessors, and many of the other lords and ladies who occupied the imperial court. But his words, and so many others, had painted a picture of the world that the young Yue Qi never would have believed in. And yet, at some point, he had begun to see things in terms of that version of the world and nothing else.

How many voices had he listened to, telling him that he was doing Shen Qingqiu a disservice by making him First Husband, by letting him 'shoulder the burdens of a household alone’?

How many voices, telling him it was his duty to keep his husband in line, his responsibility not only to others but also to his husband; to be the lord, to keep ‘that man’ in his place?

How many voices, whispering, prodding, insisting that this was the way things had to be for a reason, that Yue Qingyuan was being reckless, naive, romantic, irresponsible, that he was hurting his husband, hurting himself, failing, failing, failing…

But it would be too easy to blame those influences. In the end, he still had to listen to them. He still had to believe in what they were saying, and act in accordance with it. To buy into the absurd narrative of Yue Qingyuan, the great and gracious lord, and Shen Qingqiu, the selfish and scheming spouse.

“Qi-ge, I didn’t try to trip anyone, do you really believe I’m that foolish?”

“Why did you go and tell the emperor to punish you, what if he’d just punished both of us? Don’t you ever think sensibly about things?”

“What did they do? How bad is it? Let me see, no, shut up, hold still and let me see…”

“...Whoever set us up is going to wish they’d failed…”

It always frightened him when Shen Qingqiu spoke of revenge. It hadn’t when they were children, when the scope of his retribution was biting or kicking or maybe putting something rotten in
another child’s sleeping place. But they weren’t dealing with such small things anymore, and Yue Qingyuan’s heart felt like it took years to stop lurching in dread any time he thought of Jun Wu’s lofty, imperial gaze turning towards Shen Qingqiu. Not the eyes of his friend, the man who dressed like a well-off cultivator and made light jokes about the weather, who sighed in a chagrined fashion whenever he had to go ‘be official’. But the Emperor. The man who had achieved the highest seat of power in the world, and made life and death decisions every day.

No matter what, he hadn’t wanted that gaze to fall on Shen Qingqiu again.

“A-Jiu, don’t do anything. It’s over, it’s done with. Let the matter go.”

“Of course. What does my lord imagine I would do?”

“I’m serious.”

“This husband listens and obeys.”

How many times had he heard that sentence come out of Shen Qingqiu’s mouth? ‘Listens and obeys’? But in the end, he knew he couldn’t really control A-Jiu. Maybe that was why the accusations that his husband was ‘out of hand’ weren’t something he could simply shrug off. It was true. It was true and it was dangerous, too, because however smart and canny and quick-witted Shen Qingqiu was, he wasn’t infallible. He laid traps but he fell into other people’s as well. He was easy to incite to rage, quick to think the worst of others, and that incident wouldn’t be the last of its kind.

In the dark of his room, Yue Qingyuan shook his head at himself.

Maybe his ultimate fault really was his first, when it came right down to it. Not only the broken promise, but also the failure itself. He’d never been strong enough to protect his husband. Never strong enough to rescue him. All his attempts fell short; unlike Lord Luo. A demon, showing him up so thoroughly and undeniably that he didn’t even know what to do with the shame.

Years and years and he still wasn’t over it. He never would be. If nothing else could have highlighted how narrow his view of the world had truly become, it was that. ‘Everyone knew’ so many ‘common sense’ things about lords and demons and marriage and bloodlines, merit and skill and the weight of a person’s soul. So many things that ‘everyone knew’, that everyone said, but Yue Qingyuan lived in a world where the Demon Lord Luo Binghe took better care of his husband
than he did. It would take an even greater fool than him to still believe what everyone knew, in light of such astounding evidence to the contrary of all ‘common sense’.

He tried to meditate before he dared to attempt some sleep for the night.

The nightmare he fell into was the worst one yet.

~

Yue Qingyuan accepted the gift from his emperor with all the grace he could muster, under the circumstances. If his fate and fortunes had not depended on it, he did not think he could have managed to avoid cracking.

His heart felt like a dead weight in his chest. Exhaustion had become his constant companion, these past few months especially. Ever since his qi deviation, following Liu Qingge’s run-in with an unknown assassin, he had felt the depletion of his spiritual energy down to the marrow of his bones. It was all he could do to keep up a strong front, and he knew he wasn’t entirely succeeding.

He had dreaded something like this ever since his qi deviation became widely known; and for all his virtues, all his wisdom, the emperor had handed him the last thing he needed with such pomp and public ceremony, it would be impossible to refuse.

The Gem of Ensured Fertility was a rare item indeed. It was the method by which the emperor himself had been conceived. To award it to Yue Qingyuan and his First Husband was a sign of great favour, delivered at an auspicious time of year, with the implication made clear that the emperor valued Yue Qingyuan’s loyalty, and looked forward to having his heir rise to lofty heights in his service as well. The gem itself was not a true mineral, of course; it was only called that because of its appearance. In reality it was a special type of spirit plant that grew from a rare sort of mushroom, like a bubble that formed above the cap and took thousands of years to grow. The end result was a faceted, hollow ‘gem’ that shimmered like a rainbow, and was big enough to hold even
several infants to term.

Twins, even triplets, were not uncommon with the use of a Gem of Ensured Fertility.

It was only when he returned to the estate that Yue Qingyuan allowed himself a moment to stare at the priceless object in despair.

Even knowing better, he couldn’t fend off the sudden surge of resentment in his heart. The emperor had made it impossible for him! Impossible! Not that he really knew, because it wasn’t something that Yue Qingyuan spoke of. That fear in his heart, that desire to bring no child of his into this world, was utterly unspoken. He could scarcely protect A-Jiu, or even a mighty, well-connected man like Liu Qingge. Would any child of his even live to adulthood? Or would some scheme steal the breath from their lungs before they had barely learned how to draw it?

What was he going to do…?

…A-Jiu would never forgive him. His first child would be, at the emperor’s behest, Liu Qingge’s. Not Shen Qingqiu’s.

Even so, when he had finally secured the gem in his chambers with two of his trusted servants to stand guard over it, his footsteps made their way to the Second Husband’s courtyard. The heaviness in him wouldn’t abate. He didn’t know what to do, and despite everything, on some level his instinct was still to go and find the person who always had an idea.

When he came to Shen Qingqiu’s rooms, to say that his reception was frosty would have been an understatement. Luo Binghe hurried away, eager to be rid of it himself. Poor boy.

A-Jiu didn’t look up from his vanity.

“So,” his husband said. “Liu Qingge is good enough to give you an heir.”

Yue Qingyuan closed his eyes.

“It isn’t about who’s ‘good enough’,” he replied.
There was a snap. Something on Shen Qingqiu’s vanity table broke in his hands. Yue Qingyuan didn’t even manage to see what it was, precisely, before it was thrown angrily aside. With a fury that reminded him that his second husband was deadlier than his ‘first’, A-Jiu stood up, and rounded on him.

“How many hints did it take before the emperor gave you the excuse you needed?” Shen Qingqiu demanded. His expression was cold. Angry.

His eyes were bloodshot.

Yue Qingyuan blinked in shock.

“What?”

A sneer shattered the thin veneer of his second husband’s calm.

“Of course!” Shen Qingqiu mocked. “Of course you’ll pretend you had nothing to do with this! Certainly not, no. Poor Qi-ge was blindsided, he had no idea at all, oh A-Jiu will just have to forgive him! It’s not as if he can turn down such a gift from the emperor, after all! His hands are nicely tied, now that he has his perfect blue-blooded breeding stock, here to give him a good child! A-Jiu must calm down! He has to heel, like a dog, and promote filial harmony! Oh, A-Jiu is a wonderful husband when someone needs some dirty work done, but what sane lord would ever beget an heir with him?! What fool, what utter fool would - would-!”

Shen Qingqiu’s voice cracked. He looked wild and furious, and Yue Qingyuan was still reeling from his accusation when the first blow hit.

It wasn’t even a combatant’s strike. His head barely turned from the slap, but with one delivered, it seemed like a dam had burst. A-Jiu lashed out like a wounded animal. His hits were utterly haphazard, messy and inconsistent, as he just seemed to try and hurt any part of Yue Qingyuan that he could reach. There was still force to the strikes, and random flares of qi, but it wasn’t nearly the kind of ‘fight’ he knew his husband to be capable of.

He didn’t try to fight back. Just winced as another bruise landed, and then reached out to finally restrain the hands striking him, as his mind caught up with things. A-Jiu wrenched his wrists free and shoved him back towards the door with a furious cry.
“Get out!” he demanded.

“A-Jiu, I-”

“Get out! Get out, I don’t want to hear it, I don’t want to hear you lie to my face about this again!”

Yue Qingyuan froze in place.

Lie. Again.

Because he had been lying, in the past. He had lied to his husband many times about why they couldn’t have a child. He had deflected and dismissed, put it aside, and now… now, it was happening anyway, and it wouldn’t be A-Jiu’s child. He was having a child, but it was with a different person. Liu Qingge was… he couldn’t even think of it, somehow. Despite everything they’d been through, this notion, this concept, that Yue Qingyuan was going to have a child and it wouldn’t be…

He felt a sense of loss and a depth of remorse that he didn’t know how to describe.

Couldn’t begin to.

He had told so many lies on this topic, now there was no way for the truth to be believed. Xiu Ya whipped past his head and lodged itself in the wall beside the door. Its bright blade gleamed threateningly, its owner looked on the verge of a qi deviation brought on by his lord’s own presence.

“Get out!” Shen Qingqiu snarled.

Yue Qingyuan got out.

He had enough presence of mind left to send his husband’s apprentice to him, to keep an eye on things and alert the household if an actual qi deviation occurred. Part of him wanted to stay, to do it
himself. What should he do? He knew what most of his friends would advise; take a firm hand, don’t let his husband’s ‘hysterics’ stand, and then once he’d been forcefully subdued, reassure him firmly but lovingly. But where he might have at least tried that before, in that moment, he couldn’t think that it would work. And he knew what he wanted to do, which was to fold A-Jiu into his arms and hold on until the other man stopped hitting and clutched him back instead, letting A-Jiu vent his anguish while Yue Qi accepted his blame.

Something told him that wouldn’t work this time either, though.

When things calmed down, he’d…

He didn’t even know what he would do.

Letting out a weary breath, he headed for the path to the First Husband’s courtyard.

Liu Qingge’s anxieties were much less complex than Shen Qingqiu’s. The man was concerned over the timing of bringing a child into the household, with all that they’d endured, but there was a quality to him that spoke of anticipation as well. Some secret hopefulness, sweet and uncomplicated. It should have softened things, but instead, Yue Qingyuan found himself wondering what A-Jiu’s expression would have ever been like, if he’d agreed to have a child with him. Would there have been that same softness? Would he have tried to put on a pragmatic front, only to melt when it was dark and the two of them were wrapped around one another, and he could whisper words that he would pretend he’d never said come morning? Would he have acted like the whole ordeal was a massive inconvenience, but still have guarded their unborn child with humbling ferocity?

It wasn’t fair to Liu Qingge, not at all, to have his thoughts fixate in this direction. Yue Qingyuan forced himself to push the notion aside, and took his other husband’s hands instead. Whatever else had happened, they were going to be parents. There was no choice, not any longer. The emperor had sent cornered them with good intentions. They would have to protect this child, have to hope for the best, and there were few souls more gallant than Liu Qingge.

“It will be alright,” Yue Qingyuan said, to himself as much as his husband.

Liu Qingge hesitated. Then he squared his shoulders.

“It will,” he vowed. “But, I will not let that man near our child.”
Yue Qingyuan closed his eyes.

It wasn’t surprising. To say that Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge did not get along was an understatement. Even he had underestimated how unmanageable and hostile their relationship was bound to become. On some level, he had hoped that, eventually, A-Jiu would begin to see how beneficial Liu Qingge’s skills and connections were, and his inner practicality would win out over his resentment. And Liu Qingge was the type to let bygones by bygones… so long as the behaviour towards him actually changed.

But things had only worsened over time, and it wasn’t just that Shen Qingqiu couldn’t accept Liu Qingge; Liu Qingge himself had grown to utterly disdain and despise Shen Qingqiu. When he had first gotten engaged, many of his fellow lords and ladies had warned him that friction and jealousy would be inevitable - particularly since he had ‘spoiled’ his A-Jiu so thoroughly. But none had much advice for what to do when two spouses loathed each other to the point of drawing swords whenever they were in the same room for more than ten minutes.

“A-Jiu wouldn’t hurt a child,” Yue Qingyuan said. Even as the words left his mouth, his thoughts veered sharply towards memories of Luo Binghe being locked in the woodshed. That kitchen boy Shen Qingqiu had beaten and tossed out, barely fifteen. The sixteen-year-old maid who’d gotten pregnant and tried to accuse Yue Qingyuan of siring her child, only to suffer a suspicious miscarriage before A-Jiu coldly flung the proof of her dalliance with one of Yue Qingyuan’s apprentices in her face. The little messenger boy, fourteen, who Yue Qingyuan had found kneeling in the freezing snow - having been there for hours - after he came back from a week-long trip. Nearly dead of the cold and locked out of the estate buildings.

No, children in general were not especially sacred to A-Jiu.

_I was a child once, too, and no one spared me my portion of suffering_, he would say, as if that justified it.

_They should have_, Yue Qingyuan could only reply. But his husband would never see that as a reason to change, and the bitterness on his face whenever they spoke of their shared childhood would only provoke his own guilt in return.

“Send him away,” Liu Qingge demanded.

Yue Qingyuan balked.
“No,” he denied, immediate and reflexive. This was A-Jiu’s home. “Second Husband has no maiden family, no other place to live. Where does First Husband imagine we would send him?”

Liu Qingge looked as if he wanted to make a very inappropriate suggestion.

Instead, after a moment, he only shrugged.

“The palace?” he suggested. “Surely he has some ‘friend’ or other who would host him for a few months, at least.”

Yue Qingyuan almost voiced another, immediate refusal. But the words caught in hesitation, and he sighed instead. This was A-Jiu’s home, and he wouldn’t send him away from it. But in light of everything that had happened… there was every chance that Shen Qingqiu wouldn’t want to stay, and be around to watch Yue Qingyuan and Liu Qingge combine their spiritual essence into the living gemstone, to carefully tend and support the new life that would be seeded within, or to watch that life transform into a child that wasn’t his.

“...I’ll consider it,” he could only say, after a moment. When A-Jiu was ready to talk, then… then, they would talk.

Liu Qingge wasn’t happy to get such an uncommitted answer, he could tell, but when he tried to press, Yue Qingyuan cut him off by suggesting they sleep instead. The gem was safely guarded in his chambers, and Yue Qingyuan didn’t feel like going back to an empty bed for the night, but he wasn’t in the mood for sex, and Liu Qingge wasn’t in the mood for sleeping - so he rested in the bed, unable to escape his tumultuous thoughts, while Liu Qingge meditated.

Time passed. Shifted and drifted and slipped away into the relentless progress of days, and the uncertainty of a tense, unwieldy household atmosphere. Shen Qingqiu refused to see Yue Qingyuan, and put himself in a sort of solitary confinement; shut in his courtyard with only the few servants he’d tolerate for company. Luo Binghe confirmed that there’d been no qi deviations or dangerous trouble. Just a black cloud of emotion that cast its pall over the entire estate.

Without much else to do to try and put things off, Yue Qingyuan hired a fortune teller to give them an auspicious date for when the Gem of Ensured Fertility ought to be given the necessary spiritual energy and blood sacrifices - only minor donations from the parents, of course - in order to make use of it. The elderly woman who came by way of several recommendations gave them a three day grace period, which wasn’t at all long enough to suit Yue Qingyuan; but then, nothing about the
situation pleased him.

The day after the ritual was completed, and life blossomed within the gem, Shen Qingqiu finally emerged from his self-enforced confinement.

His back was straight, shoulders square. There was something odd about his face; Yue Qingyuan took a moment to realize that he was wearing powder on it, not something that was customarily his habit. He only had a minute to observe this, before Shen Qingqiu snapped open a fan painted with stormy clouds, and looked at him coldly.

“I want to see it,” he said.

There was no question of what ‘it’ was.

“Perhaps it would be better if…” Yue Qingyuan began, only to be cut off by a sharp gesture.

"After all this, you’re not even going to let me see it?” Shen Qingqiu hissed. “You think I’m a danger to your child? Too hazardous to let near?"

“That’s not what I said…”

“Then take me to see it.”

Yue Qingyuan’s temples were throbbing. He hadn’t slept, and despite not technically needing to sleep, the lack of rest hadn’t done much for his persistent headache or the lingering exhaustion in his spiritual reserves. Lately, it felt as though every time he though he had managed to catch his breath, something else came careening at him to drain his strength back down again. He wanted to take his husband aside and actually speak to him, but one look at Shen Qingqiu and he knew it was a lost cause. The man wouldn’t talk until he got what he wanted.

“Fine,” he sighed. “Of course. Of course Second Husband can see this child.”

Liu Qingge would not be pleased. But when it came down it - when it really, truly came down to it, did he think Shen Qingqiu would harm this baby?
…No. He didn’t. A-Jiu was capable of many things, but he was never as vicious or remorseless as he seemed.

“It’s not really a child yet. It’s a glowing blob with some spiritual goo inside,” Shen Qingqiu scoffed.

Yue Qingyuan felt some wariness at his words. But he still led the way to the inner chambers, trying not to let the icy cold front of his husband’s emotions rattle him as they walked in tense, unhappy silence.

The gem was in Yue Qingyuan’s private chambers, and so was Liu Qingge; dressed as if prepared to go to war, with his sword belted at his side and his eyes hard as flint when they landed on Shen Qingqiu. His apprentices were also standing guard, while the gem itself had been settled onto several plush cushions, far away from any windows.

When the emperor had first presented his lofty gift, the gem had been transparent. Since the rituals had been completed, however, it had filled with several cloudy inclusions that obfuscated what was going on in the middle of the strange plant, and protected the growing life from the daylight around them. The effect was beautiful, if somewhat unnerving. Different colours, the emperor had explained, denoted different things. Pink, red, golds and even some pale blues were good. Anything else was a bad sign.

Liu Qingge positioned himself pointedly between Shen Qingqiu and the gem.

Shen Qingqiu wasn’t even looking at him, though. He was staring intently over his fan at the magical treasure in the room. The hand at his side was clenched into a fist, but only Yue Qingyuan, standing so close by, could see the faint trembling and white knuckles.

For a moment, Shen Qingqiu’s eyes softened into something painfully like longing as he stared at the gem.

It was a look that vanished so quickly, it might not have even happened at all.

“What an ugly thing,” Shen Qingqiu sneered in contempt, a moment later. “Should it be out in the open like that? Obscene! Find a cover for it.”
“That’s not how it works,” Liu Qingge snapped back, bristling. “And you have no say in what goes on here, Second Husband.”

Shen Qingqiu’s fist clenched further.

“Don’t you dare take that tone with me, you brood mare. You think your status is untouchable now? You’ve already fulfilled your purpose, donating such lofty Liu seeds to this little plant, but now that it’s done you’re hardly needed for anything else. If I was you I’d tread more carefully, o Noble First Husband. Ranks can change. Take it from the voice of experience - and if anything happens to you, who do you think will be raising the well-bred little heir in your place?”

Liu Qingge’s hand moved to the hilt of his sword.

“Is that a threat?” he asked, in a tone that implied he hoped it was, if only for the excuse.

Yue Qingyuan bodily moved himself between the two men.

“Enough,” he insisted.

With obvious reluctance, his husbands quieted. Liu Qingge kept his hand on his sword. Shen Qingqiu held his fan in a manner that implied it was no less potentially deadly than a sword as well. Yue Qingyuan’s temples throbbed, while the soft energy clouds undulated slightly inside the Gem of Ensured Fertility.

Turning, he regarded Shen Qingqiu sternly. In the end, the child in the gem was Liu Qingge’s, no matter how anyone felt about the situation.

“You have seen it, now,” he said, gentling his tone.

Shen Qingqiu glanced back towards the gem. Just once. Then he turned on his heel, and stalked back towards the doorway.
"Fine. Enjoy doting on this hideous thing."

Yue Qingyuan caught up to him as he left the chamber, shooting Liu Qingge a single apologetic look before he had to hurry to keep pace with his husband, who was walking at the fastest clip he could manage without breaking into a run. Shen Qingqiu gave him a glare that made it clear he wasn’t welcome, but Yue Qingyuan couldn’t bring himself to retreat yet.

"A-Jiu," he said. "May we speak?"

"No."

"A-Jiu..."

"You’ve said enough."

"A-Jiu has barely let this lord say anything!" Yue Qingyuan protested, reaching out to grab his husband’s wrist. Shen Qingqiu deftly evaded his reach, and finally rounded on him.

"Why should I?" A-Jiu snapped at him, closing his fan and clutching it so hard that the wood creaked.

"Because… my feelings for you-"

"Don’t you dare say they have not changed!" Shen Qingqiu demanded, as the control on his fury slipped and fell away. "If this is how little you’ve ever cared for me, to let this thing happen, then I don’t want to know it! I don’t want to know that your affection has been so meager from the beginning! I’ve given you everything-"

"A-Jiu, I’ve tried my best to give you everything I could, too-"

"It’s not the same! It’s never been the same! You own me but I can’t even stop you from spending your nights with him-"
“That isn’t what it’s like-”

“That’s exactly what it’s like! I’ve been a slave for almost my entire life, Qi-ge, you think I don’t know what it looks like, what it feels like, even if the food is good and the bed is soft and no one beats me anymore?!” Shen Qingqiu countered, every word dripping with resentment and disdain.

Yue Qingyuan felt the floor drop out from underneath him. He shook his head, unable to ignore a lurching feeling in his chest that was telling him things he didn’t want to hear. Didn’t want to think about, or believe about himself, or their marriage. Like a drowning man, he began reaching desperately for things that might keep him afloat.

“A-Jiu shouldn’t make such absurd comparisons, especially not just to win an argument,” he said, rife with such an awful set of feelings that all of it could only seem to boil over into hot, blistering rage.

“What ‘absurd’ comparison?” Shen Qingqiu countered, hissing and spitting his own venom in return. “I let you put a collar on me because I knew you would die if I didn’t. Because you needed me, and I hoped your feelings would at least keep the leash slack! I should have known better, you’ve always been too weak-”

“That’s enough.”

Yue Qingyuan almost thought he would shout, but instead his voice came out rough and low. It broke with either anger or pain - he wasn’t sure which. Either way, it didn’t inspire his husband to back down.

“It really isn’t,” Shen Qingqiu insisted. “You have no idea how much I hate you right now. Even if I killed you, it wouldn’t satisfy my anger, so how could a few words be ‘enough’?”

Yue Qingyuan closed his eyes.

He felt like he was breaking inside. It was painful. His voice failed him as he watched Shen Qingqiu turn and storm away from him. The feeling didn’t abate. A-Jiu, come back, I’m sorry I’m sorry I didn’t mean it... He clenched his teeth, and realized with increasing conviction that this was more than a fight. Something was wrong. His arm trembled as he reached over and tried to steady himself against the nearest wall. He failed, and fell against it instead. His shoulder hit it as his heartbeats stuttered painfully, and Xuan Su pulsed in warning. He didn’t realize what felt so wrong
about that until he remembered that he’d left his sword in his chambers.

“A... A-Jiu!” he called.

He was having another qi deviation. So many years and he hadn’t suffered a single one since the first, when he became lord of the estate. And now these two, so close together… he really had made a mess of things…

A rush of pain overwhelmed his senses, and he cried out as he slid down to the floor.

Footsteps, near-silent, approached him again.

Yue Qingyuan stared up at Shen Qingqiu. His husband looked down at him with an unreadable expression.

Reaching out, Yue Qingyuan extended a hand towards his husband. It grasped his robe.

“Help,” he managed to say.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t move. His expression remained unreadable. He stared down at Yue Qingyuan as if he was looking at an ant, and wondering whether or not to step on it.

Then he stepped back, and kicked him sharply in the stomach.

“Die, for all I care.”

Yue Qingyuan’s fingers had no strength to hold onto him as his husband turned back around, and left. Left him there, just left him, and even in his worst furies, A-Jiu had never done that before. The pain in his chest worsened, until it felt like his entire body was burning. His consciousness flickered in and out… this… was this a qi deviation? He couldn’t tell anymore. It felt like poison and it felt like heartbreak. He tried to call out again. He thought he might have cried out in pain.

For one moment, he looked up, and he was certain he saw A-Jiu again. Coming back to save him
after all.

But then everything went black. When his consciousness returned, he was in Liu Qingge’s rooms.

With depressing certainty, he suddenly felt that what he had seen must have been what he wanted to see. If A-Jiu had rescued him, he would have taken him back to his own courtyard; that was always what he did, whenever he was worried.

Liu Qingge himself wasn’t in the room either, but one of Yue Qingyuan’s personal servants was.

“What happened?” he asked.

The youth pressed a cup of medicine carefully into his hands.

“Lord Yue suffered another qi deviation,” she confirmed. “Please drink this medicine and don’t exert yourself, your body is still recovering.”

Yue Qingyuan nodded in understanding, and then blinked in confusion. Something pale had fallen into his eyes. Was there something on his head…? He held his medicine in one hand and reached up with the other, feeling nothing but his own hair. His personal servant averted her gaze as suspicion dawned, and Yue Qingyuan grasped a long strand of his hair, and carefully pulled it out in front of himself.

White.

His hair was white.

“Is it all of it…?” he asked, looking at his servant.

She nodded in confirmation.

A long, heavy sigh escaped him. He let go of his hair, and let his hand flop down to the bed beside in him defeat. What was one more thing? At least it was just hair this time. In the past few months
he had accumulated so many scars and gone through so many strange things, he couldn’t even feel bothered. He closed his eyes for a long moment, until his personal servant gently prodded him, and he finally drank the medicine he’d been given.

Xuan Su was laid out onto Liu Qingge’s bed beside him. When he reached over and carefully unsheathed a fraction of it, he felt the ache throughout his entire body.

He re-sheathed his sword, and pushed his hair back so it wouldn’t distract him. Then he tied the blade to his belt, to keep it close for his recovery.

“Where are First and Second Husband?” he asked, at last.

“First Husband is guarding Lord Yue’s child,” his personal servant explained. “He was worried that Lord Yue’s disturbed energies might imbalance the gem’s elements, so he brought Lord Yue here to his own rooms instead. Second Husband is in his own courtyard.”

Yue Qingyuan nodded in understanding.

“First Husband found me, then?” he checked.

His servant nodded.

“He carried Lord Yue back to his chambers and sent for help. The healer came and left before Lord Yue woke; it’s been two days since he collapsed.”

At that, his eyes widened.

Two days?!

A sense of urgency and distress overcame him, but even as they did, he realized he had no idea what they were for. There wasn’t really anything in particular he was supposed to attend to right now; he’d gotten some leave from the emperor to focus on household matters, in light of his gift, and even a rare and priceless treasure like the Gem of Ensured Fertility couldn’t gestate a child in anything less than a few months.
It was the situation itself, he decided. He’d fought with A-Jiu and left things unresolved, and had abandoned Liu Qingge to deal with the gem on his own. One husband was hurt and furious with him, and the other was paranoid and defensively guarding his nest. It wasn’t a good situation to just abandon his household in.

The critics were right, he decided. He was a terrible husband. But they’d been utterly wrong about the solution; adding more spouses just gave him twice the opportunity to be terrible at it, and half the time to make amends.

“I need to go check on things,” he decided.

“Lord Yue should rest. He’s really not well,” his personal servant pressed, darting a look towards the door. A few more of his apprentices were waiting discreetly off to the side, he noted. Probably ready to restrain him if need be, but when he held up a forestalling hand, he found his authority here still meant something. Small mercies.

“This lord won’t exert himself. But he’ll find no rest until he sees how some matters are with his own eyes,” he said.

They didn’t like it, he could tell. He pressed onwards anyway, insisting on dressing and visiting Liu Qingge, at least. He wasn’t sure he had the energy to deal with Shen Qingqiu, especially if his mood was unwelcoming; but he hoped he might feel a little better after moving around. Staring at his reflection was still a shock. He watched, unsettled, as his personal servant combed and tied his now-snow-white hair.

Qi deviations really could do much worse things, but somehow the ones that caused physical changes were always the most unnerving. Even if it was just something like this.

He put the thought from his mind and barely got a single foot out of the door before one of Liu Qingge’s apprentices came barreling towards them.

“Lord Yue!” she cried. “Come quickly, something’s the matter! First Husband needs you!”

Yue Qingyuan’s heart plummeting into his stomach.
Liu Qingge was with the gem.

Could he have failed already?

With only a breath of hesitation, Yue Qingyuan broke out into a run, and went racing for his own chambers. Maybe it wasn't too late. But his dread and apprehension only seemed to grow with every single step he took. The corridor was a blur. He felt like he already knew what he would find, as if it was inevitable; he never could protect anything, never could, but it was so soon and even if he didn’t want a child, he didn’t want… couldn’t let…

He raced through the doors to his chambers, and felt the world tilt with the sight that greeted him.

Mu Qingfang was slumped next to the Gem of Ensured Fertility. The healer showed obvious signs of having dangerously depleted his spiritual energy reserves. The look on his face was ashen as Yue Qingyuan had never recalled seeing it before. Liu Qingge was on his feet, but it didn’t look as though he could stay that way for long either. His expression was painfully blank, and it seemed as though he had given up just as much as the healer had, trying to help do... something.

The gem was gone, Yue Qingyuan thought at first. It was gone, except it wasn’t. Where there’d been a bright, large object before, instead there was an ugly black lump no bigger than his fist, sitting in the middle of the soft cushions. Black blood had poured over the delicate fabrics. The scent of it was so strong that one of the healer’s young apprentices was retching in the corner.

Yue Qingyuan got the impression that things had deteriorated to this stage quickly. Maybe not even a moment before he’d opened the door. Mu Qingfang had a hand extended towards the gem, as if he was still trying to fix it. But it didn’t take an ounce of expertise to see that this would not happen.

For a moment, the only sound to break the horrified silence was the retching of the apprentice with a weak stomach.

Then Liu Qingge drew Cheng Luan.

“I’ll kill him myself,” he said.

The threat would have held a lot more weight if he wasn’t swaying on his feet. But Yue Qingyuan
still reached out, reflexively, and grabbed him by the arm.

“What even happened?” he demanded.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Liu Qingge all but snarled back, snatching his arm away. He nearly fell over in his haste to be rid of Yue Qingyuan’s touch. Instead he made another sound of mingled misery and frustration, and sank into a nearby chair. The look of defeat that crossed his expression, so uncust ommary, was painful to see.

Yue Qingyuan closed his eyes for a moment, before he turned to Mu Qingfang instead.

“What happened?” he asked the healer. This was important. He needed to know exactly what had occurred.

Mu Qingfang’s exhaustion wasn’t much better. With his apprentice still indisposed, Yue Qingyuan reached over and helped him move a little further away from… from the remains of his unborn child. He couldn’t bring himself to look closely, and instead helped the other man into a seat beside his husband.

“I have never tended to a Gem of Ensured Fertility before,” the healer admitted, quietly. “I consulted with several imperial physicians who had, but none of them described anything like this. It was as if the structure of it just started collapsing. That shouldn’t have been possible, not without some kind of outside tampering…”

Yue Qingyuan swallowed.

“Could my qi deviation have caused it?” he asked, a little desperately. “I heard Qingge brought me here before I was taken elsewhere, to avoid doing any harm. Could harm have already been done?”

To his dismay, Mu Qingfang shook his head.

“No, I tended to you myself,” the healer told him. “Your state was internal, you weren’t expelling any malevolent energy. It was only a precaution to keep you away, in case you worsened and began to…”
“It was him!” Liu Qingge interrupted, slamming a hand against the armrest of his chair and breaking it in the process. “Everyone knows it! No one even needs to guess who would do such a thing! He’s been plotting it since the emperor gave us the gem, he attacked my lord while he was injured, there is no mystery here!”

Mu Qingfang gave Liu Qingge a bewildered look.

“Who?” he asked. He glanced at Yue Qingyuan. “You were attacked? No one told me this…”

“A-Jiu… was upset, and… it doesn’t matter,” he replied, waving a hand dismissively. Liu Qingge had seen that? He must have, and then hurried over to help after Shen Qingqiu left. Some part of him felt like it broke in dismay, as the last lingering hope that he hadn’t imagined seeing… not that he could afford to be concerned about it. There were bigger problems to deal with.

Die, for all I care.

Yue Qingyuan finally let himself look at the blackened lump on the cushions again.

Mu Qingfang’s apprentice finally got himself under control. Yue Qingyuan gave him a look.

“Go outside, and tell one of my servants to send someone to bring Second Husband here. Now,” he instructed.

The youth swallowed heavily a few times, but nodded in agreement, and then hurried out of the door.

A few minutes later, Yue Qingyuan’s personal servant arrived with Shen Qingqiu. Luo Binghe followed behind them with his head bowed. When they came into the room, Shen Qingqiu froze on the spot for a long moment. His gaze fixed on the black lump and the mess of ichor around it, but his expression was impossible to read. He was, once again, wearing powder on his face; it made him even more aloof and difficult to discern anything about.

If looks could kill, however, Liu Qingge’s glare would have struck Shen Qingqiu dead where he stood.
“You wretch!” he seethed.

The sound of his voice seemed to finally draw Shen Qingqiu’s attention over to where the three other main occupants of the room were clustered together.

He looked at Yue Qingyuan.

His eyes narrowed, and his jaw clenched.

“Don’t say it. I can already tell - you think this is my doing?” he said, in a voice that sounded more accusatory than accused.

“You’d deny it?” Liu Qingge snapped. He only quieted when Yue Qingyuan raised a hand, and gave him a warning glance - it wouldn’t have worked at all, he knew, if the other man hadn’t just depleted his strength.

“This is a serious matter,” Yue Qingyuan said. His own voice sounded strange in his ears. As though he wasn’t quite present in the room with it. When he turned to look at Shen Qingqiu, it was as if a great chasm, miles long and fathoms deep, had opened up between them.

“Shen Qingqiu, do you know anything about this?” he asked.

He could hear Liu Qingge struggling not to snarl at the question, impatient and hurt and furious.

Hurt and fury were in Shen Qingqiu’s eyes as well.

“Even if I did, does anyone think I’d admit it, called here like this? It’s an accusation itself,” he said, voice low and dangerous. “No matter what answer I give, you’ve already made up your minds.”

“That’s not true,” Yue Qingyuan insisted.

“Of course it’s true! Who else would you point the finger at?” Shen Qingqiu demanded.
His heart clenched in frustration. This man…! Didn’t he understand?! The gem had been a gift from the emperor! Even putting aside the matter of extinguishing the life growing within it, there was no way for the situation to be lightly resolved. Yue Qingyuan could swear his household and Mu Qingfang to secrecy if he could get another gem, but they were priceless and rare and far beyond the means of most men except the emperor. Word would get out, and when it did, Jun Wu would want answers on what had happened; if the culprit wasn’t found and punished, the emperor would find and punish one himself. There could be no covering this up or waving it off.

And everyone knew who had means and motive and a merciless enough disposition to do this sort of thing.

Whether he’d done it or not didn’t matter, it wasn’t the time for him to focus on their relationship troubles! His life hung in the balance!

“The last time I checked, I was still lord of this estate, and so far my fingers have not pointed anywhere,” Yue Qingyuan said, straightening himself up as much as he could. “But questions must be asked. Shen Qingqiu, can anyone vouch for your location these past few days? Have you come to these chambers since the time I brought you here myself?”

“Of course not! As if that dog you brought into my house would let me!” his husband snarled. Then he gestured towards Luo Binghe. “My servant has been with me all this time, and someone would have seen—”

“Lord Yue.”

Shen Qingqiu half-turned in surprise as his apprentice spoke.

Luo Binghe’s head had raised. There was a slight tremble in his arms, but his expression was uncommonly resolute as he suddenly stepped forward. He didn’t look towards his master. Slowly, Shen Qingqiu’s furious expression slipped towards something a little more uncertain.

“You haven’t been given leave to speak, Luo Binghe—”

“If he is your alibi, then he had better say something,” Liu Qingge interjected.
Luo Binghe looked towards Yue Qingyuan. His manners seemed strangely good, despite the interruption, as he knelt respectfully and lowered his head again.

“Begging Shizun’s forgiveness, but this servant can no longer observe proper deference and loyalty in light of this situation. Lord Yue, Master Shen is lying. Last night, this servant witnessed his master sneaking out of his courtyard, and followed him to be certain that no trouble befell him. This servant witnessed Master Shen using some kind of demonic cultivation to enter Lord Yue’s chambers in the dead of night.”

“That’s a lie!” Shen Qingqiu insisted, sharp and furious. He reached for Luo Binghe and grabbed him by his hair, twisting painfully. “You lying, traitorous, worthless little ingrate!”

“It’s true!” Luo Binghe insisted, gripping his master’s wrist and glaring defiantly. “The item looked like a red jade pin! It opened the chamber doors and disoriented the guards! This servant saw Master Shen pull it from his sleeve, and perform wicked arts with it!”

“Lies, utter lies! This master is no demonic cultivator!”

Luo Binghe yelped in pain as his hair was nearly pulled from his scalp. Yue Qingyuan moved, grabbing Shen Qingqiu’s wrist to halt him, and was treated to another furious look.

“Yue Qi, you’d dare believe him?!”

“Check his sleeves,” Liu Qingge demanded, rising from his seat only to grimace and reluctantly sink back into it again.

Mu Qingfang clamped a hand down on his forearm.

“Wait,” the healer instructed, quietly. Even on his face, the tension was written plain as day. But then, he had known Yue Qingyuan and Shen Qingqiu since they were young. He had seen many things unfold, including the best of their days - Liu Qingge, so far, has only seen the worst.

Firmly but quietly, without more force than was needed, Yue Qingyuan disentangled Shen Qingqiu from his young apprentice. He met his husband’s gaze for a moment, but whatever he was looking for, he wasn’t sure if he found it. He found a lot of things. Hurt, anger, even fear. None of them told him where this next failing would prove to be; if he had badly misjudged the depths Shen
Qingqiu would sink to, or irrevocably damaging their trust by entertaining that notion at all.

Lifting one arm, then the other, Yue Qingyuan checked his husband’s sleeves.

In the second one, his fingers closed around a pin-shaped object, tucked into the interior pocket.

He hesitated.

Shen Qingqiu paled.

Letting go, Yue Qingyuan retracted his hand - empty.

“There’s nothing there,” he said, as he let go of the wrist he was holding.

Shen Qingqiu folded his free hand into the same sleeve. His eyes widened, slightly. And then they narrowed. His expression twisted with rage, and to Yue Qingyuan’s horror, he pulled the red jade pin out from the interior pocket himself.

“Is this what you didn’t find?” Shen Qingqiu hissed at him, brandishing the pin, which clearly was of demonic make. Out in the open, Yue Qingyuan could even feel the malevolent energy on it. He shook his head, just slightly, numb with panic while Shen Qingqiu held the condemning artifact in a white-knuckled grip.

“You think I’d use such methods? Do such a thing? You believe it, you’re going to protect me from it? Cover for the evil bastard you married?” his husband continued, his face a rictus of fury. “I’m not doing this anymore, do you hear me? I’m not going to be the wicked one again! I didn’t touch your precious child, that rat you made me take in has concocted this tale, likely committed the crime himself, and obviously planted the evidence in my clothes-”

With a cry of dismay, Luo Binghe dropped the floor and began kowtowing.

“Lord Yue, please, this apprentice has yet to even participate in a nighthunt, he has no wealth or means or companions of his own, where would he obtain such a foul item?!” the servant pleaded.
Yue Qingyuan could feel Liu Qingge’s glare at his back.

“You were going to cover for him? Again?” the man demanded of him.

Yue Qingyuan only stared ahead at Shen Qingqiu’s furious expression.

Just what was he thinking? Was he so determined to open a rift between Yue Qingyuan and Liu Qingge that he’d risk his life to do it? Did he want to die?! Didn’t he understand what was at stake, how dangerous this entire situation had become?

Why couldn’t he just let Yue Qingyuan protect him?

Was this some… some game, or some scheme again? To get rid of the apprentice he hated so much, to dispose of the child that would seal his fate as Second Husband, to foster more resentment between Liu Qingge and Yue Qingyuan? Did he think the matter could be so petty? Luo Binghe was openly weeping on the ground, the picture of a pathetic child - his clothes were barely appropriate enough for him to be considered a servant of this estate, yet Shen Qingqiu expected them to believe that this boy had somehow obtained a powerful demonic artifact, and used it to betray his master, rather than just selling it or destroying it? Because Shen Qingqiu had never dabbled in demonic cultivation before? With his reputation, people wouldn't hesitate to believe he could.

“There are more things,” Luo Binghe said, between his tears. “So many awful things that Shizun has done, beating innocent servants and blackmailing the steward and poisoning First Husband, and this servant kept all his secrets for the sake of loyalty and gratitude, but killing the lord’s child is too much…”

“Be quiet!” Yue Qingyuan snapped.

“Let him speak,” Liu Qingge countered. “It’s not as if we don’t all know, do we? Mu Qingfang, you’re the impartial witness-”

“Be quiet!” Yue Qingyuan demanded, louder and harsher, his own face pale with fear and anger.
The room went silent.

And then Shen Qingqiu threw the cursed pin at Luo Binghe’s head.

A bolt of black qi flared out from it. The boy yelped. Mu Qingfang moved forward to help him, showing a healer’s concern as the edge of the pin drew blood from Luo Binghe’s cheek, before it landed on the floor with a soft ping. With no one even attempting to restrain him anymore, Liu Qingge surged to his feet and drew Cheng Luan. Yue Qingyuan raised an arm but it was no use, as First Husband charged Second, and Xiu Ya whipped out to intercept the attacking blade in a bright gleam.

Liu Qingge was undoubtedly stronger than Shen Qingqiu when in top form, but with his spiritual energies depleted, he only had his martial arts to fall on. Even as exemplary as those were, Shen Qingqiu was currently the most healthy cultivator in the room, and he pulled absolutely no punches. Trying to get between them was impossible. Yue Qingyuan could see the situation unraveling before him, acted out by the two husbands attempting to carve out one another’s hearts.

With a ragged curse, he reached for his belt, and drew Xuan Su.

The sound made when his sword met Xiu Ya and Cheng Luan before they could clash again echoed through the entire chamber. The energy from the attacks rebounded. Liu Qingge was knocked off his feet, and Shen Qingqiu was sent staggering, but Yue Qingyuan took the brunt of it himself. Xuan Su’s light wavered dangerously as his arm broke.

Gritting his teeth, Yue Qingyuan released the hilt, and sheathed his sword again with his unbroken arm. The feeling was like a raw nerve being struck directly.

“Are you seeking death?” he demanded of Shen Qingqiu, in a low, pained hiss.

His husband was blank-faced again.

“Are you so bent on revenge against me that you’d destroy yourself in the process?” Yue Qingyuan pressed, too angry for words. This man had always understood - had understood far better than he had, in the past. But now he was even sabotaging the efforts to protect him. As if to ensure that they failed, as if he knew that nothing would hurt Yue Qi more, in the end, than to guarantee that last, calamitous failure.
If he was bound and determined to that outcome, then he might as well see what it would look like! Shen Qingqiu played a lot of games, but in the end, he was still a man who feared his own death and looked out for his own interests. He couldn't see the severity of this situation? Then Yue Qingyuan would make him look!

His thoughts only grew angrier at the unreadable expression on his husband’s face. In stormy silence, he moved towards a set of drawers that had been smashed by the chaotic energies of the fight. It didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for in the splintered wood. Reaching in, he pulled out a length of white silk.

Shen Qingqiu’s neutrality bled away into shock.

_Die, for all I care._

Yue Qingyuan shoved the length of white silk into his hands.

“If Shen Qingqiu seeks death, then this lord will let him have it.”

~

Yue Qingyuan woke himself up with a gasp.

He jolted upright in his bed, shaking as though he had just escaped a prison cell he had been battering the walls of. He felt as if he had spent hours, days, even weeks screaming from the inside of that cell, watching as something horrible unfolded outside of it. The moment he woke, he knew with absolute, sickening clarity exactly what those events had been. But as his mind slipped away
from his dreaming state, that clarity went with it; and in the end he was only left shaken and covered in cold sweat, consumed by a feeling of failure and self-loathing.

What had he done?

Oh, what had he said, what had he done?

Alone and unable to resist, Yue Qingyuan pressed a hand to his face. Hot tears began to track their way down his cheeks. They spilled onto the blankets across his knees. Outside, the scent of the palace gardens’ night-blooming flowers drifted in through his open window. Ordinarily, the fragrance only served to remind him that he was far away from the life he’d once had, the home he’d tried to build. But at that moment, the reminder felt like a relief.

He was in the palace, not the Yue estate. Shen Qingqiu was in his own home, with Luo Binghe; likely safe and sound. Liu Qingge was probably on another night hunt, or else resting peacefully at the Liu estate. They were fine. They were apart and Yue Qingyuan never hold any claim to either of them again, but there was no reason to think anything was wrong.

It was just another dream.

Turning his head towards the window, Yue Qingyuan let the night air dry his tears, and tried to ground himself again.

Is Shen Jiu alright?

His own thought took him aback. He paused, because ordinarily that worry could be easily appeased by reminding himself that the man was safe and happy with Luo Binghe. But in the raw, open mess of his thoughts, he realized that he wasn’t thinking of Shen Qingqiu. He was thinking of the other one. The young apprentice, who acted more like A-Jiu than Yue Qingyuan’s ex-husband did.

Gritting his teeth, he internally scolded himself. That boy was none of his business. And of course he was alright. He had no reason to suspect otherwise. Shen Qingqiu was more than capable of looking after his own apprentice. The boy was… nineteen now, come to think of it. Not so much a 'boy' anymore. And he seemed well-protected by Lord Luo and those demon followers
of his, as incongruous as it still might be to think of demons as safe.

That was beside the point. The point was, it wasn’t any of Yue Qingyuan’s business. Just because a name and some inevitable resemblances between master and student kept confusing the insensible parts of his mind, that didn’t mean he should let it go on.

…If only these things were simply resolved by a stern, internal scolding.

The Imperial Conference was coming up, he ended up reminding himself instead. Shen Jiu was likely to attend, most aspiring young cultivators would leap at the chance. And since Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe were… since they were making attempts on an heir, then, it was even more likely that the youth would be there to represent their tutelage and keep fostering connections for his family.

Thinking on it more, Yue Qingyuan scrubbed at his face, and shook his head at himself. Small wonder he kept having nightmares about strange things, really. Soon enough the actual, grown and remarried A-Jiu would have a child with another man. Even though Yue Qingyuan had long resigned himself to his fate, that was still the kind of thing that was bound to stir up complicated feelings. It wasn’t good for his cultivation, he reminded himself. With a sigh, he got up, and retrieved Xuan Su; and then he settled down to meditate for the rest of the night instead.

Resolutely, he kept his thoughts from wandering to how things might have been different if he had given A-Jiu a child the first time he’d asked.

The past was the past. It couldn’t be changed. Yue Qingyuan was still a man who would likely never have a child, and this was still bound to be for the best.
For his first wedding, there hadn’t been enough of a budget in his family estate funds to hold a lavish affair.

Neither he nor A-Jiu had much family to host either, although there were still guests to entertain. His father's widows were all in attendance, as that had been back before A-Jiu had systematically dealt with them all in one way or another. While his new husband had been studying in Gusu he hadn’t seemed to make many friends, but Yue Qingyuan had spent the same amount of time getting accustomed to nighthunts and dealing with some demon marauders that had ventured past the borderlands, and he’d earned a minor title of merit for his deeds, and knew enough people to invite several nobles of good standing. Most of them brought along spouses or other family members as guests. He had invited Yu Ziyuan, too, but wasn’t surprised when the invitation went ignored. He was a little surprised when his husband, Jiang Fengmian, showed up anyway, in the company of one of his apprentice sisters.

Most of the wedding expenses went towards making certain that the decorations looked nice, and that the wedding feast wasn’t an embarrassment. A-Jiu’s dress had been simple - Yue Qingyuan had modified his own wedding clothes from a set of his father’s in storage, but it was customary for a spouse’s outfit to be made new, and A-Jiu had seemed set on following as many customs as possible. The materials they could get for it weren’t as nice as he’d have liked, and the costs of embroidery work meant it only had simple designs. But the moment he had taken off A-Jiu’s veil remained fixed in his memory as a time when he had been well and truly struck breathless by another person’s beauty.

He had never been able to properly describe it. How could one describe a moment that was made as much from emotion as from vision, from the knowledge that this was someone he loved with every fiber of his being, the realization that this love was one of the major cornerstones that defined him as a person? How could he find the right words for the pure, indescribable beauty that was A-Jiu in his red wedding dress, with an unpainted face, eyes bright and lips curved into a small, genuine smile?

Yue Qingyuan had utterly failed to perform his expected duties on their wedding night, but he couldn’t regret that. Everything about A-Jiu had simply seemed too precious; he had taken his new husband in his arms and kissed him until both their lips were sore, but when he let his inexpert touch begin to wander, something like fear had flashed in the other boy’s eyes. They were both still young - too young, maybe. And though A-Jiu never spoke of it, Yue Qingyuan knew he’d… been through things. The extent of those things he didn’t know, to his frustration, but it wasn’t something he could press for answers about. Asking just made it seem like he cared whether or not A-Jiu was 'soiled', and he didn't; but he couldn't find the right words to say to make the questions sound right.

With his heart still singing from the reeling vision he had witnessed all that day, he couldn’t bring himself to push his husband down atop the white sheet and spread his legs apart. It wasn’t needed
anyway, there was no one to dare question their proof, and also no one among the guests at the wedding who would doubt the nature of their match. It was just an antiquated custom, and at that age, he hadn’t known why he should care one whit about those. So instead he folded his arms around his new husband and tried to find the words to describe how much adored him, whispering the most tender confessions he could clumsily articulate, while A-Jiu’s face gradually turned redder and redder. Eventually the younger boy had snapped and shoved Yue Qingyuan off of the bed with a string of complaints, and the accusation that Yue Qingyuan was acting inappropriately to just try and cover up for the fact that he didn’t know how to have sex.

He’d still been so giddy (and not just a little bit drunk) that he’d only laughed and climbed back onto the bed, and wormed his way around A-Jiu again, pressing kisses to any unguarded patch of skin he could reach and apologizing for his ineptitude. His husband had huffed and complained and then wryly asked if Yue Qingyuan even knew where to put it, but he also hadn’t tried to make any moves of his own. And as things relaxed and the night progressed without Yue Qingyuan’s hands wandering any further, he had turned, and pressed his face tightly against Yue Qingyuan’s chest.

“Is it really alright, if we don’t… do anything, tonight?” A-Jiu had asked, in a very small voice that made him feel like they were both children again.

“Of course,” he’d replied. He whispered the assurance, low and secretive, because it was just the two of them. Whatever they did behind the bed curtains wasn’t for anyone else to concern themselves with. Even if what they did was nothing at all. “A-Jiu doesn’t ever have to, if he doesn’t want.”

There was a moment of silence.

Then the newly-dubbed Shen Qingqiu had silently cried in relief.

Yue Qingyuan had to actually consider that he might, in fact, never want to. It had only been a little disappointing when he really thought about it. He still felt that just holding his husband was good, so, internally, he prepared to keep things as they were. Even if he was curious about what it would be like, he really enjoyed what they already did. Kissing and touching was good. Sleeping in one another's arms was too. If it never went further, it was still enough.

In the end, it had taken little more than a month of spending every night together for A-Jiu to warm up to the idea of sex. But once he had, and they’d gotten through some initial awkwardness, then Yue Qingyuan found himself racing just to try and keep up with his husband’s appetites. The first year of their marriage, Shen Qingqiu could have convinced him to do almost anything just by baring a shoulder and fluttering his fan the right way. They were ridiculous, of course, still too young and overcome with hormones, trying to figure out how to keep from unbalancing their qi and
setting back their cultivation even as they utterly failed to keep their hands off of one another. He would swear he became addicted to the sounds of A-Jiu’s pleasure, the moans that slipped past his lips, the way his thigh muscles twitched when he came and how sometimes, just sometimes, he would clutch Yue Qingyuan so tightly as he desperately called for his Qi-ge.

But even as breathtaking as he was in those moments, there was something about the vision of him in his wedding dress that remained unsurpassed in terms of being stunning. Of striking Yue Qingyuan like lightning, rendering him deaf and blind to all of the world except for this one single moment, this one image, that he knew would leave him a little breathless every time he remembered it again. No matter how many times he did.

Arriving at the Immortal Alliance Conference gave him another vision that made nearly the same impact. And where a young Yue Qingyuan had at least expected to be floored by the sight of the man he was marrying, had been given time to brace for it, when this older version saw the young Shen Jiu dressed in elegant robes of pale green with emeralds in his hair, and just the lightest pink rouge on his lips, subtly rolling his eyes at some comment another person had made… his heartbeat sped up so much that he worried his ribs might break.

A-Jiu.

It was ridiculous. He knew it was ridiculous. Shen Qingqiu was at home with his unborn child, and the nineteen-year-old in front of Yue Qingyuan was a different person entirely. He had to be.

And yet…

That was him. That… it just, it was him. Something deep inside of him simply knew. As if to provide confirmation, he felt a warning ache from Xuan Su. His soul had always been a little… looser, than it ought to be. Sometimes it gave him odd insights into things, though usually, it was just inconvenient. But it meant that he had learned to trust these feelings when he got them. Even if they seemed completely irrational.

This wasn’t just irrational, however. It was impossible.

That couldn’t be his A-Jiu.

But that was definitely his A-Jiu.
He’s not ‘yours’ either way, he reminded himself. He tried to look away then, he truly did. He told himself to turn his head, but it was as if his eyes had rebelled, and would not be swayed. He stayed rooted to the spot, transfixed as he watched Shen Jiu turn a curious gaze over the room, before he finally noticed Yue Qingyuan in return.

The slow, pointed once-over he received was another all too familiar look. It made his skin heat. For a moment he felt like he was seventeen with sweaty palms and tingling skin, greeting A-Jiu on his return from Gusu after writing so many letters and sending so many gifts, uncertain of what kind of welcome he’d get; only to be pinned with a cool, assessing gaze, that gradually cracked into a not-quite-smile.

He forced himself to look away.

What was he doing?!

This was not A-Jiu! It couldn’t be A-Jiu! He’d lost his mind!

“Lord Yue?”

He had to fight to maintain his composure as the polite, somewhat sly-sounding voice drifted towards him. This voice didn’t sound like Shen Qingqiu’s, not even when he was younger. And yet, something about the way that Shen Jiu spoke still made him feel nostalgic, and a little bit lost.

“Has this junior done something to offend?” Shen Jiu asked him.

Not having expected such a question, he wasn’t even certain how to react.

But as the young cultivator continued to speak with him, Yue Qingyuan felt some of his conflicted emotions give way to something far simpler - fondness. This person… he really was like A-Jiu. He felt like him. He was even playing a game like him, he was flirting and acting coy and clearly trying to pluck at Yue Qingyuan’s heartstrings.

It was working very well.
It can’t be him, he reminded himself.

Yet it felt less like he was trying to force his behaviour to be reasonable, and more as if he was trying to convince himself of it as some form of self-defense. Even after the interaction had ended, and young Shen Jiu had hurried off again - flustered, he thought, and nearly died where he was standing - he couldn’t just brush the whole thing aside. Instead he found his thoughts drifting to Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu, who never acted like Shen Jiu. Who, when he really thought about it, behaved similarly sometimes but… really hadn’t acted like Shen Jiu in a long while. Not since…

Yue Qingyuan fingered a small white jade token at his belt, and felt something akin to dread creeping up his spine.

Had he ever checked his husband for signs of possession?

Had he ever even thought to?

A-Jiu was so much smarter about such things. Had established the precedent of being smarter about them very early on, in fact, when he’d seen signs of the previous Lord Yue’s designs that a young Yue Qingyuan had utterly missed. When it came to matters like that, he had always been much sharper. It was Yue Qingyuan who had the weakness there, with his volatile connection to his sword and his occasional bouts of idealism.

It would have never occurred to him without some dramatic display that something might possess Shen Qingqiu.

But both of them had been poor children. Neither of them had parents who could have given them any of the basic precautions against possession and spiritual corruption that most noble families offered their children during early development. Just because it was a bigger danger for Yue Qingyuan didn’t mean it wasn’t still something that could have been exploited in A-Jiu, too.

Especially if he was weakened. Especially if something had happened to distract and upset him, to reduce his guard and foster resentment.

The more he thought about it, the more he could only stand in the crowded hall and feel, once
again, the resounding weight of failure and ineptitude. Because it made sense. Or did it only make sense because it was some explanation for why his A-Jiu had seemingly stopped loving him, that could possibly imply he hadn’t?

But then, where did this young Shen Jiu fit into things? Who - or what - was Shen Qingqiu?

Yue Qingyuan wanted to leave. And yet, he couldn’t stand the thought of doing so. If Shen Jiu really was A-Jiu, then he was surrounded by demons. He was living in the household of something that had stolen his body, stolen his life, and how could Yue Qingyuan let any of that stand? He nearly panicked as the picture came together. What were they going to do to him? Was this all some sinister plot?

Should he tell the emperor?

Worriedly, he found himself searching the crowds for Shen Jiu again. He needed to do something.

When he spotted his target again, the young man was standing next to a pair of humanoid demons. Though the duo were wearing the blue of that ice demon’s clan, the markings on their foreheads looked different. Servants, probably, or maybe apprentices. Possibly individuals who had married in. One of them had curved horns, the other had long claws and a mouth full of razor sharp teeth. They were standing too close to A-Jiu, but as Yue Qingyuan made to head over again, the young cultivator rolled his eyes and smacked the shorter of the pair on the head with his fan.

The demon didn’t attack. If anything, the youth - who looked several years younger than Shen Jiu - looked delighted, giggling and patting its head, making a smug motion at the other demon which clearly said ‘look, he paid attention to me’. Shen Jiu rolled his eyes and hid the lower half of his face behind his fan, while the other, taller demon pouted.

The scene looked precisely like a shixiong trying not to indulge a couple of shidis he was reluctantly fond of. And failing.

Because of course it did; the world hadn’t gone back to the way it was, just because Yue Qingyuan had suddenly realized something. This was still an imperial conference, and the demons here were official guest cultivators. If anyone started flinging accusations they couldn’t prove and attacking them, they would be the cause of a disruption, and would face retribution for behaving so inappropriately.
With a deep breath, Yue Qingyuan forced himself to calm down, and think rationally.

He needed to know what was going on, but whatever it was had been happening for years. He couldn’t justify rushing in and trying to smash it all apart without even understanding it. Whatever had happened, this Shen Jiu had been living safely with Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe and their scores of demon allies for years. Quite happily, it seemed. In fact… he seemed like a much more secure person than even the nineteen-year-old Shen Jiu he recalled, who’d been in the ‘honeymoon’ phase of being married to Yue Qingyuan and living in a luxurious estate with his every need catered to.

That Shen Jiu had been forced to put aside much of his training and interests in order to become a suitable husband, to learn the skills that would silence people who scoffed at Lord Yue marrying ‘that riffraff’.

The Shen Jiu he watched keenly over the course of the Immortal Alliance Conference, on the other hand, was quite clearly in his element. Socializing, yes, but also mainly discussing his status as a cultivator, debating various techniques and even interjecting with information about demonic practices - not even flinching when some youth from Lan clan made a face at his comment. Shen Jiu only gave him a dismissive shrug and then turned to talk to someone else, exuding a familiar aura of ‘this worm’s not worth my time’, but seeming barely rattled by it. His own Shen Jiu was always more keenly struck by even minor insults than he liked to let on.

Yue Qingyuan knew he was all but stalking the young man through the conference, but he felt that, under the circumstances, it wasn’t entirely unreasonable. He meant no harm; the opposite, in fact. And he still kept his distance.

He wasn’t even sure what he was looking for. Signs of something sinister, perhaps. Other than the obvious, glaring one, anyway.

It was the eyes that arrested him the most. They weren’t the same, and yet, they were. The colour of them was the same, he would swear by it. They were dark and deep and so keen with intelligence. It made him think back even further than he would usually recall, to when he had seen a pair of huge, dark eyes look up at him from a thin and dirty face.

*I don’t like anybody except Qi-ge!*

Those eyes always made him want to give the owner every precious thing he had.
Maybe… that was where he ought to start, in the end. Back at the beginning again?

~

“He’s A-Jiu. He’s the real A-Jiu.”

“…Yes.”

“How is it possible?”

“This master told Lord Yue that he had died. Why would it not be possible for a dead person to come back?”

“If he’s… if… then, who am I speaking to right now?”

‘Shen Qingqiu’ sighed at him. The study they were in was still and silent, and some part of Yue Qingyuan still found himself noticing things. Signs that he should have seen earlier. It had been happening ever since that dark realization struck him during the Immortal Alliance Conference. In this space that was entirely his own, the impostor really didn’t seem much like his A-Jiu at all. There was evidence of some similar tastes - a preference for green and muted colours, landscape paintings and little treasures that carried obvious sentiment scattered throughout the room. Books and writing materials. An erhu. But if he had no reason to guess, then nothing about this room would make him think it should inherently belong to A-Jiu.

“Shizun doesn’t have to tell him,” a low voice said from a corner of the room that he hadn’t seen
yet. Yue Qingyuan paused, and turned.

“Lord Luo,” he acknowledged, nodding to the figure sitting in one of the study’s chair. There was a shadow in that corner of the room. It made the demon lord’s forehead mark and eyes gleam, just a little, as he stared disapprovingly back at Yue Qingyuan.

“Oathbreaker,” Luo Binghe acknowledged in return.

Yue Qingyuan hadn’t even had an inkling he was there. That was… unsettling.

With only one further glance, Yue Qingyuan forced himself to look back at ‘Shen Qingqiu’. Of course. It was probably too much to think that the man - or whatever he was - would be willing to have this conversation without back-up.

“He knows?”

‘Shen Qingqiu’ inclined his head.

“It’s not that exciting,” he said. “I can give you the simple version. I was a man, I died, I woke up to find myself occupying the body of another man who died. The particulars are a mystery to me as well. How or why I ended up becoming Shen Qingqiu, I honestly cannot say.”

Yue Qingyuan stared at him for a long moment.

Shen Qingqiu stared back. The only slight betrayal of his nervousness was the way his eyes darted, briefly, to where Luo Binghe was sitting. As if reassuring himself that the demon lord was still there.

Did he think Yue Qingyuan would attack him?

...Would Yue Qingyuan attack him?

For a moment, he wanted to. Did he believe this story, this idea that the spirit that had stolen A-
Jiu’s body had not done so intentionally? If he did… if he did, it would mean accepting that Shen Jiu had died. Not only that, but why he had died. What had killed him. A part of Yue Qingyuan wanted so very, very much not to accept that. To fight against it with everything in him. If this was a monster wearing A-Jiu’s face, he could fight it. He could exorcise it. He could get rid of it and then he could get his husband back, and he wanted that so much it might kill him.

If it wasn’t for the other part of this equation, for the young Shen Jiu somewhere in this estate, he couldn’t honestly say what he would have done. What he could have brought himself to accept or believe.

But he’d seen it with his own eyes. Shen Jiu was reborn, and to be reborn, he had to have died. Most forms of possession either sublimated another’s soul or destroyed it outright.

He stared at Shen Qingqiu. Who was probably telling him the truth.

He didn’t realize when he began to shake. But he noticed when a hand reached out, and settled gently on his shoulder.

“Breathe, Lord Yue,” Shen Qingqiu told him.

He couldn’t. He couldn’t breathe. How could he? How dare he? He’d… A-Jiu was… he’d killed…

Everything went white.

When he became aware of things again, he was lying on the floor. There was something soft under his head. Luo Binghe was looming over him with a dire expression on his face, holding his wrist and - with some obvious reluctance - channeling spiritual energy to him in a low, steady trickle.

Yue Qingyuan appreciated the fact that Luo Binghe looked at him with the sort of disdain usually reserved for an inconvenient patch of mold spores. He didn’t think he would have been able to handle kindness at that moment. Contempt was much more fitting, much more appropriate. He felt entirely certain that he’d suffered a qi deviation, spurred by grief, and that it had probably almost killed him. Every inch of his body hurt. But he couldn’t bring himself to complain or care.

“You could kill me,” he said.
His voice was rough and halting. The words came out as he thought them, more or less. Luo Binghe was certainly capable of doing it. Probably even when Yue Qingyuan was at his best. And the man hated him, had never made any secret of it either. Physically, emotionally, ethically - Luo Binghe would have very few problems murdering him, he was sure.

The demon lord nodded.

“I could,” he agreed. “But Shizun has gone to a lot of trouble to keep you from dying. So, I won’t.”

Closing his eyes, tilted his head. Of course not. Yue Qingyuan supposed he could kill himself, but that would probably come across as ungrateful. Discourteous, at least, to do it in Luo Binghe’s home, where Shen Jiu lived with a man who possessed the body he’d had in a past life.

Funny.

To think all of this had started with Yue Qingyuan going to live with a man who wanted to possess his body for his next life.

To think Shen Jiu had saved him from that fate, only for Yue Qingyuan to consign him to this injustice.

He drew in a shaky breath. His turbulent thoughts sent his spiritual energy into fluctuations that nearly rejected the transfer from Luo Binghe. The demon lord made a sound of irritation, and gave him an impatient look.

“Calm down,” he said.

Yue Qingyuan let out a humourless chuckle.

“I killed the man I loved,” he said. “I don’t think I can calm down about it.”

The transfer stopped working. Luo Binghe dropped his wrist. The end of the transfer made his
body hurt more, but, that was fine. He wasn’t dying. Unless he lost his senses again - in that case, it would probably be the end of him. He couldn’t even feel Xuan Su at the moment, the sword’s signals lost in the full-body ache he was experiencing.

He was surprised when Luo Binghe spoke again.

“He’s doing alright, you know,” he said.

Yue Qingyuan shook his head a little.

“Who?”

“A-Jiu, of course. He died, but as these things go, he’s done well for himself,” Luo Binghe elaborated. “I don’t think he should have anything to do with you. But if it were me, I wouldn’t be able to let such a matter go. So I’ll tell you. He’s doing alright. He’s an excellent cultivator, and a good student. He makes a lot of enemies, but he has more friends than he realizes, too. Shizun’s adopted him as family and that’s how he’s treated. I trust him to hold my daughter and be around when my husband’s vulnerable. If he asks me, I’ll teach him demonic cultivation arts that won’t hurt the righteous base he’s already built up. But he might not ask me. He’s free to choose his own path. Shizun has taught him and cared for him, so if anyone is going to tell him the whole story here, it will be Shizun and not you.”

Yue Qingyuan shook his head a little, not even certain what to think.

“He stole his body,” he said. He couldn’t even tell if he meant that as a protest or not, but judging by the sharp look Luo Binghe gave him, the demon lord took it that way.

“The oathbreaker’s hair has turned white,” Luo Binghe said, in a conversational tone that did not at all match the sharp look in his eyes. “Because of the qi deviation he just suffered when Shizun explained how the oathbreaker killed the man he loved. Oathbreaker, please turn your hair black again.”

Frowning, Yue Qingyuan winced, and raised a shaky hand to pull at a strand of his hair.

Sure enough, it was snow white.
Why did that seem… familiar…?

His head throbbed, and he dropped his arm back down to his side. He didn't want to think about it. He felt Xuan Su's warning that time, like a blared alarm.

So.

Turn his hair black again? What was Luo Binghe asking? Cultivation techniques could achieve many things but he knew of none that would act as hair dye.

“Go ahead. Put yourself back to the way you were before.”

“...I can’t. Of course,” he said, wincing again. Was this a dream? No, it was much too painful for that.

“And Shizun can’t go back to his old body. It’s dead and far away,” Luo Binghe told him, in a flat tone. “What does this oathbreaker want him to do in such a situation? Kill himself? I won’t allow that. Yue Qingyuan is the one who caused A-Jiu’s death in the past, Shizun was only caught up in the chaos. Given the choice to live or simply die again, of course Shizun chose to live. He even went further and tried to help you.”

A dim recollection of a gut-wrenching evening came to mind. Wasn’t that how Liu Qingge had once described this Shen Qingqiu, too, upon being asked to do so? ‘Kind’.

“All Yue Qingyuan had to do was keep his promise,” Luo Binghe said, with a dismissive shrug.

It was the shrug that made him angry. Made him wretched. The shrug and the man who offered it, because Luo Binghe had made the same promise, and had kept it. Just as he’d promised on the day when he came to collect his 'shizun', he’d learned from Yue Qingyuan’s mistakes. And Luo Binghe was a lord, too. Part of him wanted to protest, to explain, to tell him how hard it was to live every day with the pressures of the imperial court and expectations of his rank and station. How insidious the changes could be, how gradual the corruption of power, the loss of perspective. How conceit had snuck up on him, without his permission, and silently blinded him to many things he had once easily recognized. Never once had he stopped wishing to look after A-Jiu and protect him, never once had he stopped wanting to do the right thing. But look what he’d done anyway.
Part of him wanted to say these things not to defend himself, but to warn. Luo Binghe, power will betray you - bit by bit it will overwrite what you think you know, editing and revising the story of your being until one day, you might wake up to find a stranger in your own reflection. Because this lord hadn’t failed yet, had lasted longer than Yue Qingyuan - but that was no guarantee.

And yet…

Luo Binghe, he could see, understood the dangers well enough.

It was Yue Qingyuan who had been blind. Who had let himself become that way.

He was a man who deserved no defense, and Lord Luo was a man who needed no warnings.

“All you know how to do is apologize.”

Something hot slid down his cheeks. Luo Binghe’s expression twitched briefly towards discomfort. He offered the mercy of averting his gaze, at least, as Yue Qingyuan shook and wept on the floor. At some point in the midst of that, Shen Qingqiu returned. He probably shouldn’t have been surprised to see Mu Qingfang with him. He probably shouldn’t have been surprised to see Mu Qingfang with him. Some part of him incongruously wondered if the healer knew, too. But probably not. There wasn’t that atmosphere of trust, just courtesy and his usual levels of concern as Mu Qingfang moved him to a small lounging sofa and checked him over, and then gave him a pill to knock him out so he could accept treatment better.

Yue Qingyuan spent the night recovering in the study of this Shen Qingqiu he didn’t know, but had also, strangely, known for several years.

In the morning, the man himself gave him a hesitant look as he brought in medicine and a light breakfast. Luo Binghe was lurking pointedly in the corners again.

“All I don’t… really know you…” Yue Qingyuan said, quietly.
Things like that, he could focus on. The guilt he’d always carried with him had cracked like a fault line in an earthquake, and become a gaping chasm that he had no confidence in surviving. For the time being, he let himself skirt around the edges instead.

Shen Qingqiu hummed thoughtfully.

“I suppose not,” he conceded. “For what it’s worth, I do think of you as something like… a friend? A very complicated one…”

How had he ever mistaken this person for A-Jiu?

How?

Yue Qingyuan shook his head, and regretted it as it throbbed in warning.

“I am surprised you can tolerate me,” he offered, once he finally managed to sit up.

“Sometimes I don’t,” Shen Qingqiu reminded him. “I know you loved A-Jiu. I understand. He’s my student now, and if you hurt him again then there won’t be enough pieces left of you to bury. But he wasn’t a saint either. Back then he did some things… I don’t pretend to understand it. I just know there’s no going back to fix it.”

For some reason, that sentiment jarred unpleasantly with something in his thoughts. Some notion of a dream he’d had again. It was just a fleeting impression, however. Not something that lingered, or that he could really place.

He let it go and raised a hand in understanding.

“I don’t expect anything from A-Jiu,” he said, quietly.

“Lord Yue’s been sending him gifts,” Shen Qingqiu noted, matching his tone. For all that his companions described the man as ‘kind’, from the look in his eyes, Yue Qingyuan still didn’t entirely see it. Maybe it was just that he still had some assumptions about what the face in front of him implied with various expressions, but the man before him certainly seemed to have his fair share of steel. Intimidation, even. Or perhaps Yue Qingyuan just didn’t inspire his softer side.
“He should have things,” he explained. “I don’t have much use for my wealth these days. It might look a certain way, but I really don’t expect anything.”

Shen Qingqiu raised an eyebrow.

“And if A-Jiu expects something?” he countered.

Yue Qingyuan came up a little short, at that.

He’d had to work so hard to convince Shen Jiu to marry him the first time around. It hadn’t even occurred to him that this younger version would require anything less than the same. If he didn’t offer enough effort, surely the young man would just wash his hands of him and move on to someone else who did?

Though the thought of A-Jiu and ‘someone else’ made him hurt in a way that risked dropping him into that widening chasm again. He had no right to quaver over the concept. Not after what he’d done.

Even so…

“Does A-Jiu expect something?” he couldn’t help but ask, quietly.

Shen Qingqiu gave him an unimpressed look.

“He’s an ambitious young man being showered in gifts by the most eligible lord in the capital,” he said, dryly. “What do you think?”

With a lot of mixed feelings, Yue Qingyuan let out a soft oath, and dropped his face into his hands.
Whenever I write Yue Qingyuan in this fic I always kind of feel like I'm tossing him into some gladiatorial match against an army of his own failings, where his only weapons are two knives - one marked 'genuine feelings for SJ' and the other marked 'trying'.

Anyways there is going to be more stuff to do with grown-up SJ and YQY sorting some stuff out in the future, with cameo guest appearances no less, but upon thinking about it I've decided to do those parts from Shen Jiu's POV. They're gonna be fun! :D
Chapter Notes

I think I'm getting better at cliffhangers! But just to warn ahead of time, there's something of one at the end of this part. If you wanna read the whole thing in one go, it'd be wiser to wait for the next update! ^_~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The day had started out ordinary enough.

Some recent skirmishes at the borders with a particularly aggressive demon warlord had kept Luo Binghe busy for days, answering incursions with shows of strength and dueling the warlord whenever she turned up - usually calling for blood with her saber in hand. It was more posturing than warfare, but in the end that almost meant there were just a lot of additional challenges that Luo Binghe had to personally answer. And posturing or no, there were outlying settlements that were still bound to impacted by all of it. Demon lords, much like humans, still collected taxes, and still did not appreciate having their commonfolk’s livelihoods interfered with, or their tax collectors robbed.

Shen Qingqiu tried not to worry. If it had been a clash with human cultivators, he would have been right there for it, but since it was demons, if he was captured, it would just lead to an even bigger mess to clean up. And the warlord really wasn’t on Luo Binghe’s level; she was just clever enough to know that drawing out the conflict into something long enough to make it seem like she was would do her a lot of favours in forging an alliance she was after.

Of course, knowing he ought not to worry and actually not worrying were two separate things…

Shen Qingqiu didn’t care very much for playing the fretting spouse at home while his husband was off fighting. He distracted himself by talking business with the retainers who’d stayed behind at the palace, and getting Shang Qinghua drunk so he could ply him for information on his rough drafts. The man still stubbornly refused to say anything about Luo Binghe’s other canonical love interests - and Shen Qingqiu could grudgingly concede that it was maybe better off that way - but there was a ton of stuff which he had written and subsequently almost forgotten about. Stuff that might actually be relevant, like secret members of various noble families or hidden treasures or ancient primordial beings that Luo Binghe may or may not have to fight at some point.
These were more than adequate concepts to distract himself with, but when Luo Binghe turned up not long into the morning, unexpectedly off-schedule and badly injured, Shen Qingqiu immediately decided that trying not to worry had been a mistake.

Obviously, he should have been worrying much more.

A servant hurriedly informed Shen Qingqiu that Lord Luo had come back, and had proceeded to his palace chambers in what seemed to be a bad state. It must have been, if he had returned and not even bothered to seek Shen Qingqiu out. Concerned, he made his own way to the palace rooms. His alarm increased by several degrees when he went in to find his husband leaning against a wall, bleeding onto the floor with a pale face and furrowed brow.

Why weren’t his wounds healing…?

Shen Qingqiu hurried over.

“Binghe, what happened?” he demanded, as he extended a hand to begin transferring some qi.

Luo Binghe’s eyes snapped open.

Right when Shen Qingqiu got close, an arm struck outwards, and knocked him back.

“Get away from me!” the demon lord snarled.

The gesture rendered him speechless for a moment, shocked at being rebuffed like that. But then he recovered. Obviously, something was wrong with Binghe. Poison? That seemed likely, as it would take some kind of abnormal event to interfere with his healing abilities. But whatever had caused the injury, Shen Qingqiu could already tell that it wasn’t contagious. There were no spores, no malevolent waves of corruption, no ominous vibrations in the air, or even in Luo Binghe’s overall aura. He was probably just being over-cautious in his panic.

“Don’t be ridiculous, let me help,” he said, and moved in again.
“Help?” Luo Binghe spat. Shen Qingqiu wasn’t sure what to make of that response, but he was already moving forward again. When he reached out a second time, a hand closed over his wrist and halted him. His husband stared at him with narrowed eyes, and a snarl that brought him up short again.

What was with this weird attitude?!

Was the poison affecting his behaviour…? It was as he tried to piece it together that he noticed the unfamiliar sword hanging from his husband’s belt.

That… could it be…?

“Why does Binghe have that sword?” he asked, calmly as he could manage.

Shang Qinghua had told him about Xin Mo during one of their conversations. It was notable that his own Luo Binghe had never claimed it - and for that, Shen Qingqiu was very glad. Xin Mo was a cursed demonic weapon. It was very powerful, with a will and malevolence of its own. It wasn’t really intelligent enough to qualify as having ‘consciousness’, but it had a definite spirit that sought to attain and absorb a lot of power. It took a very strong demon to wield the blade without going mad, and even then, that demon would still have to appease the sword’s perpetual hunger.

Needless to say, no matter how good of a weapon it was, the costs were too high. Shen Qingqiu had still been fascinated enough to demand a full description, though, as well as a recounting of some of the Xin Mo related plot developments from the original story. The sword had a very distinctive, dark design, and its description matched perfectly with the mysterious weapon at Luo Binghe’s belt.

Xin Mo’s presence would also potentially explain why his husband was behaving so strangely, and why his wounds weren’t healing. Had he been forced to take up the weapon to deal with those territory skirmishes? But there was no way that warlord should have given him enough trouble for that… not unless one of their own allies had betrayed them, maybe…

After a moment, the grip on his wrist loosened a fraction.

Luo Binghe looked him up and down speculatively for another moment.
“...Mind your place, and don’t question your lord,” he said.

Shen Qingqiu’s lips thinned in displeasure. The words felt like a splash of cold water! Mind his ‘place’?

There was definitely something wrong!

Ordinarily, Luo Binghe was much too OP for Shen Qingqiu to take him in a serious fight. But right now his husband was injured, and seemed to have relaxed his guard. Shen Qingqiu withdrew his hand, feigning capitulation. He barely had a breath of a moment to act, but with an internal apology to his poor husband, he summoned a burst of qi with his leg and kicked outwards. The blow knocked Luo Binghe off of his already-precarious balance, and gave Shen Qingqiu the opening he needed to close a hand around his husband’s sword belt.

Luo Binghe reacted faster than he expected. Shen Qingqiu was knocked dizzy by a retaliatory strike, but he kept his focus on his target, and wrenched the belt, and blade, away. A follow-up attack startled him even as he dodged. His husband’s gaze was terrifying in its fury, almost alien to him; he felt waves of malevolent energy pouring from Xin Mo as it tried to fly free of its sheath. Shen Qingqiu didn’t have the strength to seal it; he could only physically try to hold it back, expending his own qi in the effort as he dodged an unexpected volley of attacks, and flung himself backwards. Already, the weapon was burning at him, trying to drain the energy from him.

Fortunately, he knew where he was going.

The treasury nearest to Luo Binghe’s chambers was designed to contain items with powerful spiritual energy. Long-term, it would be a terrible place to keep something like Xin Mo - eventually, the sword would win out over the protections, and probably even devour them and grow even hungrier and stronger. But for the time being, it would contain it. Shen Qingqiu could only fly down the corridor as fast as his legs would take him, dodging his seemingly-possessed husband until the treasury opened at his command.

He threw the sword inside, and closed it again.

Then he intercepted his husband.

“Binghe!” he called, not even trying to dodge. A blow struck him hard enough to make his ears ring. He gritted his teeth, and wrapped his arms around the struggling, injured figure. Fresh blood
spattered across his robes as Luo Binghe tore open his own injuries in his fury to attack.

“Binghe, it’s me! It’s your Shizun!” Calm the fuck down, please!

Shen Qingqiu hugged his husband for dear life. It wasn’t just foolish desperation, either. The two of them had learned a lot about Luo Binghe’s demonic habits and instincts since their marriage. Whenever he got too worked up - in any number of departments - then changing the tone of their interactions often seemed to help knock him out of it. It was like the bath they’d taken on their wedding night. If Luo Binghe was locked onto ‘fighting’, the best way to get him to stop was to switch over to something else.

‘Cuddling’ was often the most effective method of getting him to ‘cool down’, as it were. Sometimes Shen Qingqiu still found it too embarrassing, but in a situation like this, he didn’t even care that they were in a public corridor. They could cuddle! Definitely cuddle! Just please stop trying to fight him!

As expected, after a moment Luo Binghe’s motions stuttered; like he was trying to make sense of some dissonant sensory input.

But rather than relaxing or putting his arms around him, his posture remained rigid. When Shen Qingqiu dared to loosen his hold enough to look up at the man, Luo Binghe’s expression wasn’t what he’d hoped.

His husband looked cold, and wary. He was staring at him as though he was some kind of animal that had just done a weird, unprompted trick.

“...Shizun...” he said, in a very odd tone of voice.

Swallowing, Shen Qingqiu rallied himself.

“That’s right,” he replied, soothingly. “It’s Shizun, Binghe. It’s Husband. That sword is a cursed weapon. Binghe is injured, he shouldn’t have it on him right now.” Or ever, preferably, but they could cross that bridge when they came to it.

Luo Binghe’s eyes flashed with displeasure and suspicion. He glanced towards the treasury. But at length, he didn’t put any more of a fight. Shen Qingqiu managed to coax him back to his chambers.
Step one, he decided, was keeping Binghe and that sword separate, and healing him. Once he’d recovered his strength, then he’d hopefully regain his right mind and they could figure out what to do from there.

“What happened?” he asked, as he shut the doors to the inner chambers again. At least these rooms were easy to seal off. Although… “Mobei-Jun didn’t betray you, did he?”

Luo Binghe scoffed.

“Of course not. As if he could,” he said.

Shen Qingqiu gave him a questioning look, but at that moment, Luo Binghe gritted his teeth against an obvious rush of pain. As long as it wasn’t Mobei-Jun, then their position in the palace ought to be safe enough. Setting aside the matter of whatever had gone wrong for the time being, Shen Qingqiu coaxed Luo Binghe onto the bed, and went about trying to tend to his wounds. At first his husband was frustratingly recalcitrant, and kept looking at him like he might pull out a knife and try to stab him at any moment. The jumpiness was strange and upsetting.

But after a few minutes, he finally seemed to calm down and accept the help. Shen Qingqiu couldn’t find any particular poison or miasma afflicting his body; the wounds just seemed to have been caused by something - or someone - comparably powerful to Binghe. That thought was unnerving on its own, and it meant that there wasn’t much to do except let them heal at their slower rate, and make sure that his husband didn’t suffer too much depletion to his spiritual energy in the meanwhile.

There was something else, too. An odd scar on Luo Binghe’s chest, that looked almost like a healed-over sword wound. When he asked about it, he couldn’t get a clear answer.

It was frustrating, but he was willing to let explanations wait until the immediate problems were dealt with.

At length, he got his husband undressed and bandaged and safely tucked into bed. Mindful of his odd and jumpy behaviour, Shen Qingqiu kept his own inner robes on as he climbed in beside him, and carefully spooned Binghe so he could feed him a steady stream of spiritual energy.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe said, a few minutes into that.
“Hm?”

“...Husband.”

Shen Qingqiu hoped he wasn’t trying to go somewhere with that switch. This was no time to be getting up to bedroom shenanigans!

“Just rest for now, Binghe,” he said.

It seemed to work. Finally, Luo Binghe settled down. Shen Qingqiu let his thoughts and worries drift as he kept a hand on his chest, and focused on transferring energy to him. Eventually, the body heat and familiar rhythm of soft breaths, combined with the slow tempo of Luo Binghe’s heartbeats, lulled him out of his own tension. He drifted off to sleep, continuing to transfer energy while his consciousness slipped away. Funny, he wouldn’t have thought himself able to nap right then… he had a half a mind that he should keep guard instead, but…

The dreams took him anyway.

Shen Qingqiu found himself living out memories of his time together with Luo Binghe, as if someone was playing some kind of ‘greatest hits’ compilation video. It was a lot of ground to cover, and even though time moved differently in dreams, the process still felt exhausting. Like a mental marathon. Clearly, Binghe’s exhaustion was taking a toll on his control levels for this kind of thing to happen. Weird dreams were par for the course when he wasn’t feeling well, but usually they were brief - Binghe would wake up, stop them, and then go back to sleep. In this case, sometimes the dream-review seemed to ‘rewind’, and linger over certain events, which had a disorienting effect on him. But it didn’t really ‘stop’. Shen Qingqiu found it too easy to get lost in memories, his heart aching with nostalgia for the past.

The review only went over memories he had with Luo Binghe in them, and sometimes he could pull back enough to feel more like an observer. Thankfully it wasn’t their entire life together, but it definitely was a lot.

When he woke up, his head was pounding.

He had the strong sense of being stared at. At some point he must have changed positions, because he was lying on his back. It felt like there was a hand at his neck - no, there definitely was. Shen Qingqiu’s brows furrowed as he slowly blinked himself awake, and confirmed that Luo Binghe
was leaning over him. Staring at him intently, and holding his throat.

Too creepy, Binghe! What the heck?! Tone it down!

All he could get out was an incoherent, sleepy grumble.

Something in Luo Binghe’s expression shifted. The weird hand at his neck turned into a caress, that moved up towards his cheek. That was more like it, thank you. And then Shen Qingqiu remembered - injuries and Xin Mo and danger. Even if he just wanted to close his eyes and sleep for a week, that was definitely off the table. With some more internal grumbling, he pushed himself up instead.

“How are Binghe’s wounds? Let me see…”

Luo Binghe was still behaving a little oddly, but he let Shen Qingqiu check him over. His spiritual energy levels seemed a lot better, and a few hours of rest had done him a world of good, too. Most of the wounds had stopped bleeding, and the smaller ones were gone altogether. Shen Qingqiu changed out the bandages and fretted over the weird chest mark - Binghe still declined to explain it - and then figured, well, he clearly still needed to wind down. So he grabbed some combs and lotions and settled into their usual morning routine, taking the lead this time as he soothed some overly-tensed muscles, and fixed his husband’s hair.

“Howard,” Luo Binghe said, while he was doing that.

“Hm?”

“…Husband.”

“Binghe.”

“Husband.”

“What?”
“...Husband.”

“Does Binghe want something or not? What does he keep calling me for?” he asked, gently bopping the other man’s head in reproach.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe said instead, glancing back at him with an unexpectedly sly expression.

Shen Qingqiu was starting to have some serious misgivings about brain damage.

“Is Binghe going to finally tell me what happened?” he asked, tying off the braid he’d done, and finally finishing with his husband’s hair. The man turned towards him, and looked him over again. It made Shen Qingqiu feel very aware of his own sleep-mussed and undressed appearance.

“...Later,” Luo Binghe said, to his continued frustration. He reached over and brushed some of Shen Qingqiu’s hair back, however, and the affectionate gesture was normal enough to ease at least a few of his worries. After another odd, silent moment, Luo Binghe seemed to come to some kind of internal decision. He nudged at Shen Qingqiu to change places, and then started repaying his gestures.

Shen Qingqiu put up a token protest - his husband was injured - but it didn’t get far. And anyway, with his temples still throbbing, the gentle slide of the brush through his hair felt too soothing for him to resist much. He sighed, and gave in. Luo Binghe gathered careful handfuls of his hair, and let his fingers run through them. The backs of his knuckles brushed the sides of Shen Qingqiu’s neck. Something about the encounter felt ‘off’, but it wasn’t in any way he could firmly place.

It meant he couldn’t entirely relax, however. It itched at him. A feeling of being unsettled, almost uncomfortable.

He wrote it off as anxiety over Xin Mo and what appeared to be its lingering effects on Binghe’s mood. They ought to get rid of that thing in a hurry.

Luo Binghe brushed through his hair, but instead of tying it up, he left it loose. Then he indulged himself in playing with it. After a while, one of his hands drifted towards the front of Shen Qingqiu’s robe. His fingertips brushed across his collarbones.
Shen Qingqiu frowned, and moved the wandering hand back up to his shoulder.

“This isn’t the time for fooling around,” he admonished.

Luo Binghe’s expression flashed with unexpected annoyance.

“What kind of husband declines his lord’s favour?” the man asked.

Shen Qingqiu nearly gaped at him.

“The kind who isn’t in the mood,” he said. “Binghe’s acting too strangely. What’s wrong?”

“...My blood is up,” Luo Binghe told him. It was what Shen Qingqiu suspected, and it made sense with the issue of Xin Mo, too, but…

Why did it feel like a lie?

As he scrutinized him, his husband’s expression softened. The brush of his hands turned apologetic.

“Shizun, this lord is really too agitated. Xin Mo consumes spiritual energy, and there was a difficult fight at its sealing site. A monster appeared and did battle with this lord. He’s not himself right now,” Luo Binghe said. At the weariness in his eyes, and recollection of his injuries, Shen Qingqiu’s affront vanished like smoke on the wind.

“Binghe just needs to rest and recollect himself,” he decided. Standing up, he fussed his husband back into bed, and then finished doing his own hair. He put it into a simple style, to keep it out of the way, and then dressed. Promising Luo Binghe breakfast, he left the room with the feeling of an unnervingly sharp gaze following him every step of the way.

Funny. Normally Binghe’s demon blood being up didn’t actually unnerve Shen Qingqiu at all - he was liking this Xin Mo business less and less.
It was a good thing that he’d had Shang Qinghua on hand for talking with lately. Rather than heading for the kitchens, Shen Qingqiu instead made a quick detour to the treasury where he’d flung the sword. He checked once to make certain it was still there, and then reset the seals on the doorway. Ordinarily, he or Binghe could open the door at will, but resetting it meant that a combination of seals would have to be touched with a droplet of blood in order to get it to work again. Shen Qingqiu chosen a specific order as password, and then grabbed a servant in the next corridor and ascertained Shang Qinghua’s whereabouts.

He cornered his fellow transmigrator outside of Mobei-Jun’s chambers. Mobei-Jun himself was supposed to be on the battlefields, and didn’t seem to have returned with Luo Binghe, so the man was alone except for Snowflake.

“We need to talk,” Shen Qingqiu told him, without any preamble.

Shang Qinghua nodded, and motioned at Snowflake.

“Set up the privacy zone,” he asked.

Accustomed to her master’s quirks, Snowflake just inclined her head, and then went to go watch the end of the corridor and glare at anyone who tried to walk down it.

“What’s up, bro?” The man asked him, then. “I heard Lord Luo came back early, looking like he let an ancient dragon chew on him for a while.”

“I almost might have preferred that…” Shen Qingqiu admitted, before explaining the basics of the situation he’d encountered. Shang Qinghua listened, brow furrowing, and after a while he crossed his arms. His expression got more serious as the details unfolded.

“That’s weird,” he said, once Shen Qingqiu was done. “Xin Mo’s effects are usually more gradual? I mean there’s the initial rush whenever someone new tries to wield it, but after that, it usually settles down and then does more of an ‘insidious creeping’ kind of thing for a while. If it went too hard too soon, it’d be less tempting for its wielders to keep it.”

“Maybe the initial encounter didn’t go right?” Shen Qingqiu suggested.

“Maybe,” Shang Qinghua replied, but he didn’t sound convinced. After a moment, he shrugged. “I
mean I never wrote that happening, so I’m not sure how it would go if it did? We should probably destroy the sword if it still seems to be having an effect, though. That’s the safest bet.”

“Destroying it won’t hurt Binghe?”

“Nah, it’s not that kind of bond,” Shang Qinghua assured him.

They were halfway back to the treasury before Shen Qingqiu remembered something else.

“There’s another thing,” he said. “Does Xin Mo create some kind of scar-like mark on its wielders or something?”

Shang Qinghua shook his head.

“Nope. Why?”

“It might be nothing. It’s just that Binghe has a new scar on his chest,” he explained. Maybe he got it at some point on the battlefield? But it was so odd, usually nothing could leave a mark on him. The only exceptions were times when he let it happen on purpose, and that was usually… uh, related to things that Shen Qingqiu had done with him. Cough cough.

He was startled from his thoughts when Shang Qinghua suddenly reached out and grabbed his arm, halting them in their tracks.

“A scar?”

Shen Qingqiu blinked.

“Yes?”

“Like a sword scar? Over his heart?”
“Yes…?”

To his alarm, Shang Qinghua paled.

“Bro, we’ve got a bigger problem than Xin Mo…”

Before his friend could continue on that ominous note, though, a figure rounded the corner. Both of them halted as Luo Binghe turned, and caught sight of them. Shen Qingqiu subjected his husband another careful visual inspection. Despite his instructions to rest, Binghe had dressed himself, and considering their location, was probably… headed for the treasury.

Worrying.

Even more worrying, Shang Qinghua suddenly moved to cower behind Shen Qingqiu.

“Shit,” the other man cursed under his breath.

Why was he being so skittish…?

They could discuss it later. If that scar mark was so troubling, then maybe it was part of why Luo Binghe was acting strangely. But no matter what, this strangeness was a danger to his husband, so Shen Qingqiu only took a moment to make up his mind, and then approached the man in question. He was supposed to be resting, not wandering around looking for cursed items that he never should have picked up in the first place!

“What is Binghe doing up?” he asked.

Luo Binghe - who had previously been looking at Shang Qinghua like he was someone at a fancy party whose name he was trying to recall - shifting his gaze towards him. The annoyance came back. Shen Qingqiu frowned at it, unable to completely suppress his hurt. It wasn’t an expression he was used to being on the receiving end of.

“Husband went to get breakfast, and didn’t come back,” Luo Binghe said, however, and that left him faintly embarrassed.
“It’s still getting ready,” he excused, awkwardly. “I was distracted talking to some people.”

Luo Binghe raised an eyebrow.

“Isn’t Husband cooking for me himself?”

Shen Qingqiu blinked.

It wasn’t that his cooking was poisonous, exactly. He’d made a few attempts in the past, and Binghe was always happy to eat anything he prepared for him, even when it was frankly mediocre. But it wasn’t ever something he had requested or expected from him before, either.

"It would be better for Binghe’s health if I didn’t,” he said, awkwardly. To his relief, Luo Binghe seemed amused by his answer - that was more like it! Reaching out, Shen Qingqiu took the man’s arm, and began to steer him in the direction of the human courtyard instead. “If my lord can’t rest easy in his rooms, then let’s go to my courtyard. There are better ways for me to indulge him there. Mobei-Jun’s First Husband could please check on that breakfast, perhaps? I’ll come get it from him in a bit.”

He didn’t put too much emphasis on his words, but he did glance at Shang Qinghua meaningfully. They needed to continue their conversation.

It really didn’t help that the other man looked like he was on the verge of shitting his pants in terror for some reason.

“Ah, y-yeah, yes, of course Master Shen, sure thing!” Shang Qinghua got out. Shooting him a worried look, the man then blurted: “Just remember not to get up to anything too straining! Physical! Physical strain is bad for injuries, don’t - er, don’t indulge Lord Luo physically!”

Luo Binghe’s expression darkened.

On that note, Shang Qinghua bolted like a startled rabbit.
…What the *fuck* was that about…?

Was everyone losing their minds?

Or, wait, no. Despite his horrible start at it, Shang Qinghua had been getting better at delivering coded information. Maybe there was a reason it would actually be very bad to have sex with Binghe right now? A reason he couldn’t mention in front of the man, maybe because he couldn’t explain how he would know it in the first place without rousing suspicion. Perhaps to do with Xin Mo or with that odd scar?

Shen Qingqiu filed the information away, and gave Luo Binghe a soothing pat to the shoulder.

“Relax,” he advised. “Come to my courtyard.”

“…Alright.”

The tension stayed in Luo Binghe’s shoulders as Shen Qingqiu led him down and around to the courtyard path. He decided it was the right choice once they got there. In recent months, Binghe had managed to make breakthroughs in getting more pleasant plants to grow in the outdoor space; even successfully putting in a patch of bamboo and a fountain. The atmosphere was much lighter. Everything was quiet except for the gentle sounds of a few hollow chimes he’d strung up, and the trickling of the fountain at the side of the fish pond. Ben Ben bounded up towards them, only to come up short and make a puzzled ‘whuff’ sound at Luo Binghe.

Binghe stiffened.

Ben Ben cocked his head. Then he seemed to suddenly remember that Shen Qingqiu was the reason he was running up in the first place, and ran over to him as usual, whole body waggling in excitement.

When Shen Qingqiu glanced at Luo Binghe, he’d relaxed again. The man stared back at him and Ben Ben, and then shook his head slightly.

“What?” Shen Qingqiu asked.
“Nothing,” Binghe replied. “I just… need to rest.”

Accepting the answer, Shen Qingqiu left his ridiculous dog be, and instead focused on getting his husband inside and safely ensconced in bed again. The servants hadn’t been and gone to tidy anything yet, so his rooms were still a little disorderly; there were half-written letters on his desk and a few odds and ends sitting out. Binghe stared at some of them, and at the rooms themselves, but he didn’t move to tidy anything or comment on whatever was bothering him.

He really must have been tired.

Some of the tension around his eyes had eased, at least, and there was a quiet that stole over him, that seemed much better than his sharpness and irritation from before. He let Shen Qingqiu settle him into his bed, and breathed in deeply as he reclined against the pillows. Recalling that he’d promised to be ‘indulging’, Shen Qingqiu retrieved his erhu from its place beside his vanity, and sat beside the bed to play for awhile.

That effect, at least, seemed to be good as ever. Binghe watched him through half-lidded eyes, and more and more, began to relax.

After a few minutes at that, Shen Qingqiu was able to go again on the ostensible hunt for ‘breakfast’.

Shang Qinghua was waiting with a tray - good man - and the world’s most anxious expression when Shen Qingqiu met him at the corridor leading into the courtyard.

“That’s not Lord Luo,” the man told him at once, before foisting the tray into his arms.

“What?” Shen Qingqiu could only ask, startled.

“I mean, it is, but it’s not your Lord Luo,” Shang Qinghua clarified, without really clarifying anything at all. “The scar, that’s a mark that’s on the Original Luo Binghe. He got it when Liu Qingge tried to kill him the first time. That’s not the Luo Binghe you know, that’s the disaster I wrote!”

Shen Qingqiu stared.
Slowly, he felt all the colour drain from his face.

“*What?! How is that even possible??*”

“I don’t know!” Shang Qinghua replied, throwing his hands up. “I mean, Xin Mo can travel between worlds, I guess? Sort of?”

“What do you mean, ‘sort of’? Why didn’t you mention this possibility before?!” he snapped.

“Because I never thought it would work like ‘between worlds’ and not just ‘between human and demonic dimensions’, which is all it does in the story I wrote!” Shang Qinghua snapped back at him.

“Then how do we even know it is possible?” Shen Qingqiu countered. “What if he just got a new scar and is acting weird because of the mind-controlling demon sword he came back with?!”

That honestly seemed more likely and oh shit what was his life how was ‘demonic sword possession’ more reasonable than ‘cross-dimensional travel’ and why was that level of disparity so pertinent to him?!

As if he could read his thoughts, Shang Qinghua shook his head.

“Bro, it’s not like we can afford to doubt traveling between worlds as an option, here. We know it happens,” he pointed out.

Shen Qingqiu’s grip on the tray in his hands tightened.

“But then, if that’s another version, where’s my Binghe?” he couldn’t help but wonder.

Shang Qinghua gave him a helpless look.
“I don’t know,” the man admitted. Then he raised his hands as if to forestall something, even though Shen Qingqiu hadn’t been able to so much as twitch in his own dread. “Look, we don’t know for sure, you’re right. So we’ve just gotta figure it out! I’ll go call Mobei-Jun here, he might not answer if he’s fighting but he should come otherwise. Lord Luo was with him at the battlefield, that’s pretty near to where Xin Mo was sealed. My king might know more about something that’s happened. Lord Luo could even still just be there, totally unaware of what’s going on here!”

Taking a deep breath, Shen Qingqiu calmed down.

That was actually… a really good idea.

“Okay,” he agreed. “Alright. I’ll go… try and figure out if this really is a different Binghe.”

Straightening his back, he turned towards his courtyard with a sudden sense of dread.

Shang Qinghua twisted the hem of his sleeve anxiously between his fingers.

“Good luck, bro,” he said. “Guard your virtue, he’s a beast and using Xin Mo makes him horny.”

“...I hate your writing so fucking much,” Shen Qingqiu said, with feeling.

“I understand that you’re speaking out of anger with the situation and will not take that personally,” Shang Qinghua replied.

Sensing that his odds of getting a fist to the face were rising by the minute, he then turned, and hastily set off to fulfill his own mission. Shen Qingqiu allowed himself a moment to regain his composure. Xiu Ya was still at its place on his wall. He suddenly wished it was at his belt instead, as he made his way back to where he’d left the Potential impostor Binghe.

Okay.

So.
Canon Luo Binghe was pretty messed up, according to Shang Qinghua’s description. But he was still a version of Luo Binghe, right? Somewhere inside, there was still that young boy who Shen Qingqiu had met, with an earnest heart and sweet soul. And there was every chance that Shang Qinghua was dead wrong and the man he was approaching was his Binghe, just, addled.

It was his self-appointed responsibility and privilege to look after Luo Binghe. He could do this.

Internal pep talk concluded, he walked back inside the replica Yue estate rooms and found Luo Binghe lying in the bed where he’d left him. The man’s eyes were closed.

The papers on his desk had been rearranged, just slightly.

Hm.

Well, at least he had gone rifling through his things, rather than trying to eavesdrop. But that wasn’t very promising on the ‘it’s just regular Binghe with Sword Madness’ front. As a person who knew a thing or two about pretending to be someone else in another world, Shen Qingqiu knew one of the first sources to go to was anything written down. His own Luo Binghe wouldn’t have even needed to touch those papers to know what they were, and that they weren’t urgent; if he’d wanted to move them, he would have neatly stacked them off to one side, too. No subterfuge required.

Shen Qingqiu scrutinized the man ‘sleeping’ in his bed as he quietly set the breakfast tray down.

He really did just look like his Binghe. With his features relaxed in feigned sleep, there wasn’t an ounce of difference from the outside.

It made it easy for him to reach over and carefully brush a few strands of hair back from his face.

“My lord,” he called gently. “My lord should eat to keep up his strength.”

Luo Binghe ‘stirred’ in a convincing display of someone rousing themselves from a light rest. He smiled a little, and Shen Qingqiu smiled back, as he settled a bowl of congee into this person’s hands. Thinking as he did on what he could use to discern the truth. That dream… this man had watched his memories. It wasn’t suspicious at the time, but in light of Shang Qinghua’s theory, it suddenly clicked into place with everything else going on.
But he hadn’t seen everything. The memory review had flashed back to some points so often that it hadn’t gotten much further than their wedding day. Shen Qingqiu’s guts twisted a little at the idea of someone else rifling through his recollections of that night, like some creepy voyeur. That was private!

“It’s a good thing that Second Husband Liu is coming back today,” he said, as Luo Binghe sipped at his congee. “If dangerous things are around, his skills will doubtless be needed.”

Inspiration had struck him because Liu Qingge was, in fact, supposed to stop by sometime soon.

Luo Binghe glanced at him.

“...It’s good that Shizun gets along so well with Second Husband,” he ventured. “Some men would be much less gracious. In another life, Shizun might have even hated him.” A wry sort of amusement quirked his lips, as if he was telling himself a private joke.

Shen Qingqiu kept his expression neutral, nodding in acceptance of the remark as he internally shrieked.

Bastard! impostor! Red fucking alert, Shang Qinghua was right, this son of a bitch was Canon Luo Binghe!!! That joke wasn’t private at all, the original goods did hate Liu Qingge! Had this doppelganger been surprised to see them make friends in his memories? He must have been!

“Second Husband is this First Husband’s good friend, of course we get along,” he replied. “There is no one else this husband would share his lord with.”

Canon Luo Binghe’s expression turned a little contemplative, a little distant, as he seemed to turn the matter over in his mind.

Then he looked back at Shen Qingqiu, and smiled.

“Just Shizun and Ge-ge is more than enough. This lord’s husbands are quality over quantity,” he said.
“Ge-ge, hm? That’s new,” Shen Qingqiu replied vindictively. Let this FAKER sweat a little! He indulged in a moment of vicious satisfaction as the canon goods fumbled a little in drinking the rest of his congee. If anyone knew what kind of minor slip-ups could make a liar break out into a cold sweat, it was him! Squirm, you bastard!

“Ah, this lord… normally only calls him that in private,” he claimed.

Not a bad save, impostor, but was Shen Qingqiu going to let him have it? No! He adopted a slightly befuddled expression, and tapped his chin.

“But, even when we three are in private together this husband hasn’t heard Yong-er called such a way…” he said. Yong-er was what Liu Qingge’s parents called him, so hopefully not too implausible, under the circumstances…

Luo Binghe almost choked on his congee.

“When we’re…?” he began. Shen Qingqiu was expecting him to have to swallow back a burst of outrage. How would such an overbearing version of Luo Binghe like the idea of his husbands really hanging out, hm? Not being able to keep them cordoned off and all to himself?

He had to revise his assessment when the impostor’s cheeks flushed, and the look that came into his eye was… definitely not ‘outrage’.

Shit.

Where did his mind just go? He had the sudden feeling it was nowhere good!

“...Husband just must have failed to notice it,” Luo Binghe finally said.

Okay, yes, that was fine! They could get out of that conversation, abort, that part was all done with! Shen Qingqiu nodded in easy agreement, and redirected his attention towards serving some tea. Shit, he couldn’t let himself get carried away. He’d just needed to prove to himself that this wasn’t his Luo Binghe, and he’d done that - so now he needed to find out if this version knew where his own was, or…
Thinking about the wounds that the impostor had arrived with, Shen Qingqiu’s movements faltered.

A being of great strength had inflicted those.

Suddenly, Shen Qingqiu felt absolutely certain that he knew exactly who that being was.

The stumble wasn’t noticed by the impostor, who was busily staring at his bowl of relatively standard congee with a look of deep internal contemplation. Mustering up his most peaceful, graceful gestures, Shen Qingqiu set out a cup of tea for him, and then stood up from beside the bed.

“My lord, let me light a few sticks of relaxing incense,” he suggested.

The impostor nodded absently in agreement, still distracted by whatever he was thinking about.

As expected, the protagonist from a harem story was never smart enough to just avoid incense entirely. Shen Qingqiu generally did, whenever possible. If it wasn’t being used a lust potion or knock-out drug, it was a poison or mind control device or something else. It was always the fucking incense! But to that end, this world was full of drugs that, when inhaled, even worked on demons. Luo Binghe was immune to most poisons, but he was rather susceptible to two kinds of inhaled substances, for plot-related reasons. The first was because of his dream-manipulation techniques. To manipulate dreams, one had to be unconscious. Thus, Shang Qinghua had never been able to completely write his OP protagonist out of being affected by knock-out drugs. Otherwise, how would he be able to conveniently and/or dramatically fall unconscious in a hurry?

The other drug he was susceptible to was truth compulsion incense. This was mostly, as Shen Qingqiu understood it, for the purposes of drama.

Shen Qingqiu loved his husband and had never used either type of incense on him before, but he still had them. The knock-out kind was sometimes used by Luo Binghe himself, for convenience of his dream powers. The truth one was a gift - ostensibly, if Shen Qingqiu ever doubted his husband’s fidelity or motives, he was allowed to drug him up and get the truth from him. It was a well-meant gesture but he’d never planned to use it, of course. Binghe just got… sensitive, sometimes, when he worried he was neglecting Shen Qingqiu’s ‘understandable anxieties’.

He was really glad for the gift now, though.
A little of the knock-out incense would be enough to make his target weak and vulnerable without rendering him entirely unconscious. He knew the amounts because he’d helped his Binghe figure them amount. A lot of the truth serum would hopefully do the rest. Shen Qingqiu lit them both, then discreetly swallowed an antidote pill from his sleeve. It wasn’t really meant to counteract the truth incense, just the knock-out drug, so it wouldn’t work completely, but it should be enough to keep his wits about him.

“Husband, this lord wants to review the political situation of the demonic realm, as it currently stands,” Luo Binghe said then, as he finished his congee. The man looked thoughtfully out of the nearby window. “Recount the state of affairs to me?”

“As my lord wishes,” Shen Qingqiu agreed.

It gave him a good excuse to sit close by, and monitor the man for reactions to the incense. He had to fight back a snort. Smoothly done, trying to figure out as much as he could about the world he was in! Worthy of a salute, except that he’s already been discovered!

Since the political situation was something he’d had to consider and familiarize himself with anyway, Shen Qingqiu didn’t have much troubles getting into a description - starting with overall and then veering into specifics as the impostor requested them. The incense had a thick fragrance to disguise the telltale notes of poison to it, and it wasn’t long before the whole room smelled like musk and vanilla, and the impostor’s brow was beginning to furrow.

Shen Qingqiu was still a little surprised when a hand reached out, lightning-quick, and closed around his neck.

“You snake,” the impostor snapped at him, eyes glassy with a disorientation he was obviously fighting. “What have you done?!?”

This Luo Binghe’s grip was good, but his coordination was shot. Shen Qingqiu wrenched himself free, and in their ensuing grapple, knocked over some of the breakfast dishes before he managed to pin the canonical protagonist down.

“Look at that, what a mess,” he chided, humourlessly.

The impostor’s eyes shone red.
“I should have known! Shen Qingqiu and his tricks!” he spat.

“Yes, yes, I’m very wicked. Now tell me - where the fuck is my husband?”

The fake’s eyes wavered a little, surprised by the question, it seemed, and then hardening into reluctance as the answer spilled out of him.

“In my world, I assume. When we met in the cavern I thought he was some kind of conjuration, and we fought, but then something swept us away. I ended up here. It seems safe to assume that he ended up there.”

Shen Qingqiu frowned.

Shit. That was the worst possible answer.

While he was frowning, Canon Luo Binghe subjected him to another odd look.

“How did you figure it out?” the man asked. “My act had holes, I know, but this is the kind of situation that’s too absurd for most people to guess.”

“I’m not from this world either,” Shen Qingqiu replied.

His eyes widened.

Shit. Shit shit shit shit he had to watch that the fucking truth compulsion was still kind of working on him, too!

Canon Luo Binghe looked like he hadn’t at all been expecting that answer. He seemed to figure out what had gone wrong as well, and his expression narrowed in interest.

“So that’s why things went so differently here,” he said. “I had wondered…”
“It’s all fascinating,” Shen Qingqiu drawled, making extra certain that he still had the physical upper hand. Xiu Ya was close by, he could call it in a second. “But you’re not going to have a lot of time to examine the effects. I want my Binghe back, which means you are going home.”

“Where are you from?” the impostor asked.

“I don’t want to tell you that,” he said, which seemed to work instead of blurting the answer. Alternate truths. Got it. “In fact I don’t want to deal with any of this. It’s been a long time since Binghe came home and I’ve spent the entire while worrying about him and resenting the fact that I can’t be with him, and now you’ve come and injured him and he’s in your world and your world sucks so even though this is sort of interesting, in a hypothetical scenario kind of a way, I just want it done with so I can see my own husband with my own two eyes and make sure he’s alright. I’m worried sick and I don’t like it at all.”

……

……Alright so over-sharing was still going to be an issue. Noted.

The impostor blinked at him.

Then he leaned up a little. His lips curved into a sultry smile, and his gaze went hooded.

“Well you know, I am Luo Binghe, and you have me quite thoroughly caught in your trap,” he purred. “Do you really need the other version? I promise I’m just as good…”

Shen Qingqiu’s glare darkened.

“Of course I need him!” he snapped. “I’m in love with him, not you!”

The seductive look slid off of the impostor’s face.
“Well how is that fair?” he demanded. “This other version of me gets to live this life where he didn’t have to go through a fraction of the shit that I did, he gets a nice Shizun and steamy hot threeways with a Ge-ge who doesn’t hate the world, and I just have to suck it up and go back to that place where everyone’s either afraid of me or despises me?”

Shen Qingqiu gaped.

Steamy hot…?

No, nope, he definitely misheard that. Concept not entertained, file deleted.

He schooled his features into a glare instead.

“Oh boo fucking hoo, I’m Blackened Luo Binghe, I have a harem of thirty and Liu Qingge as my First Husband but I never treat any of my lovers well enough to make them not want to murder me, and now I’m sad because I’m going to have to go back to counting my mountains of gold and sleeping with a different man every night. Someone, please find the world’s tiniest guqin to play a lament for me on!”

The two of them continued to glare at one another.

Then Canon Luo Binghe let out a strange sound.

“Shit,” he swore. “I like you.”

“Well I’m not sold on you at all,” Shen Qingqiu countered, firmly. “Thirty guys, really?”

“How do you know that?”

“I have no desire to let you in on that particular secret.”
“You seem a lot more buttoned-up than this in your memories…”

“My antidote to the truth compulsion incense is only half working. Shit.”

“Well that explains it then. With all this honesty going around I feel like we’re really connecting here. The chemistry is undeniable. It’s putting me in the mood.”

“Pervert.”

“Insults, truly? You do know how powerful I am, don’t you? I could break you.”

“And I could light one more stick of knock-out juice and then cut out your still-beating heart while you were entirely unconscious, what’s your point?”

“This just keeps getting more and more interesting. What other wicked things might Shizun do with this lord’s unconscious body…?”

“Stop trying to make this about sex!”

“Says the man currently pinning me to his bed.”

“And what was your excuse for being a pervert before, when you were feeling up my hair?”

“Xin Mo feeds off of a lot of spiritual energy, the easiest way to recoup it is to either let it feed off of someone else or have sex. Or both. Not that I would have considered it a chore, I used to have fantasies about my old teacher from time to time, but it probably would have still felt a little strange. I would have had to have tried to play nice. I must admit, most of my sexual fantasies about Shen Qingqiu definitely don’t involve a lot of softness or gentility. They weren’t very common either, but I foresee that changing…”

“Didn’t I tell you to stop talking about sex?!”

“You’re the one who used the truth compulsion incense, and now I can’t stop thinking about it.
Oh, this has given me an idea! Why don’t you come back with me? My power base is much more established than my counterpart’s. I’ll drown you in riches. I’ll give you a title. I’ll even let you fuck Ge-ge all you want.”

“What the -?! Why the hell do Liu Qingge’s husbands keep offering me that!?”

“Yue Qingyuan offered to let you fuck Liu Qingge?”

“Yes, it was disturbing and I don’t like to think about it. The offer, not fucking Liu Qingge, I - gah! No! No more talking about this!”

“I mean obviously he’d very interested in you-”

“Funny. Is this how you ended up with thirty husbands? You told them they could all have sex with Liu Qingge?”

“Excuse me?! You’re married to me and you think it’s a mystery how my harem got so large?”

“I am not married to you, I am married to a completely different Binghe! And I did not get to this point of being happy with my life and living with the man I love just so I could wind up in another weird impostor marriage situation. I want my husband back!”

Shen Qingqiu’s voice broke, horrifyingly enough, on the last line.

Canon Luo Binghe’s expression looked conflicted.

“It’s not fair!” he said again. “Why didn’t I get you? Why did I get the treacherous, petty Shen Qingqiu who locked me in the woodshed and threw hot tea in my face?”

“I don’t know!” he snapped. “It’s already happened, even if you want to kidnap me or stay here, it won’t go back in time and change your incredibly depressing past. Everything that’s terrible in your life will still be terrible because you will keep perpetuating terrible things until you learn to stop, and if you kidnap me or deliberately steal Binghe’s life, that’s a bad sign for your future prospects on that front!”
The two of them glared some more.

Shen Qingqiu couldn’t hold back anymore. Shit. He gave the man beneath him a solid shake, which had his brows twitching upwards.

“And you know what else? You need to treat Liu Qingge better. A lot better. I get that since you’ve married them you’re responsible for those twenty-nine other people but Liu Qingge definitely deserves more than a husband who brings home every single ass he wants to hump. And stop doing whatever else it is you’re doing that’s causing him pain. Maybe if you cut it the fuck out he’d stop periodically trying to kill you, because that is just wrong on so many levels, and I am more angry about it than I thought I was!”

Canon Luo Binghe scoffed.

“Ge-ge hasn’t tried to kill me in months, it’s fine,” he said, dismissively.

“It’s not fine,” Shen Qingqiu told him, mercilessly. “Do better. I know you’re not as capable as my Luo Binghe, but surely you can try to get on his level.”

The demon’s eyes flashed.

Shen Qingqiu had a single moment to think ‘oh fuck’, and then a blast of black qi caught him off-guard. Canon Luo Binghe twisted a leg and struck out at his side in tandem with the blast, not as coordinated as it ought to be but still strong enough to dislodge him. The blow sent him crashing into a far wall of the room. The impostor moved to follow-up, but with a gesture Xiu Ya sliced through the air and pierced his shoulder, pinning him to the bedpost instead. With a curse, Canon Luo Binghe knocked a fist against the wood. The bedpost exploded into splinters.

“Stop that!” Shen Qingqiu snapped, alarmed at the destruction of his home.

Surprisingly, Canon Luo Binghe actually paused, for a moment. Then his expression twisted, and he contrarily blew a hole through the wall nearby.

Fucker.
Lunging to his feet, Shen Qingqiu grasped Xiu Ya’s hilt before his opponent could try to remove the blade from his body, and forced him backwards with it instead. The impostor still hadn’t recovered from the incense, but with the hole in the wall, it was dispersing a lot more quickly. Ben Ben started barking furiously. Shen Qingqiu inwardly rolled his eyes. Really? That was when the loyal animal companion finally noticed something wrong? Where was the ominous growling and rejection when the suspicious duplicate Luo Binghe turned up? That was a classic trope!

Although… if Ben Ben had noticed the difference before he had, Shen Qingqiu would have never been able to look his husband in the eye again.

…Good dog!

Shen Qingqiu was running out of time and options for containing Canon Luo Binghe, however. He definitely couldn’t just light some more knock-out drugs. Desperately, he tried to think of a solution; and it seemed Canon Luo Binghe was doing the same, because a moment later, the man lifted hand, and aimed a qi blast at his dog.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t think.

He flung himself to intercept, deflecting the attack and freeing Xiu Ya from his enemy’s body. It was a clumsy move, by necessity, and knocked him backwards once again. Canon Luo Binghe didn’t give him time to recover. He pressed the attack, instead, and sent the both of them careening out through the hole in the wall.

As they crashed into the yard, Canon Luo Binghe landed a blow strong enough to shatter bone on Shen Qingqiu’s sword arm. He bit back a cry of pain, and released Xiu Ya, sending the blade to slash at his enemy’s back. Blood poured from the existing sword wound. The demon mark gleamed, and for a moment, he could only think that he had never seen that face look so unfamiliar before.

Then Cheng Luan split through the air between the two of them, and came to a stop a hair’s breadth from Canon Luo Binghe’s throat.

Shen Qingqiu let out a breath of relief.

The cavalry! The fucking cavalry had arrived!
“What do you think you’re doing?!” Liu Qingge demanded of the impostor, perched on the courtyard wall and looking absolutely furious.

Canon Luo Binghe couldn’t move much without the risk of slicing his own head off, but he tilted just enough to try and glance at the man.

“Oh,” he said. “Hm.”

Shen Qingqiu decided not to waste any more time in getting the hell away from him. He called Xiu Ya back to his side, and supported his broken arm as he got some breathing room. Stance wary, because out in the open air, the lingering effects of the incense wouldn’t take long to fade at all.

“He’s an impostor,” he told Liu Qingge. “Switched places with the real Luo Binghe. I was interrogating him, but he broke loose.”

“You want him alive?” Liu Qingge asked, eyes never leaving his opponent.

“Yes. It might be necessary to exchange him for the real version,” he explained.

“Yong-er, wait,” Canon Luo Binghe tried, using the same endearing term he’d heard Shen Qingqiu use before.

Liu Qingge’s expression turned incensed.

“Oh?!” he demanded. Cheng Luan pulsed threateningly, close enough to leave a red burn on the impostor’s throat.

“He has some misconceptions,” Shen Qingqiu explained, with a wave. “It’s how I tested to make sure he was a different person, and not just the result of a qi deviation or similar.” Probably better not to mention Xin Mo, for the time being.

Liu Qingge actually glanced at him, at that, while Canon Luo Binghe looked grudgingly
impressed.

“Shizun! If you come with me, I’ll give you the Second Husband title in my harem,” the impostor offered.

Shen Qingqiu gave him a cold glance.

“I am Luo Binghe’s only husband. You can’t possibly give me that.”

“Unfortunately true. I couldn’t. But as to my First Husband, I could still let you-”

“Disgraceful!” he snapped. “Keep this up and I will take you back to that First Husband short of several unnecessary parts!”

Xiu Ya moved to sweep threateningly low.

Canon Luo Binghe finally got wise and shut up.

With Liu Qingge’s help, then, Shen Qingqiu managed to get the impostor secured - for a relative value of the term - in the courtyard woodshed, with some immortal binding cables that Binghe kept stored under their bed for reasons no one was allowed to ask about. After a brief discussion of options, they agreed the best choice was probably to just fill the tiny building with more knock-out drugs and wait for them to take effect, on top of the cables. Shen Qingqiu left quickly and quietly to grab the extra incense from storage, and was incredibly grateful that no daring escapes were made while he was gone. They lit the incense in the shed window.

Liu Qingge helped set his broken arm, too, which was fun.

Oh this was just… such a fun adventure overall. Really. So fun.

“I sent Shang Qinghua to check in with Mobei-Jun,” he said.

Liu Qingge nodded in understanding.
“Shang Qinghua! That’s who it was!” Canon Luo Binghe said. “Mobei-Jun married that man? Was blackmail involved…?”

“How long can demons hold their breath for?” Liu Qingge asked him, ignoring the impostor completely.

“Ten minutes, in his case,” Shen Qingqiu said. “But let’s give it half an hour extra just to be sure.”

“Are Shizun and Ge-ge just going to ignore this lord?”

Liu Qingge glowered at the woodshed door.

“Stop calling people weird things!” he demanded.

Shen Qingqiu quietly seconded that sentiment. However weird his Binghe could be about calling people things, this one was clearly much worse!

“What? Ge-ge? What’s strange about that?” Canon Luo Binghe asked, in the sort of low purr that generally made Shen Qingqiu’s mind fly right to the bedroom. “Is there something else Ge-ge would prefer me to call him?”

Liu Qingge’s glower shifted ever-so-slightly in tone, as if to imply that the shed door had turned into a snake that might try and bite him at any moment. A really disgusting, unnerving snake.

Sometimes, Shen Qingqiu still couldn’t help but worry that one day, the whole ‘Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe’ thing would still come to pass, as some kind of universal inevitability.

Little moments like that one were very reassuring on the ‘no it’s never going to happen in this universe’ front.

“Just ignore him,” he advised.
“Shizun!” Canon Luo Binghe protested. He had to fight back a reflexive response at the plaintive tone. “Be reasonable. What about Xin Mo? Let’s work something out. You won’t be able to just carry a thing like that all the way back to that other place, but if you want to make a return trade, you’re going to need it…”

“We’ll figure something out,” he replied, firmly.

“Xin Mo?” Liu Qingge asked.

He motioned that it wasn’t a good time to ask, and the other man subsided.

“You know, your odds of keeping me contained are really very low,” Canon Luo Binghe added, his speech to ever-so-slightly slower. “I’m amazed you’ve managed it for this long. Sooner or later, I always escape. And when I do, I’ll get my way…”

Shen Qingqiu glared at the door. As a protagonist, the asshole had a point. But he was also missing certain pertinent details on that front. Like the fact that he wasn’t in his own world any longer - so was he even still a protagonist-type character? It didn’t seem so, although he had no plans on underestimating any version of Luo Binghe regardless.

And that didn’t really comfort him with regards to how his husband might be doing, stuck in that other world…

He and Liu Qingge (and Ben Ben, who seemed utterly ignorant of his near-death experience, as usual) were still guarding the shed, waiting for Canon Luo Binghe to pass out, when Shang Qinghua returned. With Mobei-Jun, no less. The portal shimmered open, and both men turned to look; on their guards until they recognized who had come.

Shen Qingqiu motioned to Liu Qingge that it was alright.

“Where is he?” Mobei-Jun asked.

At Shang Qinghua’s slight shake of the head, Shen Qingqiu felt a rush of disappointment. They hadn’t found the real Luo Binghe. That wasn’t good… but at least Mobei-Jun being around meant more firepower at their disposal.
Extending a hand, he gestured towards the shed.

“In there. We’re knocking him out with incense,” he explained.

“Oh, is that Mobei-Jun’s voice I hear?” Canon Luo Binghe called. “If so, I command him to open this door and release me straight away…”

Mobei-Jun raised an eyebrow.

When nothing happened, there came a tremendous sigh.

“Really?” Canon Luo Binghe said. “Why should that be different?”

“My loyalty is to Lord Luo, not anyone who happens to share his face,” Mobei-Jun replied, sounding thoroughly unimpressed.

“The binding should still work, though,” Canon Luo Binghe protested.

Shang Qinghua shot an ugly look at the shed.

“It won’t,” he snapped.

All three of the rest of them turned curiously towards him, at that.

“You know what he’s talking about?” Liu Qingge asked.

Shang Qinghua backtracked, and waved his hands.

“Well, since… whatever it is hasn’t worked, then obviously it won’t just start to, either! That’s all
I know. Like if someone were to have bound my king in perverted ancient blood rites, at some point, in another situation, then that wouldn’t mean that they would have bound him in this one. Because they didn’t. And even if anyone had tried to pull something like that, someone else probably would have taken some measures against it, because that sounds like the kind of thing an idiot would write at three in the morning while they were high on stimulants and crying from an awkward conversation with their father and just thinking they should do whatever anyone says because then at least someone will be happy with them, and that kind of garbage behaviour doesn’t actually have any business touching my king so you know what? No! It won’t work! It’s never gonna work! And if he tries it again I vote we kill him!”

Everyone stared.

Only Mobei-Jun didn’t seem at all phased, while Shen Qingqiu wondered if he’d lit too much truth-telling incense. They were out in the open air, though… eh. It was probably just Shang Qinghua being himself again.

Tilting his head, he gave his fellow transmigrator a look that promised he’d be asking for more details later.

The shed rattled.

Shang Qinghua flung himself in front of Mobei-Jun.

…Well, that was… different?

Even Mobei-Jun seemed surprised at that change up in the usual procedure. The ice demon frowned, and then rather deliberately moved Shang Qinghua behind him instead. Since there wasn’t actually any active threat, the gesture carried an implication that the ice demon was trying to correct Shang Qinghua’s inexplicable reordering of things. No, the move said. You go in the ‘behind me’ section.

“Don’t let him out!” Shang Qinghua hissed, gripping Mobei-Jun’s shoulder.

With an internal sigh, Shen Qingqiu resigned himself to taking command of the situation again.

“We’re not going to,” he said, snapping his fan shut as a slow wind kicked up in their favour. The
incense continued to fill the shed, only escaping here and there, while Canon Luo Binghe seemed to have gone quiet inside. But there was no point in jumping the gun. They’d wait until it was a given that he was at least affected, even if they couldn’t rely on it lasting for as long as it should.

The wait was inexorable.

Eventually, the impostor let out a soft huff.

“Nostalgic,” he said, in a low, dizzy-sounding voice. “Shizun’s locked me in the woodshed again… ignoring my pleas again… it truly is… nostalgic…”

His voice actually trembled with a deep and genuine-sounding despair. Shen Qingqiu paused, suddenly wavering. It… they… he hadn’t meant… his gaze darted to the shed, and he swallowed as he realized it was true. However inadvertently, he really had recreated a situation of trauma and abuse from this Luo Binghe’s past.

Then he remembered that this guy had tried to kill his dog.

“Go fuck your mother,” he muttered, still a little too loose from the truth-telling incense.

A low chuckle answered him.

Then the woodshed exploded in an eruption of black qi.

Oh, for fucksakes-!
Figured a comedy break would be good after the last update. Next part's from LBH's side of things! You'll all finally get to see some of his canon Chrysanthemum Garden. X3
When Luo Binghe stumbled out of the collapsing tunnel after the fight with his strange copy, he knew right away that something was wrong.

The place he had come out to looked like the right region, but couldn’t possibly have been. A light blood rain had begun to fall over fields that showed no signs of battle, staining the untouched grounds a dull rust colour. The fighting he and his forces had been engaged in against the latest upstart warlord seemed to have vanished into the boiling clouds overhead. A battle could stop, and portals could carry a lot of demons away in a hurry, but an entire landscape clearing of a battlefield in a matter of minutes was not something he’d ever seen happen before. No scorch marks were left, no ravaged terrain, no corpses or broken weapons or anything of the sort.

Looking around in confusion, he noticed a banner with the his family sigil on it. Situated near to the tunnel he had exited by. That hadn't been there before.

In that case, was he somewhere different? Some other, similarly situated cave?

Unease came with that possible answer. It didn’t fit, and something about the fight with his strange copy was eating at him, but he couldn’t put the pieces together just yet either. He turned back the way he had exited the caves by, and thought about it for a moment. The way back just seemed like tunnels leading deeper into the earth, however. And he had thrown aside that evil sword he’d grabbed - he still hadn’t found one good enough to hold up in his fights, and when his copy attacked him, in a moment of desperate need he’d taken up Xin Mo.

It had been tempting to keep hold of it.

Too tempting.

Luo Binghe had thrown it aside at the first available opportunity, and he worried that his sudden disorientation and urge to turn back were the whispers of that weapon. Trying to get him to go back
He needed to just... get his bearings, he decided.

Luckily, he knew precisely where to go in order to do that. He had no sword to fly by, and he lacked Mobei-Jun’s capacity with portals, but on his own he could still travel very quickly just by running. The only problem was that it could tire him out, and that wasn’t too much of an issue if he was heading home anyway. Not even with the injuries that copy had given him. His unease grew as he traveled, however, and verified that he really did seem to be exactly where the battle was waging. There were more banners with the Heavenly Demon symbol around, too, and he was sure he’d never asked for such things to be put up in so many odd places. Raising those banners was practically asking the other demon clans to come and make trouble for him.

So who had done such a thing? Maybe one of his lieutenants had gone and had a particularly terrible idea… and yet.

It would take time to raise such banners. Just like how a battlefield wouldn’t be cleared overnight.

How long had he been in those caves for?

It hadn’t felt like long at all, but maybe he had gone into one of those places where time moved differently on the outside rather than the outside. The thought had him speeding up even more. If he was gone for so long, then Shizun would be worried! Luo Binghe didn’t like the idea of leaving his husband without his protection for so long either. They were in hell, after all, and if he had unexpectedly disappeared, some of his enemies might have grown bolder…

When he reached the palace, however, he could only stall in bewilderment.

It was the palace. But it also wasn’t.

Had he somehow gone to the wrong place…?

With demon palaces, there were rarely two that were alike. Mobei-Jun’s ancestral homes had been built thousands of years ago, and despite being built by the same person, even they looked completely different. The main palace was carved into the landscape around it, its look was very distinctive and would not be easily replicated. Even illusions would struggle to make a building
that big. And yet, Luo Binghe knew right away that this wasn’t his palace. Most of it still seemed to be underground, without any of the additions he’d made to match his own preferences, or old wings he’d dug out in order to brighten the whole thing up. Most importantly, there was no sign at all of the bamboo courtyard he had built for his husband.

Maybe he had it wrong. Maybe he hadn’t been gone for too long, but had somehow… gone back in time…?

Another thought occurred to him, as he considered the ‘evil twin’ he’d encountered in the caves. But he wasn’t sure what to make of it. Of all the possibilities, it seemed the most far-fetched.

After a few more minutes of hesitance, Luo Binghe decided to approach the palace. There were more banners around it, he noticed. It might just bring trouble, but if he could figure out what was going on, then he could decide what he needed to do about it. A pair of demonic soldiers were standing guard at the gates. They didn’t question him, or even move to stop him, but instead bowed as he headed past. Whether they recognize him or if they just sensed the aura of someone in alignment with those banners, though, he couldn’t say, and wasn’t sure how to question.

He had barely made his way inside, and was still looking around, when he got another shock.

“You’re back early,” Liu Qingge said, as he strode towards him.

Luo Binghe stared.

He had seen Liu Qingge dressed in the finery of a high-ranking spouse many times before, but that was about where any familiarity with the situation ended. The Liu Qingge who approached him was wearing red and black. *Luo Binghe’s* red and black, in the right shades and everything, although it was still a very ‘human nobility’ sort of style. A second after he noticed this, Luo Binghe also noticed that the other man’s left sleeve was empty. He blinked at the space where an arm would ordinarily go, but where instead the fabric billowed too far backwards in a light breeze.

Even that was not the most shocking thing, however.

Hanging from Liu Qingge’s neck was a red coral pendant. It was stamped with the same symbol that was printed on all the surrounding banners. Luo Binghe’s mind blanked in incomprehension at the sight of it. He had destroyed all of those. He was sure of it!
When Zhuzhi-Lang had finally let him into his family’s treasury, his snake-like cousin had guilelessly explained what most of the items inside of it were for and how they worked. Luo Binghe had destroyed several treasures being distasteful or outright vile, and the ones he had most thoroughly broken and ground into dust were the enthrallment charms. Some of which were designed to be worn by ‘persons of certain interest’ to a heavenly demon lord.

There was some part of him - a tiny, ugly, insecure part of him - that had heard what the cursed coral pendants could do, and had thought ‘maybe if Shizun refuses me…’

The existence of that thought had frightened him so much, he’d known he had to eliminate the temptation of ever, ever giving in. That was back before he had gone to Shizun, to take him from Yue Qingyuan. He had never regretted destroying the ‘treasures’, and Zhuzhi-Lang had lamented that there were no other pendants of that make to be found anywhere in the world. They wouldn’t have been very useful to many people anyway, since the curses in them only worked in combination with a heavenly demon’s blood.

If the situation itself wasn’t so strange, Luo Binghe would have only been able to assume that his cousin had somehow managed to keep a few or sneak them away, and had the gall to use one on his husband’s good friend. Part of him still wondered about this, and felt severe alarm at the possible motives. But under the circumstances, another possibility occurred to him, and he liked it even less.

Enthrallment charms were traditionally given to the members of a heavenly demon’s harem. They were considered a precaution against too much in-fighting and scheming; the demon lord would always have ultimate say in his spouses’ conduct, not only through his noble authority, but in being able to enforce compliance or cause pain if their thoughts or actions veered too far away from his wishes.

There was no good reason for Liu Qingge to be wearing that thing.

A moment later, as his suspicions deepened, Luo Binghe checked and…

There was no good reason for the man to have his blood in his body, either.

Not just heavenly demon blood in general. That he could sense, but it wouldn't be the same. This blood was his own in specific. As he put together the pieces of this intensely disturbing puzzle, Liu Qingge approached him. The man’s remaining hand reached out, and startled Luo Binghe when it landed familiarly on his cheek. At his jump, the touch withdrew.
“What?” Liu Qingge asked, eyes narrowing. His expression seemed closed-off and distant. That, at least, wasn't too abnormal.

Luo Binghe shook his head a little.

“Where’s Shizun?” he blurted.

The stunned reaction to his question let him know that however wrong things seemed now, they were only about to get much worse.

Liu Qingge opened his mouth and then closed it again. He shook his head a little.

“...Who?” he finally asked. “You never call anyone that, except...”

“Shen Qingqiu,” Luo Binghe pressed. It suddenly felt like he was standing at the edge of a precipice, and he knew that pressing forward would not lead to anything pleasant, but also that he had no choice but to try and make to the other side of this strange and unwelcome chasm.

Liu Qingge just looked stunned again. Then he blinked, and cleared his throat. His features schooled themselves into something more neutral.

“What are you playing at?” he asked, in a low tone of voice. “What did you do this time?”

“Where is Shen Qingqiu?” Luo Binghe pressed.

A muscle in Liu Qingge’s jaw throbbed.

“Isn’t he still dead?” the man gritted out.

Luo Binghe stared at him.
The silence that followed was almost deafening.

This was definitely not the future, Luo Binghe decided. He refused. And it wasn’t the past either, obviously, since Liu Qingge would still have both arms in such a case. So that meant that the most absurd theory was probably the correct one, and he was in another world. An evil world. That copy he met, that was another version of himself. They must have accidentally changed places somehow, or gone through the wrong exits. Xin Mo was supposed to be able to carry a person between the demon realm and the human one. Maybe it also worked for whole other realities? He had talked about some things like that with Shizun once, when his husband had been in a strange mood. Shizun had pointed up at the stars and said that the universe was full of many worlds, more than just the human and demon realms, and then he had leaned into Luo Binghe with the full weight of his body, and said that he was glad to be in the same world as him.

This situation was very bad. Luo Binghe was no longer in the same world as Shizun. He had to go back, figure out what that sword had done, and undo it.

Turning, he went to leave again.

“Stop!” Liu Qingge said, and grabbed his shoulder. “What’s going on? You just got back, you can’t leave again. I need to talk to you about some things…”

Luo Binghe fended off a wince as the man’s hand landed on one of his slow-to-heal injuries. It was just a bruise. That copy wasn’t as strong as him. But it was still a considerable blow, and the pain made him aware of the fact that he had just run all the way here. Ordinarily he wouldn’t care, but a voice that sounded suspiciously like Shizun’s was scolding him in the back of his mind, asking what he would do if he exhausted himself and then passed out in some strange world-crossing cave system, and got even more lost...

He glanced at Liu Qingge.

The version of the man he knew was a reliable sort of person. Even if Luo Binghe was sometimes inclined to dislike him, on the grounds that he was clearly infatuated with his husband, he’d always begrudgingly acknowledged that he couldn’t actually blame Liu Qingge for having those kinds of feelings. Shen Qingqiu was an easy person to fall in love with.

The sight of the enthrallment charm around his neck was disquieting for a lot of reasons.
Luo Binghe hesitated.

Maybe it wouldn't be unwise to wait a little, he decided. He could rest, take in some food and water, and figure out if there was anything he could do for this one-armed Liu Qingge before he left. He couldn’t delay for too long, because he had no idea what that copy version might do in his own world - if he’d even gone there. But he’d beaten him up pretty badly, and left an entire battlefield waiting for him. Maybe that upstart warlord would take care of him before Luo Binghe even had to bother. That could cause some misunderstandings though, so again, he wouldn’t stay long.

“Alright,” he decided. “We’ll talk about some things. I need to rest anyway.”

Liu Qingge still looked suspicious, but contrary to his expression, he didn’t ask any more questions. Instead he just said they could go to his rooms. They passed a lot of people along the way, and although some seemed like they wanted to approach, most of them took one look at his face or at Liu Qingge’s and backed off instead. The atmosphere wasn’t good, Luo Binghe decided. It was making him remember the time when Mobei-Jun had first captured him and dragged him to hell. Back when he had been nearly feral, and everyone had either come at him to fight or else tiptoed around his back in terror.

Liu Qingge led him down a corridor that he knew would take them to the inner fortress of the underground palace, and they came to a set of unfamiliar doors. The doors were painted a pale green, and the corridor walls around them were covered with several unfamiliar sigils that were clearly powering some sort of locking array. Liu Qingge’s enthralment charm glowed when he reached for them, and the doors opened. Luo Binghe’s skin tingled faintly, his blood reacting to its own presence… his copy must have made these sigils, he realized, as he walked through.

On the other side of the door was a garden.

It looked like an exterior space, although he could tell right away that the gently sunny ‘sky’ above was an illusion. So were the flowers he could see ‘blooming’ in the wide entry chamber. If his memory served him, this should have been the large residential wing of the inner fortress; not the place where his own rooms were, but the place where they would have been if he’d decided to move Shizun inside, instead of trying to build the bamboo courtyard for him. It was the most secure place in the palace, but it wasn’t really a good atmosphere for humans. There was no natural light, and it wasn’t easy to come or go from. He had chosen a set of rooms that were more practical for himself, in the end, and largely reserved this space for future renovations. If their family expanded, it would be fine to eventually give their grown children some rooms there, perhaps.
But apparently, his copy had handled things differently. The light in the chamber still didn’t feel like ‘daylight’, while still being close. Something was making the air a little fresher than in the rest of the palace too. Luo Binghe would still consider the effort a ‘work in progress’ by his own standards, and yet, it was clear that this was a space being occupied. Two young men wearing enthrallment charms were sitting in the ‘garden’, along with some little servants. One of the men was wearing the iconic forehead ribbon of the Lan clan. Neither of them were familiar to him, but when he can Liu Qingge entered the garden, they both stood up and acknowledged him in a respectful fashion that made Luo Binghe feel even more uneasy.

“Eighth Husband, Twentieth Concubine,” Liu Qingge greeted them.

*Twentieth*…?

Luo Binghe’s unease skyrocketed. These were the chambers of a harem, in the innermost rooms of a fortress. Liu Qingge was wearing a symbol of his bloodline, and had brought him here. No one had tried to stop him. The warded doors had let him pass without issue.

The implications were obvious, and Luo Binghe felt sick.

He couldn’t even feel surprised when the two strangers greeted him as their lord. Liu Qingge gave him an odd look, and then started heading down one of several available pathways.

“My lord,” he said, with a hint of visible irritation, when Luo Binghe just remained standing in place.

He was about to move when the ‘husband’ wearing the Lan clan ribbon approached him.

The man was young enough to make him feel even more uneasy, with a face that looked like it had been carved from white jade. His manner was very deferential, but also elegant. However, Luo Binghe couldn’t help but think that this person looked very washed out. As if all the colour had been sucked out of him by the strange, illusory garden that he’d been locked into.

The picture presented was deeply uncomfortable.

“Begging the pardon of First Husband and my lord,” the young man said. “But Eighth Husband has been meaning to discuss with his lord the matter of the person being kept in the Orchid Room…”
Liu Qingge made a warning motion at this Eighth Husband Lan.

Luo Binghe could already tell that this person was determined to try something, though. It seemed like he required all of that determination to just… talk.

His skin crawled.

It got worse when Eighth Husband Lan knelt.

“Please, my lord, let Eighth Husband’s brother return to the cultivation world. This husband is happy to stay and serve. Wangji only misunderstood the situation, he’s still just a boy, but he is now also the person that Lan clan’s future depends upon. Please forgive his transgression in coming here, and accept the ransom for him so that he can go home.”

Liu Qingge closed his eyes in a manner that implied he thought that this poor man had somehow sealed his own fate.

Luo Binghe felt a profound urge to turn around and run away. This situation… even if Shizun was… was... how could he become the kind of person who…?

It sounded like he was a menace of a demon lord in this world, the sort who kidnapped and rampaged and conquered with wild abandoned. What did Liu Qingge have to do with him, in that case? He couldn’t imagine the man giving such a person even the time of day. But with the red coral pendant he was wearing, was it such an unsolvable mystery? He’d forced...

He’d… he’d probably forced all of them...

As the seconds ticked by, the young man kneeling before him maintained his calm, but the… concubine… he’d been speaking with looked more and more nervous, and Liu Qingge seemed almost like he was bracing himself to try and rush into a burning building.

What should he do?
He had no idea what was really going on, but…

What would Shizun advise?

*Maintain composure, deal with the situation in front of you, and if it’s too dangerous, then retreat.*

Luo Binghe wasn’t sure how exactly to quantify the potential ‘danger’ to him in this scenario, but he was too appalled to really not do anything. If this was some more mundane matter, and he’d been mistaken for some other, callous demon lord, what would he do?

Leaning down, he helped the poor Eighth Husband stand up.

“We’ll go let that person out of the Orchid Room, then,” he said.

The concubine looked surprised. The young husband looked relieved. Liu Qingge still looked like he was bracing for calamity, and even shot Luo Binghe something that amounted to a pleading look. When the Eighth Husband began to set off down another path, Luo Binghe followed. Presumably, he would be needed to open whatever locks had been put in place. In his urgency the Eighth Husband had taken the lead, but that was fine, since Luo Binghe didn’t even know where to go. Liu Qingge fell into step beside him.

“They’re brothers,” the man said to him, in a low tone of voice. “They’re only young. Are you really so offended at one trying to look out for the other?”

Luo Binghe shook his head. He was offended, of course, but it was by this entire scenario, not anything to do with the people trapped in it. He looked again at the young Eighth Husband, and felt some more unease. Who was he? He was clearly a cultivator, and Luo Binghe felt certain he’d met most of the noble cultivators in the major clans by now. Of course, Lan family members tended to share a lot of resemblance, but he was still sure that there would have been talk about such an exceptionally good-looking and talented person.

Uneasily, he thought about the prospect that he had landed in some distant future scenario again. He couldn’t see himself ever doing this kind of thing, though. Even if Shizun died, and couldn’t ever be brought back, and Luo Binghe’s spirit broke entirely, he could see himself just crawling into a hole and dying before he ever did anything like this. He could see himself trying to burn the world down in pillars of fire and ruin before he ever did anything like this!
If it was a different world, on the other hand, then maybe there was no accounting for the changes. Maybe he’d traveled through space and time. It wasn’t a dream, at least, he could verify that much.

His silence just seemed to distress Liu Qingge more.

“I won’t just stand idly by,” the man warned him. “Not again.”

Luo Binghe didn’t even know how to answer that.

Past the entryway garden, the beauty of the illusions in the space got decidedly more thin. The path they were on led into an interior corridor with windows that let in more fake scenery, and ended in a door with an orchid painted on it. There were more sigils drawn onto the walls. Having watched Liu Qingge open the first door, Luo Binghe had gleaned some notions about the mechanics. This one, of course, didn’t react to the enthrallment charms that three of the people present were wearing. But when he stepped forward and pressed on the door, it opened at his own touch; reacting to the command of his blood.

Inside, the rooms looked fine enough. They were neither especially lavish nor particularly barren, though there was a conspicuous lack of personalized items. Guest rooms, or maybe, given the situation, the type used for light punishments and confinements.

The thought of being the sort of lord who locked up his spouses to ‘put them in their place’ left yet another sour taste in his mouth. The thought of being kind of demon lord who genuinely just stole pretty young men he wanted for himself was a rough follow-up. In the middle of the room, another jade-caved beauty with a Lan clan ribbon on his head was meditating on the floor. The Eighth Husband hurried over to him, and spoke quietly but urgently as he helped him to his feet. The only evidence of mistreatment on the youth - who couldn’t have been a day past eighteen, if that - was the way he swayed, just a little.

Then the two of them looked at Luo Binghe.

“My lord is… letting Wangji go,” the Eighth Husband said, slowly.

His younger brother grasped his arm. He didn’t speak, but some wordless communication seemed to pass between them. Eighth Husband Lan shook his head.
“I will stay, of course…”

Somehow, without speaking, the younger brother managed to convey just how firmly unacceptable he found that compromise to be. Luo Binghe was about to suggest that they all go find somewhere to discuss things a little more clearly, but then the concubine behind him suddenly called out.

“Lan Zhan!”

A sword went flying past Luo Binghe’s head. It was gleaming with righteous brilliance even still sheathed, and obviously not actually being thrown at him. Instead, its target was the younger Lan. Luo Binghe felt more taken aback by the name than the action, however. Lan Zhan? Lan Zhan was a child! An actual child, not just a teenager. He was the younger child of the current Lord Lan, if it was indeed the same person - which would fit with the pair of brothers as well. The thought that he had moved forward in time crashed into him again. What if the person responsible for this really was not him? What if some impostor had taken over his life in his absence, killed his husband, enslaved his friend and proceeded to reign as a terrible demon lord?

The Twentieth Concubine darted up behind him, moving with obvious physical skill. He also flung out several paper charms, infused with demonic energy and drops of heavenly demon blood, that summoned up a few phantom combatants.

_Not bad,_ Luo Binghe thought, with the corner of his brain that wasn’t hyperventilating. Had the Twentieth Concubine figured out how to use the demon blood that had been put into his body? Or were there more Heavenly demons out there, more bastards like himself? The illusion of a different appearance fell away from the youth as his fighting techniques apparently took too much of his attention, and revealed a very able-looking teen, spirited and determined. He skidded into the room, and came to a stop next to the young Lan who had caught his sword.

Eighth Husband Lan looked alarmed.

“Ah!” he said. “Wei Wuxian, I thought we agreed that fighting really doesn’t seem wise…?”

“Respectfully, Zewu-Jun, I don’t think Lan Zhan is leaving without you,” Wei Wuxian said, the cheeriness of his tone belied by the grim determination in his gaze. “And I’m not leaving without my own brother either, so, we might as well all get killed together!”

Eighth Husband Lan raised a hand to the enthrallment charm around his neck, and looked at Luo
But whatever grim retribution he anticipated, the version of Luo Binghe he was looking at wasn’t planning any harm. He was beginning to regret not just turning around and leaving instead. This was the opposite of resting for a bit and trying to get his bearings before heading back the way he’d come. Now he just felt even more confused and alarmed, and it seemed he was going to have to fight again, too. Wei Wuxian’s puppets rushed at him. They were stronger than the average human, and not deterred by pain, but in the end, despite their speed and grace, they were also just fragile constructs. Luo Binghe didn’t even need a sword to break them, his fists more than sufficed. He barely even noticed that Liu Qingge was just standing there, watching, and when he did, it didn’t make much of a difference to him.

The fake(?) concubine was clearly the boldest of his confusing young opponents, but it was the younger Lan who drew his sword and swung it first. It was a graceful and well-made weapon. Luo Binghe still countered it with two fingers, and then with a twist of his own body knocked the youth back, and took the sword from him in turn. He could see the exact moment when the younger Lan’s eyes widened as he realized he was about to be disarmed, could even see him moving to counter it - if he hadn’t been exhausted from his imprisonment, Luo Binghe was curious if he would have been able to.

But at that point, he had a sword - though it wasn’t pleased to be in his hands - and had taken down all of the paper opponents. Wei Wuxian had torn off the fancy outer robe he was wearing to draw a sword of his own, and charged him. Luo Binghe met the blow with his stolen weapon.

“Run!” Wei Wuxian told the others.

“Wei Ying!” the younger Lan protested.

“Get Jiang Cheng and just go! Zewu-Jun, use what I gave you!”

Luo Binghe was curious. What did the little demon-blooded infiltrator give the Eighth Husband? He felt almost like he was reading one of those odd stories written by Mobei-Jun’s husband. But it occurred to him then that he should probably do something other than just fend off attacks, so with some effort, he disarmed the teenager in front of him, too. Wei Wuxian was sent staggering backwards. The younger Lan grabbed him protectively.

“And now none of you have weapons, and I am blocking this room’s only exit,” Luo Binghe observed. “If I was actually the Lord Luo you know, you would all be beaten. It’s really fortunate for you that I’m not.”
There was a pause.

Four sets of eyes looked at him utter bewilderment.

“What are you doing?” Liu Qingge asked him, apparently still very wary and convinced that there was some kind of mind game going on.

Luo Binghe schooled his expression into something placid, so that he wouldn’t wince. The more this went on, somehow, the uglier it felt. He tried for a reassuring smile, but that seemed to have the opposite effect.

“I’m really not him,” he explained. “I wasn’t certain at first, but this is definitely not the place I come from. I passed a copy of myself in some caves in a certain part of the demonic realm. The sword sealed there has some strange abilities, so I think I must have exchanged places with the Luo Binghe from this world.”

Everyone looked wary and confused. Except for Wei Wuxian, who looked fascinated.

“Huh,” Wei Wuxian said. “That would be such a weird and pointless thing to lie about… could it be you’re actually telling the truth?”

Liu Qingge was scrutinizing him with an odd expression.

“You don’t have Xin Mo…” the man noticed.

All at once, then, Luo Binghe felt as though he had realized part of what must have happened to have created this bizarre situation. Xin Mo! That sword he refused to wield, the one which tended to make people power-mad and lustful! Suddenly, he was even more glad that he hadn’t picked up that sword when he was younger. If this kind of situation was what came of it, he never wanted to touch it again!

…Unless he needed it in order to get back to Shizun.
But then after that, he’d definitely never touch it again! Or he might even destroy it. That would probably be wise. He definitely, definitely would not keep it or use it any more.

“I don’t have Xin Mo,” he confirmed, anyway. Then he shrugged. “This situation seems bad. I’ll go back to my own world, you all can sort it out—”

“Wait!”

It was that Eighth Husband Lan who spoke suddenly, and even reached a hand out to stall him.

“If… what you’re saying is actually true, and I’m not sure how it could be, but if it is… could you get rid of these?”

Reaching up, the young man tapped at the enthrallment charm around his neck.

Oh.

Luo Binghe considered it. Doing just one wouldn’t take long, but to do more than that, it might take a few hours. He’d have to take the heavenly demon blood out of the people involved too, or else just ripping off the charm would probably have some ill effects. It was tempting to just say ‘no’ and leave everyone to sort their own troubles out - what did he really have to do with them, after all? But when he thought of saying that, he hesitated instead.

Just leaving the situation as it was might not be as bad as causing it in the first place, but it wasn’t much better, either.

“If that’s what you want,” he agreed. Everyone was incredibly tense as he walked over to Lan Xichen. Liu Qingge went back to looking like he expected something terrible to happen. One of his hands closed over Cheng Luan, but with more uncertainty than Luo Binghe could ever recall seeing that man reach for a weapon before. Somehow that seemed even more unnerving than his dread or suspicion. Liu Qingge, unsure if he would draw his blade or not? Unsure of who he would fight if he did?

Luo Binghe didn’t want to know what had happened to bring all of this about.
It was easier to deal with Lan Xichen, who he didn’t really know. Everyone was bracing themselves, and when he called the blood out and the young man coughed it up, he thought the younger Lan might charge him again. But Wei Wuxian, who could probably sense more about these things, gripped his arm instead.

“No, wait!” the demonic cultivator advised, in a quiet voice.

Once the blood was gone, it was a simple matter to deactivate the charm, and then take it off. Luo Binghe broke it in his fist for good measure.

Lan Xichen staggered. His brother caught him, stone-faced despite the anxiety in the gesture. Luo Binghe had never seen anyone who could emote less than Shizun in a crisis, but somehow this boy managed it.

“It’s alright,” Lan Xichen said, astounded. “It’s… he actually broke it…?”

Wei Wuxian reached for the charm around his own neck.

“It’s best if I deactivate it,” Luo Binghe said. The young cultivator shook his head, though.

“My’s fake,” he admitted. “Or, well, it’s not actually fake but I deactivated it myself once I figured out that I could. Ah! That’s right. Guess what, Lan Zhan? I have demon blood! I bet you’re not surprised, right? Your uncle was right, I really am a menace to the cultivation world!”

Lan Zhan blinked and then made a vague sort of noise. The sound of someone faced with information he is not bothering to process right now, while Wei Wuxian finished getting rid of his fake charm.

Luo Binghe looked over at a stunned Liu Qingge.

He nodded at the man’s own cursed pendant.

“Should I…?” he offered.
Liu Qingge didn’t answer. He looked like he was still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Hey, can you take Jiang Cheng’s off?” Wei Wuxian asked him, with a light tone that belied the calculating look in his eyes. “He’s Ninth Husband Jiang, and my shidi. That other Lord Luo stole him a while back, before he grabbed Lan Zhan, even. He doesn’t want to be here.”

Inwardly resigned, Luo Binghe shrugged.

“This lord can take them off of anyone who wants him to,” he decided. “But then he will go, and figure out how to get back.” And assure himself that some other, far more sadistic person with his face wasn’t running around his own world, causing problems for his own people.

Wei Wuxian nodded.

“Kindly Lord Luo, if you take the amulet off of Jiang Cheng and help me destroy a few other things around here, I’ll help you figure out how to get back! I’m good at these sorts of things, actually! You can ask anyone, even people who don’t like me will have to concede!” he said.

Luo Binghe’s first impulse was to decline - how good could some random teenager be at figuring out the mechanics of something he hadn’t even known existed a minute ago? But then he recollected what he’d seen of this strange Wei Wuxian so far, and reconsidered. He also didn’t know anything about this youth at all, and yet, by all appearances, he’d managed to infiltrate a demon lord’s harem, sneak two weapons in along with him, probably compromised the sigils keeping certain people in or out, constructed several fairly complicated techniques using demon blood he seemed to have just recently discovered, based on his comments, and had only really made a mistake when he realized that one of the people he’d come to rescue was going to get into a fight no matter what.

“...How much time would it take to destroy these other things?” Luo Binghe asked instead.

Wei Wuxian frowned, then shrugged.

“I’m not sure? But if it takes too long, we can decide what to do then. Anyway, we can free people first!” he suggested.
Turning, Luo Binghe looked over at Liu Qingge.

“What do you think?” he asked. Mostly because he was having a lot of trouble making sense of this person’s behaviour.

It was strange. Liu Qingge was a lot of things, but Luo Binghe had never classified him as ‘hard to understand’ before. And yet, again, he seemed full of hesitation. Doubt? Suspicion? Or just an inability to tell what he should do?

Luo Binghe almost wanted to say ‘I’m not going to hurt you’, but that also seemed like it would be too insulting, somehow. Liu Qingge was not a person who feared confrontation.

Or at least, he wasn’t supposed to be.

“What will you do?” the man asked him, with a look that seemed to be searching for something. “After you… ‘free’ anyone who asks. What will you do to them?”

Luo Binghe almost shrugged, before the realization struck.

Liu Qingge thought he was laying a trap.

He thought he was seeing who would take the offer of freedom, so that he could feign giving it, only to deal with the ‘disloyal’ members of his harem after the fact. He didn’t believe that this was a different Luo Binghe. Or at least, he hadn’t been convinced enough to assuage his worries. It wasn’t really his concern what even the Liu Qingge of his own world worried about, it definitely shouldn’t have been his business to reassure a whole different version of the man that he wasn’t a tyrannical monster. If he wanted to be suspicious, letting him be suspicious; it was wasting time.

But.

Seeing even a different version of Liu Qingge in such a bad position was more difficult than he might have guessed. Even if the person responsible wasn’t some other version of himself, he wouldn’t have been able to stand for it. Actually, thinking about it, if some other demon lord ever treated the Liu Qingge of his own world this way, he wouldn’t hesitate to kill that person. That notion simplified things for him again. Forgetting the matter of other worlds, what would he do if this was just a bad situation he’d stumbled upon?
He would dismantle it. Lord Luo Binghe did not abide slave traders, had no tolerance for oathbreakers, and protected his allies and their people, as well as his own. Liu Qingge was one of Shizun’s good friends. Maybe one of Luo Binghe's good friends, too. If he thought of this version as someone just connected to the Liu Qingge he knew... of course he would intervene.

“I won’t do anything to them,” he finally said. “I’m not him. Once they’re freed, then they can do as they please. Or Wei Wuxian here can get them somewhere safe. Or you can.”

Liu Qingge swallowed.

One of his fists was clenched in a white-knuckled grip.

Luo Binghe decided to let him be, and instead turned to the other three again.

“How should we do this?” he asked.

Lan Xichen was the one who answered.

“Let’s go back to the main courtyard, then we can have the servants gather everyone, and you can tell them the situation?” he suggested.

No one had any better ideas, so in the end, that was what they did. Apparently his other self’s ‘first husband’ was Liu Qingge, and his ‘second husband’ was… Mobei-Jun.

Disturbing.

Liu Qingge and Mobei-Jun were the only ones permitted to wander the rest of the estate freely, so a servant had to be sent to go and fetch ‘second husband’ from a different wing of the palace. All in all the demon lord apparently had thirty spouses - or, well, ten husbands and twenty concubines - to deal with. Luo Binghe startled at the sight of more than a few of them, before he just started resigning himself.
He startled again at the sight of three little children, one with obvious signs of ice demon lineage, all of them somewhere in the three-to-five range. He thought. He wasn’t an expert. They looked like him, and most distressingly, they were all three of them wearing enthrallment charms as well. At least the items didn’t seem to work the same on them with their own heavenly blood to contend with, but even just looking at the sight, Luo Binghe thought he would rather chew off his own arm than let such items touch a child.

Especially his own children.

This other demon lord was depraved.

When Mobei-Jun arrived, he also didn’t go to the child that was obviously his own. There was something… off about him, in a way that Luo Binghe had troubles placing. The man stood quietly next to Liu Qingge, stiff and silent as a statue. His eyes looked paler than usual.

The first man to jump out of the crowd, though, was that ‘Jiang Cheng’ shidi that Wei Wuxian had apparently come looking for. He was a scrappy-looking teenager in Yunmeng purple, and something about him immediately put Luo Binghe in mind of Shen Qingqiu back before he’d started acting more kindly. When his Shizun had still been in love with Yue Qingyuan, and hadn’t liked Luo Binghe very much.

“Wei Wuxian!” the teenager angrily exclaimed. “You idiot! Who said you could come and rescue me?!”

“Shijie did!” Wei Wuxian brightly replied.

“As if she’d ask you to do something that dangerous and stupid!” Jiang Cheng snapped.

“If it’s dangerous and stupid, who else would she ask?” Wei Wuxian countered. “Anyway stop yelling at me and come over here! We’re going to free you from the demons and take you home now. We can deal with the rest of it later, alright? Only we don’t know for sure, this person might change back unexpectedly or something, so hurry up!”

“Who’s going to ‘change back unexpectedly’?” Luo Binghe asked, raising an eyebrow.

Unrepentant, Wei Wuxian just shrugged.
“Well if you’re not telling the truth, you could also just be insane,” he pointed out, as if this was reasonable. “Insane people are unpredictable, right? Sometimes, anyway. Don’t be offended, I’m just accounting for all the options. It’s not personal.”

Luo Binghe frowned a little, but let it go.

The young Jiang Cheng looked incredibly uncomfortable to be near him, and also wary and skeptical, which only got worse when he started coughing up blood. That alarmed people again, but when he was finished and Luo Binghe broke the enthrallment charm, a painful kind of hope and relief crossed his features. There and gone again a moment later, before he hurried to where his shixiong was and started whisper-hissing something at him.

Luo Binghe motioned at the remainder of the harem.

“Alright, who’s next?” he asked. “Should I do the little ones?”

He tried not to feel annoyed with how long it took everyone to make decisions on that.

Finally, Mu Qingfang, of all people, came forward and let him destroy his enthrallment charm, too. Liu Qingge looked increasingly nervous at that, and even reached over and grabbed the other man by the shoulder a moment before he approached. As if to try and warn him. But he didn’t say anything, and as the tension dragged on, the healer-turned-spouse ended up patting Liu Qingge reassuringly instead.

“If this is a trap, Lord Luo is certainly granting us a breath of freedom beforehand,” he said, and again, Luo Binghe found himself reminded a little bit of Shizun. Just a little. In the healer’s calmness, his willingness to accept that things might go terribly badly, but also to take a chance on them not.

That was one of the most unnerving things he was coming to notice, Luo Binghe decided, as he freed Mu Qingfang and then observed the others who came forward to seek the same treatment. Shizun was dead in this world, according to Liu Qingge - he didn’t want to know why or how, the question frightened him enough that it wouldn’t pass his lips. But everywhere he looked, in all these meticulously dressed, well-kept, horribly mistreated people, he saw… hints. The older Lan and his obvious empathy, the younger one and his neutral mask, Liu Qingge and his connections there, Mu Qingfang and the same; Jiang Cheng and his prickly, accusatory nature, even some hard-to-define quality of Wei Wuxian’s gave him pause, made him think ‘this person is not unlike my
husband’. All of the men of this harem were beautiful, at least somewhat refined, and many carried elegantly painted fans with them. Apart from red and black, the most common colour of clothing was green.

But whereas his other self seemed to have seen enough in these traits to covet the people involved, for Luo Binghe, who had his husband waiting for him at home, the overall effect was more to just make him increasingly determined to get these people out of this situation. It was all too many unpleasant things. Even Yue Qingyuan hadn’t gone so far or treated anyone this badly, and it galled him that some other version of himself had crossed so many more lines than that oathbreaker. When they finally let him take the cursed amulets off of the children, he let out a long breath of relief, too.

Though in the end, not everyone agreed to let him to do it. There were two spouses and four concubines who refused.

Or just hesitated too much to make a clear choice. One of those spouses was Liu Qingge. The other was Mobei-Jun, whose situation seemed… much more extensive, than just relating to the enthrallment charm. It was hard to tell, past his blank expression, but there seemed to be the same flicker of deep fear in both men.

Luo Binghe felt frustrated, but in the end, he could only leave it be as he turned to Wei Wuxian again.

“What else should I destroy?” he asked.

“There are arrays!” Wei Wuxian told him. “I think they might be throughout the palace, but definitely the biggest one is here. They let the lord siphon off spiritual and demonic energy from all the other people in residence. I’ve been studying them for weeks. It’s making him a lot stronger than he is on his own, so if you destroy those, that would be a big help.”

Luo Binghe inclined his head, and let the strange young man show him where he’d pinpointed the arrays.

It was actually clearer to him, too, as they moved along. He had a suspicion that he would have figured such things out on his own as well, if he’d been planning to stay for more than a few hours. The traces of his other self’s actions weren’t hard to find when he focused on the hints leading him there through his blood. It was strange, a lot of felt as though ‘he’ had done it, but some of the techniques he could detect came across so badly, he felt a little sick. Digging out the anchors for the array didn’t help much, as he destroyed a lot of objects that looked like gifts, and decorations,
and pretty things that should have been tokens of affection, but instead felt warped and distorted in his grip.

This is the ugly side of you, all of it seemed to say. Like a stark warning of how his every conviction to do with love might twist, and become a parody of itself. He’d already had a good example of that in Yue Qingyuan, but this was even harder to deal with.

It was one thing to know that he could lose his way. It was another to see what it might actually look like.

In the end, he felt badly enough that he destroyed everything Wei Wuxian pointed him towards, even though it did take longer than he would have liked.

It was only when he’d taken down the last device that something flitted across Mobei-Jun’s features.

“You haven’t weakened,” the ice demon observed.

Everyone still present turned and looked at Luo Binghe. He could feel the scrutiny of everyone able to scrutinize the amount of power he was just naturally putting out into his surroundings. That other demon lord definitely would have weakened, he realized at the same time. Even if he only did everything for show, after relying on other people’s energy to bolster his own for so long, would he even know how to handle himself without it? He probably wouldn’t be weak by himself, but he’d definitely not be able to keep up the same apparent levels of strength.

The only spiritual energy that Luo Binghe had ever taken was the kind freely given to him by other people. Usually Shizun. He’d fought his way to his current position without a lot of shortcuts, and definitely nothing as heinous as stealing his strength from a harem.

No wonder that other person hadn’t put up as good of a fight in the caves! Apart from having that cursed sword, which was the real problem, he hadn’t had access to his usual reserves of power.

Luo Binghe felt a little less worried at that.

But he was still anxious to get back.
“If there’s nothing else, then I’ll go,” he said.

Suddenly, though, it seemed like there were definitely other things - in fact, suddenly it seemed like everyone was reluctant to let him leave. Because he could do things, they realized, he could dismantle the entire infrastructure his other self had built, he could kill his lieutenants or disband his alliances or otherwise completely sabotage his efforts. It would take weeks if not months for some of the ideas to go anywhere, though, and Luo Binghe was definitely not staying that long.

“Let him go!” Jiang Cheng was the one to say, at last. “We don’t need him to do us any more favours. If he’s telling the truth, then when the other one gets back, I’ll kill him myself!”

“Ah, Jiang Cheng, I didn’t even manage to bring your sword, though…” Wei Wuxian mentioned.

“Who needs a sword?! I’ll kill him with my bare hands!”

“Aren’t I supposed to be the one who makes rash, impractical statements? If you take my job then what will I do?”

“I think it would be best if we all escaped first,” Mu Qingfang interjected. “If we tell certain persons with enough influence about this weakening in Lord Luo’s situation, then they will surely take action against him. An organized effort would be… best.”

Under other circumstances, Luo Binghe might have felt uncomfortable to see people who were ostensibly supposed to be in love with him so readily conspiring to get him killed. But, really, he couldn’t hold it against them. In fact he was more surprised at the people who seemed to pipe up against that idea than at the rest. He was just starting to wonder if he should simply turn around and walk away when Mobei-Jun came to stand in front of him.

“You’re really not him,” the ice demon said.

“As I said,” Luo Binghe confirmed.

There was a moment of silence.
Then Mobei-Jun looked down at himself.

“Can you break it...?”

To say that Luo Binghe had mixed feelings about his lieutenant was probably an understatement. Mobei-Jun had once been someone he had hated more than anyone in the world. The man had attacked Shizun in a way that merited nothing less than a painful death in retaliation. He had put Luo Binghe through actual hell. At one point, if Shizun had even asked for it in a roundabout way, then even though they had become allies, Luo Binghe wouldn’t have hesitated to kill Mobei-Jun. He wouldn’t have felt much remorse afterwards, either.

Out of everyone he had seen so far, he could come closest to justifying a decision to bind Mobei-Jun’s will and refuse him even the possibility of treachery.

On the other hand, since swearing fealty to him, the Mobei-Jun he knew had never once gone back on his word. And if Shizun asked him to kill the man tomorrow, he would probably at least put up an argument about it. But he knew Shizun wouldn’t, because the Mobei-Jun they knew wasn’t an enemy anymore. In the present, there were very few conflicted sentiments, in fact. It was more that the history of their interactions was too complicated to ever entirely put aside.

So, Luo Binghe took stock of the situation, and did his best to break the thrall on the ice demon.

It was a frustrating process. Something much more extensive had been done to him than to the others. The heavenly demon blood wouldn’t come out without beginning to kill him, it was less like it had been ingested by him and more as if he had been infused with it. There was a strange corruption of Mobei-Jun’s qi as well. Luo Binghe thought for the first few attempts that there might actually not be anything he could do.

Then he looked over at Wei Wuxian.

“You have heavenly demon blood,” he said.

The young cultivator looked surprised at being addressed, but after a second, he nodded in confirmation.
“You what?” Jiang Cheng demanded.

Wei Wuxian laughed nervously.

“Eh, it’s a long story?” he said, while the young Lan narrowed his eyes at his rescuer’s shidi.

“Fight about it later. I need some of your blood,” Luo Binghe said, motioning at Wei Wuxian. The teenager moved forward, only to be halted by Jiang Cheng’s verbal protest, and Lan Zhan’s hand on his shoulder.

“Not a lot of blood,” Luo Binghe amended.

“It’s alright!” Wei Wuxian agreed, nodding in understanding. “It’s to break the curse on him, right? Explain it to me while you’re doing it and you can have some blood, I can definitely spare some right now-”

“Wei Ying,” the younger Lan protested. Not a person of many words.

“Lan Zhan, I know this kind of thing offends you, but what else can be done? Just avert your gaze for a little bit. It’s three demons doing it anyway so there’s nobody innocent that needs defending, right?” Wei Wuxian said, before moving closer.

Lan Zhan’s brows furrowed.

Luo Binghe marveled at the misunderstanding he seemed to be witnessing, before internally shrugging, and grabbing a bowl for Wei Wuxian to pour some blood into. As Mobei-Jun accepted it, he explained how a heavenly demon’s blood could be controlled by them. Not in-depth - there wasn’t time for that - but Wei Wuxian seemed to catch on fast. With more than one source of blood in the body, it was much easier to confuse the ‘infusion’ in Mobei-Jun’s system. If Luo Binghe hadn’t been working in tandem with Wei Wuxian, the end result would have just been a catastrophic tug-of-war inside the ice demon’s body. It would have been frighteningly easy to kill him. But since they were both trying to draw Luo Binghe’s blood out, Wei Wuxian’s involvement was like an extra set of hands helping rip the stitches from a very unpleasant quilt.

The end result was that Mobei-Jun toppled over and vomited blood for about ten minutes straight.
There was a lot of it. Luo Binghe and Wei Wuxian didn’t get out of the spray zone in time either, so it was a good thing they were both wearing red and black. The scent of iron became thick in the air.

When the blood was out and Mobei-Jun was unconscious - but not dead - Luo Binghe finally removed the enthrallment charm from him and broke it, too. Mu Qingfang checked the other man over, and fretted that he didn’t know much about healing demons. But Luo Binghe knew enough to tell that if he hadn’t died, then he’d probably recover.

He glanced at Liu Qingge again.

The man seemed shaken. Not by the bloody display, either. One of his hands moved up towards the red coral he was still wearing, before it dropped back down to his side again.

There was no point in asking again, Luo Binghe thought. If he still wasn’t convinced, then he’d either have to let it go or force him - and if he forced him, that would be a problem of its own, and might not even help anything. After all, what could he do to stop that other person from just feeding his blood and giving more red coral pendants to whoever he pleased? Maybe he would just have to kill that evil demon lord. If he had the chance to, anyway.

“I’m leaving now,” he decided, then. There were some more protests, but having made up his mind, he ignored them and headed directly for the exit.

People followed him. It was only once they were out of the fortress that he realized they were following him in specific, and not just also leaving. Wei Wuxian kept pace with him, which reminded Luo Binghe of his offer to help - somehow he’d almost forgotten. He still didn’t take it too seriously. It seemed that Jiang Cheng and both Lan brothers were also following, and that Liu Qingge was as well.

“You don’t have to come,” Luo Binghe told the latter, almost gently.

Liu Qingge didn’t answer.

Since there were only three swords between several people, traveling was slower. The Lans went together, and Wei Wuxian took his shidi with him, which left Luo Binghe to ride Cheng Luan with Liu Qingge. It was decidedly strange for many, many reasons. He balanced himself on the blade
behind the other man and gave directions to the cave system they needed to reach, as the two of them took point.

His attention drifted towards Liu Qingge’s missing arm with an increasing sense of unease. He had nearly ripped limbs off of Mobei-Jun in one of the feral rages he could actually recall, from the early days of unlocking his blood. It was a surprisingly clear memory, that viciousness, that desire to tear him apart.

The dark satisfaction when he’d latched onto a limb and felt it start to come away, like ripping the wings on a butterfly…

“Your arm,” he finally asked, while they flew over jagged terrain that offered more stagnant air, and less wind. “Did the other version of me…?”

Liu Qingge glanced back at him.

“...No. He saved me, that time.”

Luo Binghe felt some relief.

Even if ‘not ripping off his husband’s arm’ wasn’t a great virtue, even if ‘that time’ held some unpleasant implications of its own, at least it wasn’t another transgression.

They finished the rest of the trip in silence.

The caves were where Luo Binghe had left them, of course. Even in hell, the landscape didn’t often change so drastically or swiftly, but he still let out a breath of relief at the sight. Without having actually taken any time to rest, he felt less-than-refreshed, but also more-than-ready to go home. Forget that petty warlord issue, he’d leave it be for now and deal with any fallout later if he could just return to his own palace and see his own husband.

He jumped down from Cheng Luan before anyone else bothered to land, and began to make his way inside. Xin Mo wasn’t hard to locate, the sword’s menacing aura was distinctive even in the demonic realm’s heavy atmosphere. He hesitated to approach the weapon, however. It was still lying where he’d thrown it aside. Luo Binghe could recall how powerful it was - how powerful it had made him, the moment he drew it. How swiftly the tides of that fight had turned, from him
fending off his copy’s attacks with an identical blade, to hammering his opponent until the other man fled.

That kind of power... he definitely wasn’t immune to the temptation of it.

It made him wish he’d never drawn the weapon even once. He should have figured something else out. That other demon lord hadn’t been that strong, even with his own Xin Mo. Luo Binghe’s weakness had given him a taste of something that itched with terrible desire in his veins. That whispered that he could handle it - surely, surely he could handle it better. Wasn’t he stronger? Weren’t his intentions good? He was a demon anyway, his strength came from dark places to begin with, did he really think a sword could overcome his own will...?

He was standing in a world where Shizun was dead, and that other version of himself had taken up Xin Mo.

Even if those two things didn’t actually have anything to do with one another, the thought alone was enough to make him revolt against the temptation. Power needed a purpose. What could Xin Mo give him? That other version of him had nothing which Luo Binghe wanted, despite wielding that very weapon. And he already had everything he needed, the only use for Xin Mo was to get him back to it - that was it, and nothing more.

The thought of lifting it up again still caused him a terrible internal conflict, no matter how he tried to reason through it.

It filled him with unnameable fear that he wouldn’t be able to cast it aside a second time.

When the others caught up, Liu Qingge looked between him and the discarded Xin Mo.

In the end, it was Wei Wuxian who approached the demon blade first.

“Don’t touch it!” Lan Zhan called to him.

A hand was waved back in his general direction, while Wei Wuxian squatted down beside the sword, but did not, in fact, touch it.
“This thing’s powerful,” he observed. “And strange. It’s got a lot of resentful energy, a lot of hunger, but… where did it get it from?”

Luo Binghe didn’t have troubles following the young cultivator’s train of thought. Even in the demonic realm, in order for objects to accumulate a high level of power, they needed to be exposed to certain things either in great abundance or for a long period of time. Or both. The item would then reflect a lot of what it had taken in. For example, if a hunter stabbed a tiger with a knife, and failed to kill the animal but still left the weapon lodged in its hide, then the knife might begin to pick up the tiger’s resentment for the chronic pain it caused. And resentment for the hunter who had wielded it, too. If the tiger began to hunt down humans, the effects would be magnified by the tiger’s hunger and ferocity, and desire for vengeance, all associated with the knife; while the lingering terror and death of the humans being devoured would feed into it as well. The tiger would likely become a monster, but even after it died, the knife might still carry on its vendetta. Anyone who found it and picked it up could become possessed by the tiger, or be driven to cannibalistic tendencies, or even just experience a lot of bloodlust.

Luo Binghe hadn’t considered it before, but since Wei Wuxian mentioned it, Xin Mo’s overall ‘mien’ was very odd for that kind of a thing. The combinations of hunger and lust and power-madness weren’t necessarily notable in the same object, but having that object be a sword that could open passages between worlds did beg the question of how it all came about. Especially since the ‘lust’ element didn't seem to just be general bloodlust, but in fact, that type more strongly associated with cursed items from brothels or other such places.

“I heard that it was wielded by a succession of powerful demon lords,” he said, recalling Shang Qinghua's explanation. “The sword probably took on its characteristics from them. It might have had some abilities when it was first forged, too.”

“It must be really old, to be so complicated,” Wei Wuxian mused.

After a moment, Luo Binghe shrugged.

“I just need it to get back,” he reasoned. He really didn’t want more to do with the thing than was absolutely necessary.

“Sure. But, I wonder if a person could cleanse it… it seems really confused…” Wei Wuxian replied, even as he obligingly stood up.

“Any thoughts on how it would open a portal?” Luo Binghe asked, stalling. He would have to pick it up, he knew, and his fingers itched to, and that was why he didn’t want to.
“Not a single one!” the young cultivator admitted, somewhat chagrined. “To be honest, Kindly Lord Luo, if you hadn’t told me it could do that kind of thing, I wouldn’t have guessed. Ah, I feel bad now, I’m in your debt but I can’t pay you back - if you want I could pick it up and give it a try…?”

“No!” both Lan brothers and Jiang Cheng all said at the same time.

“Wei Wuxian, what even makes you think it would go to the right place if you held it?” Jiang Cheng demanded. “Stop saying foolish things and get back over here!”

“I guess that’s a good point, if someone else touches it then it might get even more confused,” Wei Wuxian conceded, and reluctantly let his shidi drag him away.

There was nothing left for it, then. Luo Binghe glared at the sword, and moved to pick it up.

A hand clamped over his arm.

“You could leave it,” Liu Qingge said.

Frowning, Luo Binghe pulled his arm out of his grasp.

“I can’t,” he refuted. “I have to get back. Shizun’s waiting for me. Even if you want me to stay, I won’t. But I can take that thing off of you. All you need to do is ask.”

He nodded at the coral pendant.

Liu Qingge’s expression was still hard to read, and seemed to close off even more. After a minute, he only shook his head, and silently took a step back.

Luo Binghe didn’t pretend to understand. With a sigh, he made a mental apology - he *had* tried, and maybe he could try more, but not without risking things that were more important to him. Squaring his shoulders, he gave Xin Mo a disdainful look before he finally leaned down, and
picked it up.

It was a heavy-looking weapon, but it felt light in his grasp. Unlike the first time he’d picked it up, there wasn’t any sense of it fighting him. It was easy, in fact. Easy and powerful, graceful, like a perfect extension of his own strength and abilities. He adjusted his grip, and focused on his desires. It took some effort, especially since he wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing. The sword seemed to know better than he did, and he couldn’t focus too much on that or else he would be too disturbed to keep up with it. Energy crackled along the blade. With a cold, decisive swing, Luo Binghe sliced through the air beside him, and felt Xin Mo tear a wound in reality itself.

The opening was dark.

With such power, what couldn’t he do? It didn't even tire him out to make such a move. With Xin Mo, there probably wasn't a single person in either world who would be able to defeat him. He'd be strong enough to protect everything, everyone, to keep Shizun safe forever...

Acting on pure impulse, Luo Binghe flung Xin Mo point down into the dirt at his feet, and then threw himself into the portal.

It was more like blinking than traveling. He felt a lot of energy snap around him, but then a moment later, it was as if he simply opened his eyes and found himself still in the caves.

The other people were gone. Xin Mo was gone, too. It was just Luo Binghe by himself.

Outside, he could hear the din of a battle being fought.

The thought rushed over him all at once, then, that he’d traveled without the sword - that if he’d gone to the wrong place, he wouldn’t even know how to begin to find the right one again. Foolish! In the heat of the moment, all he could think was that the only way to be completely rid of that dark temptation, those dire possibilities, was to make sure he couldn’t bring any of it back with him. Common sense was slower to follow, and he regretted his impulsiveness. For a moment he even felt a rush of pain, fierce regret that made him want to go back, get that sword again, there was so much he could do with it...

There wasn’t anything to be done about it, however. And the sounds of fighting, for once, meant good news.
With a great sense of urgency, bordering on desperation, Luo Binghe raced out of the caves. He spared the battlefields barely a glance. There was no sign of Mobei-Jun, but Sha Hualing seemed to be in charge of the combat, and that was a difference that could just be explained by him having been absent for several hours. He decided not to rejoin his forces, or engage with any of the enemy demons, but instead took up a fallen sword and headed straight for the palace.

When he finally got within sight of it, he nearly cried in relief.

The bamboo courtyard! The additions! They were all there!

Shizun!!!

Then he saw the column of black qi in his husband’s specially made courtyard, and the tone of his urgency changed entirely.

He cursed himself as he tried to move even faster. What was he thinking, wasting his time in that other world? He should have left straight away! That other demon lord was here, and of course it was too much to hope that he would have been waylaid by the fighting. If he touched Shizun-

Luo Binghe was distressed by the sight that greeted him when he flew over the outer wall.

Shizun’s house was a mess. There was a gigantic hole in the wall, and his little dog was racing around, barking in distress. A lot of the bamboo he’d painstakingly planted had been trashed, and the little fountain by the fish pond was broken, too. There were slash marks on the carefully-tended grounds. His evil copy was on the defensive, trying to fend off attacks from Shen Qingqiu, Liu Qingge, and Mobei-Jun, but he seemed to have grabbed Shang Qinghua as the weak link to use as a human shield.

Before Luo Binghe could finish approaching, the copy flung Shang Qinghua into one of Mobei-Jun’s attacks, which had the ice demon rushing to counter his technique himself. In the end his momentum was thwarted as he grabbed his little husband to save him from a flurry of frozen projectiles, and got a back full of them himself instead.

The opening gave that other demon lord an opportunity to fling two near-solid blasts of black qi at Liu Qingge, who was forced to block. The enemy moved to get in past Shizun’s guard and strike him-!
Luo Binghe shouted something, he thought. He wasn’t completely sure, except that a minute later he had his double’s throat in his hands and a rain of earth was flying upwards as he slammed the other demon into the dirt. It didn’t even unnerve him this time that the copy had the same face as him. His every instinct was only screaming that this was a demon intruder trying to hurt his husband.

The protocol for that was very simple.

Luo Binghe would hit him until he was dead.

“Binghe!” Shizun exclaimed.

It distracted him just a little.

“Begging Shizun’s pardon, this lord must kill this thing!” he called back.

Relief. Such relief. He was home, he was back, something bad had happened but Luo Binghe would take care of the problem and then clean it up again, too. He wanted to kill the intruder in a hurry so that he could go and fling himself into his husband’s arms, so that he could rest and recover, pretend it had never happened. He even wanted to check Liu Qingge and Mobei-Jun and make certain they were alright, too.

It was strange how such an improved state of affairs made his punches even heavier, as he hit his other self over and over again. He’d dropped the sword he picked up somewhere, so fists would have to do.

Of course, his enemy struggled, and didn’t just lie down and accept death. He got his arms free and grappled with Luo Binghe, strong enough to break one of his legs with a kick and hold back some of his blows, even though he wasn’t strong enough to get free.

“Stop!” the copy demanded. “If you kill me now, you’ll never know what I know!”

“You think I want anything from you?” Luo Binghe snarled back.
“I am you!” the other person protested. “Who will you trust, if not yourself? That person you call Shizun is lying to you!”

“There's no world where I'd take your word over his!”

“If you don’t let me go, you’ll wonder forever!”

“That's fine! I'll wonder!”

His fists made a satisfying ‘cracking’ sound as he landed a blow on his copy’s ribs, and broke them. But he forgot to be wary of how his own power tended to surge when he was in pain and regenerating. Before he could get another strike in, the other Luo Binghe roared and successfully countered him with a sudden burst of strength. Then the battered figure fled, retreating towards the palace, blasting straight through one of the outer walls in the process.

Luo Binghe gave chase, staggering somewhat on his broken leg and grimacing at the pain.

“He’s heading for the secure storage room!” Shizun called, while the others followed.

There was an obvious blood trail that wasn’t difficult to keep up with, but his other self was moving fast. Like his life depended on it. Which it did. The treasury door had been sealed, by the looks of things - it delayed his counterpart long enough that Luo Binghe almost caught up to him. But then his other self just burned out the doorway by bleeding on it too extensively. Not a technique he’d considered using before, but disturbingly effective. A few minutes later, he heard the same sound that Xin Mo had made earlier, when he’d opened a path to this world.

When they reached the room, there was a lot of blood, and a broken door, but nothing else left.

Luo Binghe punched the wall beside him.

If that other person came back to cause trouble again, he’d definitely pay for it with his life.
Recovering from the situation that had just happened was, inevitably, not all that easy.

The biggest problem was that Luo Binghe didn’t know the limits of how Xin Mo could work, so he didn’t know how or where that other person might turn up again. Unfortunately, since both versions of Xin Mo were in the other world, there wasn’t much to be done about it either. He could only hope that the people from that world figured out how to kill him in a hurry, and otherwise just take normal precautions against intruders. Fortunately, he hadn’t relied too extensively on his own blood to establish things in his palace anyway. After all, his father was still an unknown factor that could turn up some time, and Zhuzhi-Lang and some of his other retainers had heavenly demon blood, too. He could only assume that his other self had killed or neutralized such people in his own world, in order to feel so confident in using his blood as a safeguard to begin with. Or maybe he just really wasn’t all that clever.

Thinking about that place left him feeling hollowed-out and horrible. When he’d first gotten back, he thought he’d done too much and spent too long there. But after his double was chased off, and everyone could only pick up the rubble and start licking their wounds, he felt as though he probably hadn’t helped enough.

The back-and-forth grated against his heart.

He didn’t really relax at all until he brought Shizun to his rooms and held him. Even then, he wished they could have stayed in the bamboo courtyard; but there was still a large hole in the wall there, and the grounds had been trashed. Seeing it all would have just made him angry, and it wasn’t suitable for resting in, so instead, he let Shizun take him to his palace rooms so they could fuss over one another’s injuries.

Once Luo Binghe satisfied himself that Shizun’s arm - which had been hurt - wasn’t too bad, he pressed his nose against his husband’s hair, and just breathed in the scent of him for a little while. A heavy sigh passed his lips.
“Husband,” he murmured. “Being in the same world as Husband again is such a relief…”

The circles that Shen Qingqiu had been rubbing against his back paused.

Then they resumed, moving more slowly. He could feel an odd tension in the other man - not really strong, just distinctive enough that some of the relief of the moment became tinged with worry again. Luo Binghe nuzzled closer, and decided to wait a few minutes. Sometimes waiting worked best - if he pressed too hard then Shizun just became frustrated and clammed up. But if he left things alone, also, there was a chance he’d never say anything. After what had happened, Luo Binghe wanted to know everything that was on his husband’s mind. But he himself felt like a raw nerve, and if Shizun didn’t want to share, then just giving and receiving comfort would work for the time being, too.

At length, Shen Qingqiu cleared his throat.

“Does Binghe remember that time when we were looking up at the sky, and this husband said similar words to him? About… being in the same world…?” he asked.

Luo Binghe couldn’t help but smile.

They had remembered the same thing! It always filled him with a unique sort of happiness when a memory that stayed with him also persisted in his husband’s heart. Shen Qingqiu wasn’t always the most expressive person. Even for Luo Binghe, he could be hard to read at times. But that didn’t mean he was at all lacking in affection, or sentimental habits.

“Binghe remembers,” he murmured.

Shen Qingqiu went quiet again for a while, then. His hand tightened against the back of Luo Binghe’s inner robe.

It started to tremble.

“Shizun…?”
Frowning in concern, he pulled back a little. Shen Qingqiu insistently pressed close, though. Holding him near and hiding his face against his chest. It was something he did when he was too distressed to let Luo Binghe look at him, and it set off alarm bells in his head. He settled his own arms more securely around his husband.

“Did something happen?” he asked, quietly.

He felt Shen Qingqiu close his eyes. His eyelashes brushed against his skin.

“That other person… he said to Binghe… that I was lying about something…”

Luo Binghe remembered. He didn’t give it much credence. Even if that copy really had discovered some deception or other - which had seemed far-fetched, until just a minute ago - he really wasn’t all that concerned about it. If Shen Qingqiu was lying, there was undoubtedly a reason. If it was a silly matter, then they could take care of it.

But if it was something serious, something that was causing distress…

“Does Husband want to tell me?”

Reaching up, he carefully stroked the back of Shen Qingqiu’s head.

“I don’t know,” his husband admitted, quietly. “I want Binghe to know the truth, but… I don’t know if I’m strong enough…”

“Didn’t I say before? Husband doesn’t need to be strong all the time. When it’s just us, he can be weak.”

Shen Qingqiu was quiet. He was quiet for long enough that it was a force of effort to just let him be. Some part of Luo Binghe was even hesitant, on the other hand, to keep going. After what just happened, he really just wanted to hold his husband close and reassure himself that things were back to normal, and he didn’t have thirty spouses all locked underground. Very nearly, he opened his mouth to say that they could leave whatever the matter was for another day.
The sudden sense that if they did, it would never come up again, gave him pause.

Then Shen Qingqiu’s hold on him tightened.

“‘I’m not from this world!’” his husband blurted.

Luo Binghe’s hand went still against his head.

“I came here the day Yue Qingyuan married Liu Qingge. I don’t know how, or why. I was a different person living in a completely different place, and I died there. The next thing I knew, I was in the body of Shen Qingqiu. I didn’t mean to deceive anyone, except that of course I did mean to because - because if I was discovered, then…”

Then Yue Qingyuan surely would have wanted to get his original husband back. Spiritual possession wasn’t something any cultivator would treat lightly - even demons didn’t appreciate it. Part of Luo Binghe felt utterly stunned, but his mind didn’t fail to process the information he was being given, either. His first, terrified thought was that his own Shizun had somehow been swapped out for another one during this entire recent incident. But the explanation calmed that particular dread nearly as soon as it manifested. The day of Liu Qingge’s wedding… that was years ago, well before they were married. That was even when Shizun had started acting the most differently. Before, he hadn’t liked Luo Binghe very much. But on that day, he’d apologized for the past, and then… he had become…

Luo Binghe’s arms were still frozen as he turned this information over.

The Shizun who had rescued him from that rich person’s house, that wasn't who he was holding.

The Shizun who had locked him in the woodshed, had called him ‘beast’ and ‘mongrel’, that wasn't who he was holding.

The Shizun who dumped hot tea on him and made him kneel in the cold and threatened to have him beaten, that wasn't who he was holding.

The Shizun who told him the most valuable advice he'd ever receive was to never fall in love or
hope for a good life, that wasn't who he was holding.

The Shizun who married Yue Qingyuan, and was betrayed by him, that wasn't who he was holding.

The Shizun who shared half of his meals with him every day they were together, that was who he’d married.

The Shizun who taught him proper techniques and cultivation skills and gave him new manuals to learn from, that was who he’d married.

The Shizun who had bought him his first set of good winter clothes, and the second jade token around his neck, and the first proper sword he’d owned, that was who he’d married.

The Shizun who befriended Liu Qingge. Who indulged a little dog. Who smiled at Luo Binghe’s cooking. Who tried to protect him from attacks. Who sent him Xiu Ya when he was alone. Who cared and cared and cared…

That was who he’d married.

The Shizun he’d seen one morning in the soft sunlight, like a painting that would never leave his memories, in the moment when he’d realized how it felt to love this person… was still the person he’d married.

Luo Binghe tilted down, and kissed the top of his husband’s head as he realized something else.

“In his other world, was Shizun married?” he asked.

Shen Qingqiu finally pulled back enough to look up at him.

“What?”

“Was Shizun married, before he came here?” Luo Binghe repeated.
“...No…”

“Did he have someone special?”

“...No, what… Binghe…”

“Then, was this lord Shizun’s first love?” he asked, unable to keep the smile off of his lips.

Shen Qingqiu gave him a look that implied he was being ridiculous. It was much better than fear or grief or despair. It made him smile wider, as his husband covered half of his own face with his hand.

“Is that really the first thing Binghe is going to ask me?”

Luo Binghe thought about it.

“Yes,” he decided. “Am I Shizun’s first love?”

Shen Qingqiu made a tiny, pained noise. Not the serious kind, though. The exasperated kind.

“...You are.”

“Considering that, then with regards to our wedding night-”

“Binghe!”

“Shizun! This is important to know!”

“It really isn’t!”
“But this humble servant had already reconciled himself to not being any of Shizun's firsts, so even if it’s still the case—”

“As if I’d sleep with someone I didn’t have feelings for!”

Luo Binghe beamed, and in a sudden rush of delight, pulled his husband down onto the bed with him. It wasn’t that he was lying - he’d love his husband no matter what, he was even more certain of that now than he had been several minutes ago. But he could be a selfish creature sometimes, too. The idea that, in actuality, he’d had something he’d already assumed was impossible - these first-and-only type situations - made him happy. Yue Qingyuan had even less claim on this person than he’d thought, too! If he’d known from the beginning… well, he couldn’t have actually taken him away any sooner. But it still made him feel even more vindicated about things, and he didn’t know that was possible.

“Did I also get Shizun’s first kiss?”

“Is Binghe really not concerned with anything else?” Shen Qingqiu demanded.

At last, that sobered him up a little, because it made him actually think about it.

“There are more concerns,” he allowed. His husband stiffened, and his expression smoothed out into deliberate, careful neutrality again. Luo Binghe brushed his cheek, reassuring. “This lord had thought that the difficulties Shizun had were because of that oathbreaker betraying him. But having been to that other world recently, and not even having been forced to stay, that kind of situation seems uniquely bad too. Shizun needs to tell me his struggles, so that I can help properly with them.”

Shen Qingqiu stared at him.

Luo Binghe brushed his cheek again.

“Also, I would like to know Shizun’s real name. If he has one,” he added, thoughtfully. “Is it Shen Qingqiu?”
“It… no…”

He waited.

“…Shen… Shen Yuan…” his husband told him, in a very quiet, secretive sort of voice. Surprisingly nervous. As if he’d stripped back some last, lingering layer, and bared something that would be all too easy to break.

Something important.

Luo Binghe felt a rush of warmth move all the way through him. Shen Yuan! It was a good name. And it was even more secretive than most, since his husband really couldn’t share it with just anyone. The way it was offered to him just made him feel more tender than he ever imagined possible.

“A-Yuan,” he whispered, experimentally.

Shizun went a different kind of still. It was a lot like the way he sometimes froze up when they were in bed together, doing things, and Luo Binghe managed to do something he really really liked.

“A-Yuan,” he repeated. “Husband is A-Yuan-”

He couldn’t get anything more out, because then there was a mouth against his own.

Luo Binghe let out a soft sound of surprise and delight as his husband kissed him breathless. Shen Yuan devoured his mouth, and touched him almost desperately, pressing close and sliding his hands into his clothes, emboldened and fiercely greedy. It made the warmth in Luo Binghe’s chest pop like fireworks. He answered the kisses given to him enthusiastically, and let his own touch wander, too. That other version of himself, he really was a foolish man. Was this what he thought might drive a rift between the two of them? That his husband’s origins were just a little different than he imagined?

So what? Was Luo Binghe supposed to be the kind of stupid person who married someone without really knowing them?
He knew who his husband was.

But it was nice to have something even better to call him.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this entire segment was actually a challenge to do from LBH's POV because I think if you asked him to describe most of his Shizun-free adventures, he would ultimately just be like 'idk some boring things happened and I did some stuff 0/10 not enough shizuns BUT THEN I GOT BACK TO SHIZUN that was my favourite part 11/10 definitely recommend!!! <3333'.

Also there wasn't really an opportunity to get much more into Bingge's side of things, given the way things, uh, panned out there. If there's interest I might do more in that direction? But in the meanwhile there will probably be more Shen Jiu POV and Moshang up next!
Liu Qingge wasn’t meant for happiness.

It didn’t take the advent of much of his suffering for him to know that. Happiness was a fleeting thing, a momentary reprieve; not a goal in and of itself. Liu Qingge was born to achieve his duties, to live up to the expectations of him, to meet his responsibilities and uphold his oaths.

He had sworn an oath to Luo Binghe.

He had sworn several, in fact.

After the duplicate of his husband left, Lan Xichen and the others also departed. They didn’t invite him to go with them. The blood still in his veins would have made them a target if they had, too easy to find, to punish or recapture. Wei Wuxian spared him a concerned look, and Lan Xichen offered a polite murmur of parting, but that was it. They weren’t friends. When they were in Luo Binghe’s harem, then they were persons for whom Liu Qingge considered himself responsible. But having broken their own bonds, that was no longer the case - the only thing left for him to do was to let them leave.

He hoped his husband wouldn’t go after them again. It was a slim hope. Luo Binghe’s harem was one of the safest places in all the world, but Liu Qingge had already known that many of its residents would risk any manner of threat to escape it. He hadn’t quite realized how many… but he couldn’t be surprised, either.

With no other leads to follow, and no reason to know if his husband would emerge from these
caves or not, he gave it a few minutes more. Then he headed back to the palace.

When he checked the Garden again, it was emptier than he’d left it. Splashes of heavenly demon blood marked the pavilion in the middle of the harem, where most of the spouses and concubines had been released. Apart from the servants and the four concubines who had chosen to stay, Liu Qingge doubted anyone else remained. Nevertheless, he found his feet leading him to Mu Qingfang’s rooms.

He was startled when the Fourth Husband - former? Did all of this count as divorce? He didn't know - met him at the door.

“Mobei-Jun’s still unconscious,” the healer told him, in answer to his unasked question.

“If you stay here, I doubt you’ll be able to leave,” Liu Qingge told him. “He’ll be furious with you for letting that other lord remove the blood and break your protection charm.”

“My leash, you mean,” Mu Qingfang corrected, and motioned him into his rooms. It wasn’t proper. The servants were scarce, in fear of their lord’s retribution, but Liu Qingge couldn’t manage to care at that moment. He looked to where Mobei-Jun had been laid out on one of the larger pieces of furniture in Mu Qingfang’s parlor.

“He’ll be furious,” Liu Qingge could only reiterate.

“He’ll be furious with you, as well,” the healer replied. “But I know you won’t go.”

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the ragged breaths that Mobei-Jun was drawing. They had no idea when, or if, the real Luo Binghe might return. It made him feel simultaneously anxious and resigned. The unpredictability of their lord’s reactions made preparing for anything difficult. Both of them could assume the worst, but really, who knew what Luo Binghe would say or do in the end? Liu Qingge had been with him the longest, and even he found it difficult to guess. Fury was likely. But then, there was also a chance he would turn up and just announce that anyone who had left was undeserving his protection anyway.

That anger would come at some point was the only certainty. He hoped no one who had left the Garden ever crossed paths with Lord Luo Binghe again; there wouldn’t be much he could do for them if they did.
The feel of a hand landing on his shoulder nearly made him jump.

Mu Qingfang’s pity was easy to read. It made Liu Qingge close himself off, defensively. He wished he could say that he didn’t need it. It was his fault the healer had been dragged into all of this to begin with - if he hadn’t been foolish enough to get himself into so many dangerous situations, he doubted Luo Binghe would have even remembered the man, or his considerable skill. He wouldn’t have had the opportunity to notice anything else about him, either, like the atypical beauty of his features, or the gently lyrical timbre of his voice.

“Fourth Husband, you need to leave,” he said, seriously. “…I’ll do something for Mobei-Jun.”

Mu Qingfang shook his head, and withdrew his hand.

Liu Qingge sighed.

“How are the children?” he asked, then. It was likely that Luo Binghe would want to go after them first. Once he’d calmed down, anyway.

“Giving you specifics would be a bad idea,” Mu Qingfang pointed out, apologetically. “But they’re being carried somewhere safe. When Mobei-Jun wakes up, I’ll tell him where his son is.”

“He won’t care,” Liu Qingge guessed. The ice demon had never shown an ounce of attachment to his poor child. Unlike Luo Binghe, he was a demon through and through; he didn’t deserve this much from someone like Mu Qingfang, but the healer’s compassion always outstripped his sense.

“Don’t be so sure. Circumstances like these make anyone’s true feelings and intentions difficult to know.”

Agitated, Liu Qingge gave him a skeptical look, and then paced over to the far end of the room.

His phantom arm throbbed. It always did, when he was standing at the edge of something terrifying. Which seemed to happen so often now. If Liu Qingge had known that adulthood would carry with it such never-ending strings of misery, he wouldn’t have been in such a hurry to grow up as a child. Even this… what those others took for a stroke of good fortune could only leaving him scrambling to anticipate the fallout. What if Luo Binghe came back? What if he didn’t? His lord had many enemies. Too many. His children would be targets, and so would his former spouses.
Some of them might be strong enough or lucky enough to keep their freedom, but what about the rest?

Not that he could entirely fault them. The past few years especially, Luo Binghe seemed to have been getting worse. Seeing that other version of his husband had put it into stark perspective. That man wasn’t so different from the one he’d first married. Once upon a time, his lord understood moderation; but his demon blood and his cursed sword had seemed to erode away a lot of who he had been.

A lot of who Liu Qingge had been, too.

What world, he wondered, had resulted in a situation where Luo Binghe never lost his allegiance to Shen Qingqiu?

Who was Liu Qingge there? Was Yue Qingyuan still alive? It sounded as if he had both arms in that life as well. Did that mean he was never captured by Mobei-Jun? Never rescued?

It was probably pointless to think about. It didn’t matter what he dreamed, where he went, or how things happened in other places. He had learned his lesson. No matter what, he would always end up back here again.

The red coral pendant around his neck felt heavy. He glanced at the unconscious demon on Mu Qingfang’s settee.

One of the healer’s personal servants hurried to the door. A meek little demon, showing a rare streak of boldness as she sought out her master, even though all the others were still hiding.

“The lord has come. He’s hurt,” was the warning she gave them, before rushing off again.

Mu Qingfang reached for his bag of medicine and supplies. Liu Qingge almost wanted to hit him.


“I have a duty,” the healer refused. “When I came here, I swore to myself that I would help. The
oath I made had nothing to do with the ‘protection’ charm placed on me. I won’t simply abandon it now.”

Gritting his teeth, Liu Qingge grabbed Mu Qingfang’s arm.

“He’ll be fine. He always is,” he snapped.

The shorter man looked up at him steadily, as if he wasn’t dreading what might happen to him in the least. Nerves of steel. But then, Mu Qingfang had always been like that. There were things that even the most hardened warriors would hesitate to look at for too long, while a healer not only looked but examined and accepted. A sword could spill a man’s guts on the ground without its wielder taking any more note of the action than the time it took to complete the swing. But for someone dedicated to piecing those guts back together, putting them in their right place and sealing over the torn and decimated flesh, there could be no shying away from grim prospects.

This, however, just seemed foolish. Luo Binghe could heal from almost anything. Mu Qingfang owed him nothing.

And this person had tried to look out for Liu Qingge from the very beginning. From back when he had suffered his first qi deviation after marriage, and then again when he’d been rescued from his first kidnapping, when he had lost both of his children, and his arm, and more brushes with death than he could count.

If Luo Binghe killed him, then Luo Binghe himself would be the only person Liu Qingge had left. Just him. Indestructible, inescapable, the opponent he could never defeat, the lover who would never let him go.

Mu Qingfang gently pulled his hand off of his arm. He held it for a moment.

“Liu Qingge,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid,” he automatically denied, with reflexive affront.

Mu Qingfang gave him a sad look.
“You’ve been afraid since the day I met you,” the healer said. He sounded so certain, and sorrowful, that Liu Qingge couldn’t bring himself to try and deny it again. He could only fail, again, to stop what was going on, as Mu Qingfang left and he shot Mobei-Jun’s unconscious form one last look before following after him.

He’d do something. Mu Qingfang staying might have put him in considerable danger, given that his protection charm was gone, but it still might count for something when all of the others had merely left. He would put himself between his lord and the healer if he had to. It wouldn’t be the first time.

They found Luo Binghe sitting on the dais in the middle of the Garden’s pavilion.

As the servant had mentioned, Lord Luo was clearly injured. It had been a long time since Liu Qingge had seen the man look so beaten, in fact. His red eyes turned towards them as they approached. It seemed some more superficial wounds on his face had already healed, and left behind only some smears of blood; but the other wounds were taking a long time to recover.

Someone powerful had inflicted them.

Liu Qingge could guess who.

“So,” Luo Binghe said, as he smiled a smile that never reached his eyes. “It seems that other version of me was messing around with my house, while I was off messing around with his.”

The lord’s gaze drifted over them. It halted, for a moment, on Liu Qingge’s protection charm. Then on Mu Qingfang’s bare throat. For a moment the tension in the air felt thick enough to cut. But then Luo Binghe’s gaze drifted down to the medical bag, and his lips quirked instead.

“Trust Fourth Husband to miss his chance to run,” he said, in that light, dangerous tone of his.

“I would not abandon my oath,” Mu Qingfang replied, simply. “Where are my lord’s injuries?”

“Better to ask where aren’t they,” Luo Binghe countered. “I’m not letting Fourth Husband touch me until he has my blood back in him again.”
“That’s fine,” Mu Qingfang agreed, before Liu Qingge could even feel alarmed. “First Husband can assist with that. I’ll just instruct him.”

For a moment, Liu Qingge thought that Luo Binghe might refuse that as well. But then the lord just sighed, and nodded. He settled back against the bench he’d chosen as his resting place. Xin Mo was unsheathed, radiating hungry from beside him, and Liu Qingge resigned himself as he was motioned towards the sword. With practiced ease, he cut a small opening on his forearm to let a few drops of blood feed the blade, and then winced as his spiritual energy was drained. Lord Luo wasn’t in the condition to do things the more ‘pleasant’ way - right now, Liu Qingge preferred being cut anyway.

“Who is left?” Luo Binghe asked him.

“First, Second, Fifth and Ninth Concubines, and of course, First Husband,” Mu Qingfang told him, before Liu Qingge could.

“So few…”

The lord sighed, and a genuine flicker of pain crossed some of his features. Liu Qingge knew what he was thinking. Let down again, betrayed again, of course he couldn’t trust anyone even if he gave them ‘everything’… Never mind how many promises he himself had broken. Often on technicalities. Or how many of those who had left had never wished to remain in the first place. With Luo Binghe, other people’s refusals were simply barriers to overcome. Challenges to prove himself against. He never ‘forced’… but he always took.

Liu Qingge closed his eyes for a moment, and then set about helping him get out of his clothes so that Mu Qingfang could see his injuries.

He felt a sickening twist in his gut. Luo Binghe’s skin was almost entirely black and blue. It was clear he’d been impaled in several different places as well. Some of his limbs had probably also been broken, or close enough to broken. There was more blood here and there, indicating wounds that had already healed.

“Gently apply this to his skin over the worst bruises,” Mu Qingfang instructed, as he handed Liu Qingge a jar of ointment. “Wear a glove or your hand will go numb.” So saying, the healer then handed him a clean pair.
“I don’t need treatment for the pain,” Luo Binghe refused.

“It won’t effect you as strongly anyway. Not with your physique. It will clear the bruises more quickly so we can see where the bigger problems are, too,” Mu Qingfang countered.

After a moment, the lord acquiesced. Liu Qingge carefully applied the ointment. Luo Binghe watched him with a hooded gaze, still bright red enough to be more suitable to combat than to the aftermath. But the muscles beneath his hand weren’t tensed for a fight.

“Ge-ge didn’t leave.”

Pausing, Liu Qingge glanced at his lord’s face. Then he went back to his task.

“He didn’t keep the Garden safe, however. My First Husband failed his duties.”

More silence followed.

Quietly, Mu Qingfang handed him several ready-made poultices.

“Put those over his open wounds,” the healer instructed. “Then bandage them in place. Not too tight, but don’t leave them loose either.”

Luo Binghe’s focus remained on Liu Qingge as he worked. After a few minutes, one of his hands came up, and brushed against his cheek. The cracked and dried blood itched against his skin, as his lord gently traced the outline of his features.

“I’ve thought of a punishment,” Luo Binghe whispered.

Liu Qingge froze in alarm.

In a flash, then, Xin Mo was lifted up and struck downwards, aiming to spear right through Mu Qingfang’s chest. Liu Qingge lunged, and already knew he wouldn’t be fast enough. Still he grabbed Luo Binghe, only for both of them to lurch in surprise as Xin Mo’s downward sweep met
open air, rather than human flesh.

In the blink of an eye, Mu Qingfang had gone.

At once, it seemed like both of them abruptly remembered that apart from being an accomplished healer, Luo Binghe’s fourth husband was also, of course, a skilled cultivator with a variety of talents.

Glancing around the pavilion, there didn’t seem to be any sign of him.

Liu Qingge let out a breath.

“Fourth Husband?” Luo Binghe called. “I sealed the door. You won’t be able to get out.”

No answer.

With a sigh, he moved to stand up.

“My lord, no,” Liu Qingge countered, gripping him with one real arm and one he could only imagine. “He stayed, he was just trying to test the process for the others who wanted it, he didn’t go, you need him-”

Luo Binghe offered him a soothing caress.

“Xin Mo needs to eat,” the lord said, gently. “One large meal now will be better than trying to recover it inch by inch. Ge-ge, think. What are we going to do now that so many flowers are gone? It will take time to fill the Garden again. This is the cost of your mistake.”

“I’ll pay it, then,” Liu Qingge insisted. He knew Luo Binghe wouldn’t kill him. Offering up everything to that sword wouldn’t leave him in a state fit to be called ‘living’ for some time, and the thought made him feel a true tremor of fear. But it was better than the alternative.

“As if I could do that to my First Husband.”
Glaring resolutely at the man he'd married, he didn't loosen his grip.

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

"Didn’t this lord say ‘never again’? Ge-ge, all of this is for you. It’s always been for you. How could you forget such a thing?"

He closed his eyes, and wished he could fight.

“If it’s for me, then don’t hurt someone else!” he demanded. Shouted, even. But Luo Binghe just clucked his tongue kissed his brow.

“Look, Fourth Husband, drawing things out is just causing First Husband distress,” the lord called. “Come out and accept the punishment. It might not kill Fourth Husband anyway; if it doesn’t, this lord promises to forgive his betrayal and give him a second chance…”

No answer.

Good, Liu Qingge thought. Maybe Mobei-Jun knew another way out of the Garden. Maybe Mu Qingfang was already running away with him. He let himself hope for it, even as foolish as it was, while Luo Binghe called out again. He was so focused on examining their surroundings for any hint of the missing healer that he nearly didn’t notice it when Luo Binghe’s voice trailed off strangely.

He noticed it when the lord staggered.

A shocked gasp rattled out of Luo Binghe’s chest.

“...What…?”

Liu Qingge reached out with the wrong arm to try and catch him, and mostly just felt confusion at first. Luo Binghe’s injuries were healing, so why would he have stumbled…? He waited for the
lord to pull himself back up onto the bench, thinking it was a misstep or exhaustion. He only moved when he heard another, sharper gasp, and saw Luo Binghe begin to claw at the poultices on his wounds.

At some point which neither of them had noticed, spidery black lines had begun to spread outwards from the injuries.

When Luo Binghe ripped off the first poultice, the smell was enough to send Liu Qingge staggering back a step.

The wound was black.

“Ge-ge,” his lord gasped.

Heart in his throat, Liu Qingge hurried to help rip off the remaining poultices. The wounds beneath had gotten bigger. Black, green, and white fluid oozed from them, and the stench alone was enough to make his eyes water. The miasma which seemed to have all at once begun to pour from the wounds forced him back a few steps again. Luo Binghe clawed at his own injuries, desperate and delirious.

“Stop!” Liu Qingge said, horrified as his lord tore at his flesh.

“Get back!” Luo Binghe snarled at him. “It’s poi... it’s... Ge-ge, back!”

The scent was worsening, and Liu Qingge knew why he was being pushed away. He could taste the poison in the air, too. It wouldn’t let him near. Covering his mouth, he could only stagger back again as Luo Binghe ripped at his wounds once more, but this time he understood - his lord was trying to tear away the tainted flesh before it could spread. He could regenerate from most things. But if this poison took over his entire body...

Rotting clumps of flesh were tossed away, and Luo Binghe cut into his own thigh with Xin Mo as he screamed and struggled. The black veins were still spreading, however. Liu Qingge couldn’t breathe. He reached for Cheng Luan, thinking to at least send his own blade out to cut, too, but instead of drawing it, he found himself freezing in place. Rooted to the spot as he watched the horror unfold, as Luo Binghe continued to rip himself apart before his eyes. Red blood joined the fetid pool of liquids spreading across the pavilion stone.
And then suddenly he was being wrenched away. A surprisingly strong grip pulled his rigid figure down and sideways, towards the brightly coloured flowers arranged next to the dais. He was shaking. When had that started? He was shaking, but then there was a black-clad shoulder, and a slender hand pressing his face against it.

“Don’t look,” Mu Qingfang told him. “Don’t listen. Close your eyes, you don’t need to see. There’s no reason for you to see.”

The hand moved to curl around his head, covering his ears as Luo Binghe screamed.

Liu Qingge wasn’t the sort of person to shy away from such things. He knew violence. He knew death.

He hid against Mu Qingfang’s shoulder, as his lord tore himself apart.

The healer watched every moment unfold. Never looking away until the screaming had stopped, and the struggles had ceased. The poison spread quickly. It was meant to; the work of years of careful studying, modifying, testing, and reformulating. As silence descended, the remains in the garden’s pavilion were barely recognizable. The fumes were too thick for anyone to approach too closely; and he didn’t like how much of it Liu Qingge had breathed in before he could intervene. For several long moments, the only sounds that could be heard were Liu Qingge's ragged breaths, and the soft *plink-plunk* of blood running down the pavilion steps.

They waited until the last parcel of flesh stopped twitching in place.

Liu Qingge shuddered.

Patting the younger man on the back, Mu Qingfang coaxed his patient up, and led him back down the path towards his rooms. Mobei-Jun would be waking up soon, and then they could leave.

When he was first brought into Luo Binghe's harem, Mu Qingfang made no secret of the fact that he had sworn a very important oath. Made a binding promise to himself, with regards to the man he'd married.

It was funny. He’d never had to lie about the nature of that promise.
No one had ever asked him what his oath actually was.

Chapter End Notes

"Hey Shang Qinghua, how come your mom lets you have TWO ridiculously powerful characters hiding as background NPCs?"
The borderlands that separated the human realm from the demonic realm were a real place, of course, but the ‘border’ they represented wasn’t a traditional boundary between one region and another. A person couldn’t stand in a random building in the borderlands and look out the window and see Hell. Although, if the weather was right and the window was pointing in the right direction, and it was dusk or dawn, they might see the top tier of the pleasure palace in the Ghost City.

The borderlands in fact represented a weak point between the human and demonic realms. Legend had it that the region was once the site of a cataclysmic battle between ancient gods, and that the echoes of this skirmish and the slaughter of many divine beings was what had caused the boundaries between worlds to ‘thin out’.

Shen Jiu had no idea if that was true or not. Some of the elder demon scholars probably had a better idea, but demons could be stingy with information. He had asked Mobei-Jun’s First Husband once, on a whim, and the man had just idly nodded and waved a hand and said ‘sure, why not?’ But that wasn’t exactly the a compelling dissertation.

Anyway, it was ancient history no matter the answer, and the reality was that the borderlands remained a region that operated in perpetual low-or-high level chaos. In Shen Jiu’s study at the Luo estate, there was a map that clearly marked out where the anomalies that made the borderlands a ‘border’ began and ended. Unlike most borders, which were defined by things like rivers or mountains or ravines, the borderlands were marked out by less geographical forces. So from the perspective of travel and trade, they could be incredibly inconvenient.

There were a lot of spots in the borderlands where good roads could have been built, cutting weeks off of journeys, except no one wanted to cross through the treacherous terrain. There was a single haunted lake that forced traders from Qinghe to add days to their trip if they wanted to reach the...
capital, just because there was no safe way to cross it. And there was a forest near the southern edge that no neighbouring landowner would dare try and collect timber from, lest they vanish with only a single spatter of blood left behind. A big splash of compromised terrain, thrown awkwardly into the thick of things, could have just as easily been an impassible mountain range or perilous sea, and people would have just had to accept it. But the galling thing about the borderlands for most of the surrounding regions was that, on the outside, it just looked like perfectly good territory.

Humans who defiantly tried to tame the borderlands were usually disabused of their hubris, and either died or, if they were lucky, just gave up and left. So most of the villages in the area were populated by outcasts. Demons and humans who didn’t fit in with the rest of society. Criminals escaping punishment often ended up there, because no one asked a lot of questions of strangers and some bounty hunters would turn aside if a trail led to the borderlands. Conversely, a few demons would pick up bounties in the area and bring their prizes to Lord Luo, who compensated a third of the emperor’s price on murderers and rapists, in exchange for turning them over and claiming the rest of the bounty himself.

Shen Jiu had a lot of thoughts on the borderlands, and hubris, and the temptations presented by the region. He owned property there, after all.

After Master Shen had formally revealed his dowry to him, Shen Jiu had acted appropriately surprised. But of course, he’d already had time to go through it all and start making some plans. Farming in the borderlands was always risky - you never knew when your crop harvest would suddenly become a patch of rotting skulls instead of radishes. An enterprising person could probably still find a market for rotting skulls, too, but since most of them weren’t ‘real’ skulls, even that wasn’t too promising. The land that Lord Luo had given him would never yield crops, and wasn’t close to any of the established settlements that managed to function in the borderlands, but it was in a good position for a road that could easily cut days off of the trip for some of those traders from Qinghe.

Building a road wasn’t a small undertaking, and Shen Jiu would want to put in rest stops and inns and maybe some other properties to lease along the way, too. Even so, once the idea had come to him, he couldn’t shake the notion that it was a good one.

There weren’t any really powerful landlords in the borderlands. He still had his plan to get the Yue estate as well, but Master Shen’s advice was still loud in his mind, and… well.

A broad power base was important, as long as a person didn’t stretch themselves too thin. Not to mention, if ever there was a place to practice building safe havens in the midst of never-ending threats, the borderlands were it. Taming even just a corner of the region would be a point of credibility for anyone, in either world.
And it probably would be foolish not to seize the opportunities he had with Lord Luo’s people while they were still good, and he wasn’t considered compromised by any other loyalties or interests. Yue Qingyuan had yet to make a formal declaration or send in a proposal, even though he hadn’t stopped sending gifts. Shen Jiu felt like maybe his master was right, and he had the luxury of waiting - every gift he got, even without any kind of letter or correspondence, seemed to add weight to the notion.

Shen Jiu wasn’t an expert at investments or anything of the like, however. He approached one of the senior servants at the Luo estate for advice first.

To his annoyance, the old man just rambled on about how nothing ever lasted in the borderlands without becoming a bloodbath, inadvertently reminding Shen Jiu that even though the human servants at the estate worked for Lord Luo, a lot of them were still superstitious and only believed in making ‘exceptions’ for the human-like demons they could pretend weren’t really all that frightening.

So for his second attempt, he wrote a letter to the demonic estate instead.

Ji Man was a fox demon who’d begun serving Lord Luo not too long after his marriage to Master Shen. According to the rumour mill, she’d been a smuggler when Lord Luo approached her to see about acquiring some items for Master Shen’s courtyard, and eventually had been hired on to the estate to help sell some of the rare ingredients that could be harvested in the demon realm. It was Ji Man who’d made the suggestion for Lord Luo to offer a fractional rate on the emperor’s bounties, collecting the rest as his fee for working as a go-between for demons and humans, and she also advised on Lord Luo on a lot of the estate’s investments.

As a fox demon, Ji Man could look perfectly human if she chose to, apart from her tail and the demon mark between her brows. She was over fifty years old, but looked closer to twenty, and had the sort of face that seemed deceptively trustworthy. When Shen Jiu wrote to ask her what she thought of his idea, he mostly expected her to just send a letter back, listing some reasons as to why it might be good to pursue or too unfeasible to bother with. He wasn’t expecting the letter to say she would turn up at the Luo estate, nor for her to arrive just a few days later, riding in by carriage from the borderlands.

He got the distinct impression that she’d surveyed his real estate along the way.

“Is Young Master Shen serious about this idea?” Ji Man asked him. Her expression was mildly curious, but the tip of her tail was flitting around her ankles, as they shared a lunch together.
“If it’s workable,” he replied, cautiously.

Tricky demons were always the ones to be the most cautious with. Powerful ones like Mobei-Jun just tended to barrel through everything, blunt because they could afford to be blunt. Weaker ones were another matter. Ji Man wasn’t a strong demon, and if asked, she would claim to have no interest in rising in power - and probably mean it, too. She was just concerned with ‘securing a good life’ for herself. But in hell, there was no good life for anyone too weak to defend what was theirs. Anyone without a lot of physical power had to get it by exploiting the right opportunities instead.

The question was whether Ji Man thought Shen Jiu was an opportunity worth exploiting because his idea was lucrative, or because it would open the door to her taking a step up by using his back as a ladder when he fell.

As these things went, he was willing to entertain that it was the former option, while remaining wary of the latter threat.

Ji Man’s tail twitched again as she tapped the side of her teacup.

“...It’s workable,” she told him, at last. “There are a few other people we’ll need to discuss things with, and they might prove Ji Man wrong. She’s only a simple businesswoman, you see, and doesn’t know enough about roads and setting up protection. But Lord Luo would be best to ask for those things. On the business end, if Young Master Shen can get the basics arranged, this would be very good. The region is mostly flat land, but keeping the safe area narrow would be the best option. Don’t try to squeeze more than is fair for toll collection, and the biggest problem will be actually convincing human traders to use it. Ji Man can handle that - a few demons disguised as humble merchants safely using the road and avidly assuring the rest that it is peaceful will go a long way. Merchants are greedy, and they like shortcuts.”

Shen Jiu frowned a little, and tapped his fan while he thought.

It really did seem like a good idea. He was willing to bet that it actually was one - at least enough of one to take it a few steps further.

“Help me draft a proposal for Lord Luo to look at,” he decided.

Ji Man demurred, or tried to. It was an expression that was bound to look fake on that sly face of
hers. She was much better at a saleswoman’s ‘sincere’ enthusiasm for this or that good, this or that rare deal, because she didn’t look like the kind of person who was born yesterday.

“This servant doesn’t answer to Young Master Shen directly, and there are some matters she has to see to…”

“If you help me draft the proposal, your name can go on it as well,” he offered.

“Ji Man would never ask for such a thing. Accolades are much too lofty for her humble aims,” the fox demon countered.

“What do you want, then?” Shen Jiu asked, resisting the urge to sigh.

With a shrewd look, she cut to the point.

“A trading post,” she said. “If Young Master’s route proves successful, the opportunity to sell to traders who can then carry goods onward to human city marketplaces would be ideal. That much human traffic would make it more lucrative than most borderland shops, too. This humble servant would be willing to pay a lease, but wants pick of the locations.”

Shen Jiu thought about it. But he didn’t have to think for very long. If the project failed, then Ji Man’s request wouldn’t prove costly to him - it just wouldn’t come to fruition, either. And if it succeeded, it wasn’t as if Shen Jiu intended to run the outposts in the place anyway. Leasing the best location to Ji Man would be worth considering anyway.

“Done,” he agreed.

Ji Man’s tail swished eagerly a few times, and she even gave up the game by excitedly clapping her hands together.

“Then we should get started! But, tomorrow - the road was long and this servant needs a meal and a good bath and her beauty sleep first.”

He rolled his eyes.
Fox demons. What else did he expect?

~

The meeting with Lord Luo went as most meetings with Lord Luo went these days. Which was to say, it was annoyingly casual, but somehow things still seemed to get accomplished. Lord Luo had Fruit Baby with him that morning. Her tiny hands were still sticky from some treat or other he’d been spoiling her with, which meant that Shen Jiu had to dirty another handkerchief trying to clean her up before she grabbed at his hair and made a mess of him. Somehow he also ended up holding her through most of the meeting, even though she shouldn’t have even been there and it wasn’t as if Shen Jiu was any good with babies anyway.

Of course, even though she’d had him to pester for the whole meeting, when he finally gave her back Fruit Baby still leaned out of Lord Luo’s arms and whined at him as he left. Proving her good taste but not doing much for Shen Jiu’s convenience, since he had to go back and stop her fussing. Couldn’t have Lord Luo revoke his acceptance of the proposal on the grounds of Shen Jiu upsetting his heir.

“Stop bringing her to work,” he scolded the man, as he rifled around and found a soft rattle to give her.

Lord Luo shrugged.

“Shizun needed a break, and I have things to do. There’s no other option. Unless A-Jiu wants to watch her?”

Inconvenient as it could be, this aversion to proper nursemaids was only reasonable, in the end, because the odds of something happening to the heir went up a lot if only servants were watching
her. Servants couldn’t be trusted. Mostly.

Shen Jiu hesitated. Fruit Baby chewed on her rattle.

“Do you have any important meetings?” he checked.

Lord Luo shrugged.

“Only one or two,” he replied. “If they object to my heir’s early training, this lord will simply reschedule.”

“Fine, then. Give her to me,” he decided, with a put-upon sigh. He had a feeling he’d been set up to do this anyway, and it almost made him refuse. But stuffy meetings probably weren’t the best places for little buns, and Lord Luo’s acceptance of his project proposal meant he would very shortly have a lot of things to do. It was probably a good idea to get in a few extra favours before he got very busy, just so no one forgot how invaluable he was on multiple fronts.

Lord Luo smiled, and cooed at Fruit Baby while he handed her over again.

“Be a good baby,” he said. “Look after your shixiong, but don’t indulge him too much. Shizun will expect you back in three hours.”

Shen Jiu rolled his eyes.

“I’ll take her back around then,” he promised, and let himself be burdened with the bag containing some necessary baby supplies, and finally got away.

Fruit Baby babbled happily and played with her rattle, until she seemed to realize that they’d lost Lord Luo. Then she started fussing around and looking for him. Shen Jiu distracted her by summoning up some tiny amounts of qi to make little light puffs in the air. Luckily, even though she was spoiled rotten, the Luo heir didn’t have a bad temperament for a baby. She was prone to laughing more than crying, and when they got back to his courtyard, she forgot all of her woes the moment she saw Lady. Who couldn’t reach her, from the raised crib Shen Jiu kept in his rooms, but still leaned up to sniff and wag her tail while Fruit Baby happily babbled and made excited motions back at her.
Toys were thrown to the dog. Those would have to be cleaned before the baby could have them back.

Shen Jiu let them entertain one another while he started writing letters. Lord Luo had approved the project with surprising enthusiasm, with the only stipulation being that the demonic estate’s steward and Ji Man would be in charge of managing the funds for his investment in it. Because Shen Jiu’s approach to money tended to be either ‘spend it all before it’s gone’ or ‘horde it in secret and never part with a single tael’, and he could reluctantly concede that neither approach was best for an investment project of this size.

Still, he planned to keep an eye on the numbers to make sure no one would be skimming anything off the top.

Shen Jiu had planned to meet with Ji Man in person that afternoon to go over things, but in the meanwhile, he needed to write to the steward, and there were already some people he knew he’d need to hire for a few things to get started. The first order of business would be marking out the intended roadway and clearing it of obvious dangers and trespassers, and for that job, hiring some peasant cultivators would be a good idea. Shen Jiu would check over the route himself of course, probably more than once, but he already knew there were malevolent things rooted in the area. He didn’t even need to check. Anyplace untended for long enough would get like that in the borderlands.

There was a sort of unofficial hiring post for freelancers and mercenaries in the region, so Shen Jiu’s second letter was to put the word out to them that he was looking for help. He needed to make sure the project’s potential threats were properly listed, or else he’d just get some unskilled but arrogant types dying on his route, and that would mean more clean-up work.

By the time he finished that letter, Fruit Baby had gotten tired of Lady and decided to start fussing over being ignored. She should have been napping, but of course, she was a clingy little thing. With a sigh Shen Jiu fetched her back out of the crib, and sure enough, once she was being held she happily snuffed against his shoulder and fell asleep.

Only to grip his clothes and wake up with a soft complaint when he tried to put her back down again.

Internally cursing, he resigned himself to having a baby fuss at his shoulder. At least he could consider it practice for when he had his own child.
One of his personal servants hesitantly came up and offered to take her, which earned a withering glare. She was new, and didn’t know the standards for such things, so Shen Jiu only rebuked her with a few words before having her sit down and write out a letter he dictated instead. He kept his voice low while Fruit Baby drooled on him. This letter wasn’t sensitive, so, it was fine enough for a servant to handle writing it on his behalf; he could just check and make sure the words were right before sending it off. And Fruit Baby was accustomed to sleeping while people talked, just so long as the voices didn’t get too loud.

In the end, Shen Qingqiu came to retrieve his troublesome offspring before the scheduled time limit was even up, or nap time was even halfway done.

“Binghe said you had her,” his master whispered, as he gently transferred the baby to his own shoulder. Shen Jiu brushed a curl from her cheek, so it wouldn’t irritate her eyes, and then shrugged.

“Lord Luo had meetings, so I was burdened with protecting your child from would-be assassins,” he explained. “You owe me a favour now.”

Shen Qingqiu gave him an amused look.

“You can rest here if you want,” Shen Jiu permitted, narrowing his eyes at his master. He was supposed to be taking a break, but then he probably got all sappy and decided he missed Lord Luo and Fruit Baby and went rushing after them anyway instead. That wouldn’t mean he wasn’t still in need of rest, though…

His suspicions were confirmed when Shen Qingqiu just hummed in thanks, and only went into the next room to settle onto the settee with Fruit Baby curled against his chest.

When Shen Jiu went back to check on them a few minutes later, they were both still sleeping. Lady had jumped up with them as well. He left them to it.

Eventually Fruit Baby woke up and fussed enough that Shen Qingqiu took her to go change and feed her. When they came back, Shen Jiu was pondering over the maps again. He needed better ones, he decided. These ones were old and, knowing the borderlands, that would make them even more unreliable than usual.

“What are you up to?” his master asked him, as he played with Fruit Baby.
“I’m trying to make use of that ugly patch of land that you and Lord Luo left me,” he admitted. “I had an idea about it.”

When Shen Qingqiu made an inquiring noise, he decided it was fine to explain it. Lord Luo had already approved things anyway, so, if there was some problem he hadn’t been able to see, then at least he wasn’t the only person who had missed it.

“We’re clever,” his master complimented when he was finished. Shen Jiu smirked.

“If it works,” he then said, and resisted the urge to sigh. Investments were stressful. Putting money towards something that wouldn’t produce tangible results right away wasn’t easy.

“Even if it ultimately fails, a partial success could still make a lot of profits, I think,” Shen Qingqiu told him, as if reading the trajectory of his thoughts. “If you’re nervous you should have Shang Qinghua take a look at it, he used to help run his family business.”

“I’ll trouble him,” Shen Jiu agreed. He’d already planned to, in fact, although he hadn’t known that the man had any history in business. He just generally knew useful things, and was overall good to consult on a lot of matters. A thought occurred to him as he considered this. Shen Jiu hesitated for a moment, frowning at the maps again. Then he internally shrugged.

“I was thinking I might also discuss the matter with Lord Yue,” he admitted. “If someone in the emperor’s circle could vouch for the safety of the route when it’s completed, it would probably go a long ways towards convincing people to actually use it. We might even be able to get some official sanctioning. Actually, it wouldn’t be bad if he decided to invest in it too, then we’d have a reputable righteous cultivator backing it - superstitious types might be less wary, in that situation.”

He glanced towards his master.

Shen Qingqiu’s expression was placid, as he looked directly back at him.

In a fit of explicable self-consciousness, Shen Jiu turned his gaze down again.

“...If that’s what A-Jiu wants, then Lord Yue will almost certainly be interested,” Shen Qingqiu
finally determined.

Shen Jiu cleared his throat, and shrugged.

“It might also be good to have an excuse to actually speak to the man, too. For all of his courtship gifts, he doesn’t spare me many words,” Shen Jiu admitted.

There was a moment of quiet. Not entirely awkward, but this topic had begun to make him habitually nervous. There was a small line between Shen Qingqiu’s brows, eluding to more worry than anything else. It smoothed away somewhat when Fruit Baby reached up for him.

“Well, Lord Luo probably won’t want to involve him,” Shen Jiu mused.

“If he gets upset just leave it to me,” Shen Qingqiu advised.

The offer of help finally eased the last lingering bit of tension out of him. If he really thought it was a bad idea, his mentor definitely wouldn’t offer such aid in dealing with the resident demon lord’s potential disapproval.

“I have to meet with Ji Man to discuss the rest of it,” he admitted.

Shen Qingqiu was busily making faces he probably didn’t realize he was making at the baby.

“All right, A-Jiu,” he said, brightly, before he caught himself using tones normally reserved for talking to tiny children. Then he cleared his throat and schooled his features into something more appropriate. “Good luck with this venture. If A-Jiu needs this old man’s assistance, just come and ask!”

As if he needed more reassurance on that front.

He even had to pat Fruit Baby goodbye and play with her a bit more before he left, so she wouldn’t fuss as much.
This family. Such hassle.

Demon servants were also a hassle.

Shen Jiu had learned this when he’d first gotten old enough to be assigned some. The vast majority of his time these days was spent cultivating at the Luo estate, and he had human servants there. Two personal servants, to be exact, and of course dominion over several others. But he still sometimes did things at the estate in the demonic realm, too, and none of his human servants would go with him there. At first he’d just borrowed Master Shen’s servants while there, but then Lord Luo decided he should have some of his own as some point of order or something, and so he’d gotten three personal servants along with his own set of rooms in the underground palace.

The rooms weren’t bad. Since they were in the underground segment, they didn’t get a lot of light, and Shen Jiu could never decide if he felt like they had too many exits or too few. But they were clean and positioned in the inner palace, normally reserved for family, and more than fine enough to entertain guests in. His demon servants were tasked with keeping them clean and cared for while he was gone. Shen Jiu hadn’t taken on any apprentices to train yet - he still wanted to focus on his own cultivation - but, being demons, all of his servants were still good enough fighters for a spar and all of them were obsessed with getting stronger.

Which meant they fought.

At any excuse.

All the time. Over the most stupid things.
Shen Jiu had to sneer and snap at them for using doing nearly any task on his behalf as an excuse to challenge one another. Bringing him breakfast? Fight over who carries the tray. Fetching his books? Race to see who reaches the shelf first. Brushing his hair? Savage one another over the comb. He had learned very quickly to specify which servant was to do what task, even for the most basic things, and even then if he turned his back for too long the situation was bound to devolve into pointless games of sabotage and there was more than half a chance of a completely different servant doing it anyway, turning up with a black eye and whatever thing he’d ask for and insisting that the other servant was too incompetent for words.

On some level, he knew it was just demons being demons. But he’d swear that no one else’s personal servants gave them so much trouble. It was annoying. He knew he was human and humans didn’t rate highly in the eyes of most demons, but the obvious lack of fear towards him grated. No matter how often he thwacked them on the heads, though, they were never deterred. Too thick-skulled to care!

Some of the younger retainers and apprentices who served Lord Luo and Mobei-Jun weren’t much better, either. They were always fighting in front of him, but since he properly started entering into the cultivation world, it was rare that they challenged him. Shen Jiu wasn’t sure if it was because they’d been warned against causing some kind of incident with human cultivators, or if they were trying to imply that he was too weak to be worth their time, but it didn’t seem to be because they were intimidated by him. Whenever Shen Jiu made challenging gestures towards them, they always submitted or just acted cheeky about it.

He would have thought that, being more noble-blooded, maybe they just had better etiquette than his servants. But around each other, their behaviour was almost always the same thing. If Shen Jiu said he wanted to go have lunch, suddenly he’d have a pack of young demonic cultivators fighting over who would go kill something to eat. Even though he didn’t eat disgusting raw monster meat anyway, he’d end up halfway back to his master’s courtyard before any of them stopped fighting long enough to realize that he’d gone.

But the eccentricities of demonic retainers were beside the point. Shen Jiu’s servants weren’t really strong as far as demons went. However, while he was working on clearing out new roadway being built, he’d still need someone to serve him. Needless to say, none of his human servants were up for the task, since none of them were even apprentice material. The borderlands were too dangerous for them. So it was obvious that he’d need to bring along at least one of his personal servants from the underground palace.

And it was definitely just going to be one, because he was absolutely not dealing with the hassle of having two or three of them fight all over everything while they were on the road.

Luckily, while their competitive tendencies made the whole thing a lot more annoying than it needed to be, it also meant that choosing between them was a pretty simple matter. Shen Jiu just
dragged them out to a good spot, and then told them what he was going to be doing, and that he was only going to take one of them along with him. He’d barely finished explaining before the three of them were fighting like stray dogs faced with the last scrap of meat. Straightening out his clothes, Shen Jiu unfolded a stool he’d brought with himself. Then he sat down to wait, lightly fanning away any unpleasant fumes that wafted over whenever the servant who spat venom got a little too enthusiastic, and pulling out Lord Yue’s latest gift to examine.

It was a book. On sword fighting techniques, actually. It was interesting because it didn’t seem like a formal copy of a standard training manual. Instead, it looked like the personal notes of an aspiring swordsman, written over the course of several years, as the author figured out various things about his own individual style and wrote out his thoughts and revelations. The style of the manual was messy and uncoordinated, clearly something meant more for personal reference; and it was an odd gift because it was, technically speaking, the most ‘low brow’ thing that Lord Yue had ever sent him. However, Shen Jiu had a sneaking suspicion that the book might actually be invaluable. Despite the unusual style of writing, nearly all of the author’s suggestions seemed to work perfectly for him. He had never had so much success with a martial training manual before. It was the closest any book had ever come to mirroring the effectiveness of one-on-one training from his master, actually.

So maybe the author was some kind of unorthodox genius, or else just happened to suit Shen Jiu’s own style remarkably well? Either way, he didn’t think a manual of this type could be a common item, and so even if it wouldn’t be considered rare or precious to most people, it was worth more than a lot of the other gifts purely in terms of how much progress his skills had made since he’d brought it back with him from the human estate.

He still hadn’t managed to write to Yue Qingyuan about his current project. It was just better to wait and make certain that it all wasn’t going to fall apart. No point in involving the man if he was just going to embarrass himself, after all.

Besides. He might say no. Or he might disapprove of it altogether. Human noble spouses weren’t expected to engage in ‘business’. Shen Jiu didn’t pretend to understand why, but he knew that something like his investment project was skirting the bounds of social respectability in that realm. On the one hand, it wasn’t as if he was running a shop or handcrafting merchandise or anything of those kinds of things. But on the other hand, he was definitely engaging in activities to make money; something that wasn’t supposed to be the ‘domain’ of a proper spouse.

But then again, he wasn’t married yet, and developing land that was tied to his dowry could simply be seen as a matter of course in improving his own appeal. If Yue Qingyuan wanted to take over managing the leases and protection racket of a borderlands roadway after Shen Jiu had it up and running, it wouldn’t bother him in the least. The point was to make something worthwhile, something capable of producing a steady stream of income and, eventually, running a lot of itself through other people anyway. He wasn’t interested in wasting a lot of time on handling the particulars himself. And who would call a steady stream of income some sort of downside? He was pretty certain there were lords who would try, but also that they were fools he’d be reluctant to
associate with anyway.

Nodding to himself, Shen Jiu quietly flipped another page in his manual. He tilted his head to one side to avoid a clump of hair that went flying by.

Oh, this page had diagrams. Not bad…

Half an hour later, two of his personal servants were bleeding in the dirt. The third spat out a tooth that would probably take a week or so to grow back, and gave him an expectant look. Shen Jiu nodded at him in confirmation. The young plant demon crowed in triumph and, despite the considerable claw marks across his back, started jumping around to celebrate his victory. The poisonously bright flowers in his hair spilled petals everywhere.

“Pick the others up and drag them in for healing,” Shen Jiu instructed, closing his book. “We’re leaving tomorrow.”

“Of course, Young Master!”

“Make sure you get treated too, don’t just try and keep the injuries as trophies. If you aren’t good enough to serve me on this trip, I’ll send you back and take one of the others instead.”

With greater urgency, then, his servant gathered up the others and rushed back into the palace, while Shen Jiu followed at a less panic-driven pace. Thinking about it, he figured that, problems aside, he’d still prefer to take demons around most places. At least when they decided who was in charge, they stuck to it pretty dependably. He’d had his human servants for longer but he still wouldn’t trust them with half as many things.

And they knew when to let things go. In general. Even though his other servants were clearly upset about it, they’d lost fair and square; and once Shen Jiu put down the idea of rematches, that was it. What could they really keep objecting for? All three of them had tried, one of them had succeeded. Even resenting the winner wouldn’t really work all that much because it was such obvious envy. The only recourse was to try and get stronger, and win next time, and that was just demonic philosophy distilled to a fine point anyway - get stronger. Win next time.

Some part of Shen Jiu found that sentiment very agreeable, even if it was overly simplistic.
Satisfied with the servant who’d accompany him, he turned his attention to other matters. Peasant cultivators, or rather freelancers who didn’t come from noble families and had no substantial connections to them, were people who were always looking for paying jobs. Very much not embodying the whole ‘lofty figure above worldly interests’ image that was typical of the noble kind. The most lucrative tasks for cultivators were preferentially afforded to the nobility, of course, and with the cultivation sects long officially disbanded, most independents could only train or work for whatever they might get. Some lived lives barely better than the average beggar. There were opportunities to make a name for oneself even with disadvantages, and become better connected by attending various tournaments and conferences and hunts, but even then, one had to do something to stand out and get noticed. Just being ‘good’ wasn’t enough.

So, even for dangerous tasks like trying to clean up a region of the borderlands, there were a lot of interested parties. The trouble was organizing how and what to compensate for, and what sort of proof to demand. Bounties on certain kinds of monsters wouldn’t work, because it was a region that Shen Jiu wanted cleared - and he had no idea what all might be in it, and wasn’t about to pay to have beasts killed from elsewhere. But just hiring at a flat rate for someone to ‘cleanse’ the place wouldn’t work either, because it was too much for a single cultivator or even paired partners to do, and without supervision, he’d probably end up hiring a bunch of people only for too many of them to just slack off. A lot of scam artists faked having know-how for getting rid of various monsters, demons, and ghosts, but in reality, would just take half their payment upfront and then vanish. A person would be lucky if they even feigned some kind of ritual first. He needed to make certain that whoever he hired would actually do the job.

So, that meant Shen Jiu had to supervise. He let the estate steward recommend the rates he should pay at, convinced Ji Man to come along and get a look at things, and then somehow ended up with a few of those annoying demon retainers tagging along too, insisting that they wanted to go kill things in tribute or something. Currying favour with Lord Luo, no doubt, but it worked to Shen Jiu's benefit as well, so he wasn’t about to complain.

Much.

They made their way to the freelance offices first.

The building was located in one of the oldest borderlands towns, apart from the Ghost City itself. It wasn’t a pretty place. The air was dusty and not many plants grew there, and those that did looked dead. Looks could be deceiving, though. In the middle of the town was a fountain that ran with clear, bright water, that made it an appealing place to live even in such circumstances. Most of the doorways had various charms and seals to ward off evil spirits. Some were quite old. But there was very little to deter actual demonic folk; having places like this was, ultimately, more of an advantage to the demon lords than not. So even minor demons wouldn’t stir up much trouble, for fear of irritating people like Lord Luo or Mobei-Jun, or even the more traditional nobles. If a person were to ask a human in the imperial court who protected the towns in the borderlands, they would of course say that it was the noble cultivators who frequented the region; and if a person were to ask one of the consorts of hell who protected the towns in the borderlands, they would say
it was done by the grace of the great lords.

In reality, the truth was more that neither faction cared to attack a lot of the settlements in the first place. Sometimes a clan or warlord would try and seize control of certain swaths of territory, but it was most likely to be that person or group’s own side who smacked them back down if they grew too brazen.

This particular town was, on the human side of things, under the protection of the Jin clan, and on the demon end of things, part of Sha Hualing’s dominion of inheritance. So far as he knew, neither party was even aware of nor cared about the other's claim. The settlement was also a fair ways away from Shen Jiu’s swath of land, but the detour was necessary. He had brought carriages and supplies, servants and retainers, and now he just needed to gather up his hireling cultivators, and the first foray into clearing out and marking the grounds for his new road could be put underway. If all went well, then anyone he hired would be able to recollect the route back to his holdings, and he would be able to contract the same people again with more ease.

Provided they didn’t piss him off or prove too incompetent, anyway.

As they secured their animals at the stables, a little half-demon child ran off towards the offices. So Shen Jiu wasn’t surprised at all to find a lot of interested parties waiting for them. A vagabond gave their carriages a speculative look, but shied away when his personal servant pointedly settled in to wait by them; exuding a poisonous aura as deterrent.

“Mister Shen,” the manager of the freelance offices greeted, looking as perfectly human as the half-demon child clutching her skirts; save for some uncommonly sharp teeth. “We thought you’d be arriving yesterday. Two of the gentlemen interested in your work got tired of waiting and left, I fear.”

“That’s fine. We’re staying the night in town, so if anyone with a little actual merit turns up before tomorrow, they can be directed to us,” he replied, unperturbed. The delays were inevitable - crossing the borderlands sometimes meant unexpected fights - and if anyone couldn’t wait, then he doubted they’d be reliable enough to handle the job anyway. It wasn’t likely to be quick or easy work.

Inside the offices was a front room that resembled a tavern more than anything. Tables, food, and drink were all available. There were even some boarding rooms to be had, though they were shabby, and not good enough for Shen Jiu’s party. He knew there was a records’ room somewhere, keeping tabs on a lot of jobs and comings and goings. But if he hadn’t been aware of the nature of the place, he could have easily mistaken it for a worn-down rest stop or inn.
The manager nodded him towards one of the tables, where several figures with the obvious bearing of cultivators were seated. Not far from that, at a single table, was a demon cultivator as well. Shen Jiu accepted the cue and tipped the manager, glancing at his own ‘for hire’ ad where it had been hung up among several others, before he made his way over to the waiting group. Ji Man and one of Lord Luo’s retainers followed after him.

“Hey, little human,” the demon cultivator said, right when they were about to pass his table. “Give me double the offered pay, and I’ll do the whole job for you myself. You won’t even need to hire any of those weaklings for it.”

Shen Jiu didn’t even bother to hide his scoff as he slid a disdainful look towards this person.

While the man definitely had a demonic aura about him, he wasn’t wearing any of the symbols or tokens of a noble bloodline. That didn’t necessarily mean anything, but if someone was going to boast like that, they needed to at least present some clue as to why they should be taken seriously. Shen Jiu was himself wearing Lord Luo’s crest at his belt, so anyone who bargained with him would know he was probably good for the money on offer.

This person was only dressed in plain clothes, with a mediocre-looking sword at his belt, and a general aura of being unwashed and unfed lingering about him. He looked mostly human, so he probably wasn’t weak, but then again, the servant and retainers that Shen Jiu had brought along also met that minimum requirement. Among demons, ‘not weak’ and ‘strong’ could be entire worlds apart.

“Ji Man, do I look like I was born yesterday?” he asked the fox demon.

“Master Shen’s appearance is very youthful and refreshing, but certainly still that of a mature adult,” she obligingly replied.

“That’s good. Hopefully some of the others here will not take me for a fool, in that case,” he quipped, before pointedly turning his back to the demonic cultivator.

He heard the man spit. Turning one’s back to a demon was considered very insulting, but since the feeling was mutual, Shen Jiu didn’t bother about it. Demons weren’t well-suited towards purifying things anyway, and he had more than enough of them that he could call on for help.

“If they’re smart they won’t take your job,” the demonic cultivator nevertheless insisted. “Human
cultivators aren’t made to handle such work. Too *delicate.*”

Shen Jiu paused at the table where the three other freelancers were waiting.

“Excuse me a moment,” he said.

Then he turned back to that other, irritating person.

He had an entire party of demons with him, which meant that he couldn’t afford to brush off any insults. Not that he wanted to. This wasn’t a diplomatic function after all, so he let his gaze turn sharp, and inclined his head.

"Are you looking for a fight?"

“Master Shen,” the retainer who’d followed after him said. She was a very statuesque fire demon, from one of their old bloodlines; a year or so younger than himself, usually quiet. “Permit this servant to take care of this nuisance.”

He could. A demon’s strength was reflected in the strength of anyone who declared allegiance to them, but most would still generally perceive a human as ‘weak’ anyway. So it was usually better for him to just take care of matters himself. After all, technically speaking, everyone’s allegiance was to Lord Luo. Reflecting well on Lord Luo’s strength didn't say anything about his own. Shen Jiu shook his head and then made a challenging gesture at the demon cultivator.

“No need,” he said. “If he’s such a tough, powerful demon, let’s see if he can even do anything I couldn’t myself. If he can manage to beat me, I’ll consider hiring him.”

The demonic cultivator look taken aback. His eyes darted between the fox and fire demon, and then narrowed at Shen Jiu.

“I don’t fight humans,” he said.

“You challenged me,” Shen Jiu sneered, more infuriated at that dismissive statement than at any of the preceding ones.
“Humans don’t usually answer that!” the rough-looking stranger retorted. “Especially not personally. I’ll fight your hireling, roughing you up wouldn’t be worth the trouble.”

A few things suddenly clicked together.

Did this person not know who he was? Shen Jiu paused for a moment, considering that. He was wearing a symbol of a demon noble house on his belt, but it seemed like this cultivator hadn’t even glanced at it. If he also hadn’t put together the implications of the name ‘Shen’, then he probably just thought he was provoking some human noble who’d hired a demon or two on as escort.

“I’ll fight him.”

Another voice joined the irritating dramatics. Shen Jiu looked back over towards the other table.

There were three human cultivators seated around it, two men and one woman. The woman was older, had probably started building up her base later on than most, and showed a lot of signs of frequent fighting and familiarity with conflict; someone who lived in the borderlands, then. Possibly an exile or just a wanderer. One of the two men was a slender figure, dressed in white with wrappings visible around his wrists and throat. His white clothes were dirty and stained from travel, and there was a straw hat resting at his back. He didn’t have a sword on him.

The second man was the one who had spoken. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and judging by the state of his clothes, hadn’t been in the area for very long. His facial features seemed forgettable and average, somehow, as if Shen Jiu would surely not recall them the moment he looked away. His hair was white.

That gave him pause.

He’d heard the rumours about Yue Qingyuan’s hair turning white. There was a lot of speculation about it. Seeing another cultivator with long, white hair, it made Shen Jiu regret that he hadn’t even laid eyes on the lord since his apparent change in appearance. The effect was striking, even on this ambiguously-featured person.

He put the stray thought aside, along with a strange and nagging sense of suspicion, as the tall cultivator stood up from his table.
“To spare Master Shen the inconvenience, and make a good showing for human cultivators, I’ll fight. If I win, perhaps Master Shen will consider hiring me for this job.”

“I fight my own battles,” Shen Jiu informed the stranger, stiffly.

The man just smiled at him.

“Of course! But given the circumstances, wouldn’t it be better to see the skills of those who are looking to be hired on for them…?”

That wasn’t a bad idea, actually. He paused to consider it, while the demonic cultivator seemed to get more agitated.

“I already said I don’t fight humans.”

Then fuck off, Shen Jiu wanted to reply. He curled his lip instead, radiating disdain, but before he could speak he was beaten to it again.

“Forgive me, fellow cultivator, but first you will not fight our noble patron for fear of angering a benefactor, and yet, you will also not fight me?” the tall man said, in a friendly, contemplative tone of voice. “Who does the fellow cultivator imagine I am, to be so skittish? Or is it only that he fears the embarrassment of defeat?”

The demon he was addressing finally seemed to have reached the end of whatever tether he’d hung himself on.

“If you’re so eager to be torn apart, then accept responsibility for the consequences,” he hissed, eyes flashing just faintly with a dangerous colour.

“Don’t worry, if it gets to be too much, this humble wanderer will beg for mercy,” the tall cultivator replied, so easy and assured that Shen Jiu couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow.
Somehow, then, they found themselves exiting the offices to head off to a convenient patch of wasteland, so that his prospective hires could engage in their own brand of pissing contest. Shen Jiu frowned the entire way. He’d posted the ad asking for righteous cultivators specifically, so he had hoped they’d be able to forgo this kind of nonsense, but no. Of course not. It was too much to hope that a gaggle of freelancers would bother to read an entire posting; it was probably too much to hope that many of them could read at all.

With some obvious interest, the other two peasant cultivators also followed them out. As the tall man and the demon exchanged the usual pre-fight pleasantries of trying goad one another into backing down, Shen Jiu spared them both another glance.

“Is this really necessary?” the man with the straw hat wondered.

Shen Jiu snorted.

“No,” he said. “But it’s bound to happen anyway.”

To his credit, Straw Hat didn’t try to argue the point any further, even though his brows were knit with concern.

The tall cultivator had two swords, Shen Jiu noted. One was lashed to his back along with his pack, not in a position to be easily drawn, but more as if he was simply carrying it along. The other was at his hip. It was a decent quality sword, but nothing as impressive as Xiu Ya or Cheng Luan, or even Shen Jiu’s own, demon-forged and still-nameless blade.

The demonic cultivator drew two wickedly curved shortswords, in turn, and for a moment, both men just sized one another up in defensive stances. Waiting for the other to charge.

Straw Hat moved forward until he was standing next to Shen Jiu. The peasant didn’t even seem to have realized he’d done it; his gaze was focused on the fight. For his own part, Shen Jiu’s eyes affixed themselves mainly to the tall, pale-haired cultivator.

Hm.

He kept track as the demon finally cracked and made the first charge.
It was clear who was greatly outmatched within two moves.

The human didn’t use a lot of spiritual techniques, but he didn’t need to. From the first exchange of blows, Shen Jiu could already tell he was an exemplary swordsman. Judging by the soft ‘ah’ that Straw Hat let out from next to him, he wasn’t the only one. Ji Man and his retainer also watched with interest, along with the third freelancer.

Shen Jiu’s gaze drifted down to observe the familiar footwork in play, and the elegant sweep of the human’s sword as he calmly countered the flurry of attacks sent his way, and let his opponent’s frustration build up. The match was predictable from there, so it wasn’t even all that interesting to watch. The demon tried to call up some technique from his bloodline - Shen Jiu had no idea what - but never got the chance to finish. As soon as the ground started shaking, his opponent moved quickly and efficiently to disarm him and break it.

Then he knocked the demon down.

“Yield,” he requested, pleasantly.

Spitting and hissing resulted, but after a minute, the demonic cultivator complied. He barely shot the rest of them a glance, before hurrying off to lick his wounds. Heading elsewhere into the town, rather than going back to the offices.

The tall cultivator sheathed his weapon, and then bowed to Shen Jiu.

“This humble wanderer fears he did not get to demonstrate many things, save perhaps for his opponent’s weakness,” he said, apologetically.

Lifting a hand, Shen Jiu waved the matter off.

“It’s fine. I didn’t really need an exhibition. If anyone can’t handle the job, I'll just send them away,” he replied, looking at the man’s ‘forgettable’ face once again. Irritation bloomed in his chest. “What’s your name?”

There was a conspicuously long pause.
“Ah…” the tall cultivator said. “Yue… Qi…”

Shen Jiu waited.

The man cleared his throat.

“This one is called Yue Qi,” he repeated, more clearly.

…Right.

Shen Jiu mentally added ‘terrible at all forms of deception’ to the list of things he’d managed to learn about Yue Qingyuan, before unhooking a fan from his belt, and batting away some of the dust that he had been kicked into the air by the fight. He glanced at the other freelancers.

“And you two?” he asked.

Straw Hat nodded politely.

“Xie Lian,” he introduced.

“Eh, just call me ‘Auntie’ or something,” the other instructed, with a shrug. “It’s better not to leave names lying around this place. Causes trouble, sometimes.”

Shen Jiu supposed it didn’t matter. He nodded in acceptance, while ‘Yue Qi’ looked very much like he wished he’d thought of such an answer himself. Or probably literally anything other than his name but shorter. Of course, there were now many issues to address, but it wasn’t really the time to do so. Instead, with that upstart demon dealt with, they could start by heading back inside and signing the necessary contracts for hiring on the freelancers. There was some bartering. He let Ji Man handle most of it, and spent his own time silently looking over Yue Qingyuan’s body, until the other man seemed to be getting a bit self-conscious of the direction of his gaze.

The lord didn't have a bad figure by any means, but Shen Jiu was actually trying to figure out
where he’d stashed the charm he was using to conceal his facial features. He was pretty sure he’d just put it on a cord and shoved it under his collar. Yes, there was a telltale distortion in his clothing, as when something was beneath the fabric. Making it rest a little unevenly.

That figured out, Shen Jiu only had to decide if he was going to let this farce continue, or rip open Yue Qingyuan’s shirt and demand some answers.

Following that train of thought led his mind to some inconvenient places.

Shen Jiu stopped staring at Yue Qingyuan’s chest, and decided not to just dramatically address things right away. Maybe the man would approach him on his own. He had to have a reason for... this, right? It was too much of a coincidence to just think that he wandered around the borderlands in disguise as a hobby or something. Maybe he’d come to spy on Shen Jiu’s activities? See what he was like outside of official sphere? Actually, that was almost clever. Perhaps he suspected Shen Jiu of practicing inappropriate forms of cultivation, or entertaining a secret lover, or plotting the downfall of the current dynasty.

Only one of those was slightly true, which was probably why the notion felt so unpleasant to him. What had he done to merit this kind of suspicion?

Actually, it was pretty rich for Yue Qingyuan just to turn up and start spying on him, as if Shen Jiu had given him some reason to be suspicious. Considering that the man hardly ever actually spoke to him, when would he have even had the opportunity to deceive him? Or maybe it was just Shen Jiu’s background itself that was making him cautious. After all, he was part of Lord Luo’s household, and his master was the man’s ex-husband.

In fact…

Could it be that the man here because of those things? He’d spoke with Shen Qingqiu and still hadn’t stopped sending gifts, so… it was probably just that he was being careful? Making sure that someone with a vendetta against him wasn’t putting Shen Jiu up to accepting his suit, or planning something disastrous? Or was it the reverse? Was Yue Qingyuan, all this time, looking to take some kind of action against Lord Luo and Shen Qingqiu? Looking to use Shen Jiu to do it?

Was that why he gave all the signs of pursuing something, but yet maintained this strange distance? And thought he could pull a fast one over some ‘naive’ young cultivator…?

Shen Jiu stole another glance at the man as business concluded, and ‘Yue Qi’ admitted that he’d be
staying at the same inn that their party was using. That might be more suspicious, except that there was only the one place in the village. 'Auntie' and Xie Lian were staying at the offices.

“We’ll leave in the morning,” Shen Jiu decided, tone cold and aloof.

He wondered if Yue Qingyuan would seek him out once they were settling down for the night.

If the lord thought his suspicious little game was just going to pass without incident, he would have to think again.

Chapter End Notes

For those who might not know, Ji Man is from The Dreamer in the Spring Boudoir! She's not a demon in that, but I mean... it kind of... fit? ^^;

This current segment, I'm not sure how long it's going to be, so it might be interspersed with other extras while it all gets hashed out. So keep an eye on the chapter titles! And as always thanks for all the comments and support, it's amazing! <3
The first time Mu Qingfang saw Liu Qingge was on the day of the young man's wedding to Yue Qingyuan.

Liu Qingge had cut a striking figure in his beautiful red dress. The celebrations were lavish and, given the good reputations of the couple, well-meant. Mu Qingfang wished he could have appreciated the day for its joys, but he found himself a more subdued spectator than most. He had attended Yue Qingyuan’s first wedding, as well. He had worked at Shen Qingqiu’s bedside through several harrowing ordeals, including six poisonings, the aftermath of a demonic abduction, and two near-drownings. The Yue estate was a beautiful place, and Liu Qingge was not an abusive or ill-tempered man. But Mu Qingfang couldn’t help but wonder how long it would be before he was called to attend Liu Qingge's bedside. Seeing the stiffness and uncertainty of the newlywed's body language, and the rigid, hate-filled expression on Shen Qingqiu’s face, he could not imagine that it would take very long at all for Lord Yue to turn up at his doorstep.

In the end, his prediction proved unhappily correct; it wasn't much time at all before Yue Qingyuan was all but beating down his door with an urgent matter.

Liu Qingge had gone into qi deviation.
Mu Qingfang gathered his things and hurried over to the estate, mentally calculating the worst case scenarios - qi deviations could be frustratingly unpredictable, though, and almost impossible to gauge the consequences of until a thorough examination was performed. He had other appointments that day, and only a few that could have been safely pushed back. That also kept his mind busy, as Lord Yue ushered him into the chambers of his new First Husband, but most speculation and distraction was swept away as Mu Qingfang took in the grave state of his patient.

Liu Qingge’s qi deviation was devastating. If it had been any worse, then the damage to his cultivation may have been irreversible. Death could have resulted, too.

Mu Qingfang had built up his skills as a healer and physician. He had studied a wide variety of medicines, and like most people in his profession, was constantly learning and studying more every day, to keep abreast of new discoveries and old mistakes. The complexities of the human body, the wide variety of ailments and injuries, and the potential cures and treatments, were endless. Even the oldest and most experienced healer to have ever lived would not be able to say that it was enough, and he had finished learning. It was one of the most frustrating and one of the most invigorating things about his field - he knew his life, immortal or not, would come to an end long before he ever exhausted the amount of knowledge he could gain.

But, learned skills and knowledge aside, he had first arrived at his profession because he had a talent for it. When his master had taken him on, he had planned to cultivate in more scholarly or martial pursuits. His skill with a sword wasn’t bad, and he had some interest in painting and music as well. It wasn’t until he had been apprenticed for a few months that his ‘knack’ for transferring spiritual energy was discovered. It was a surprise when it happened, because Mu Qingfang was not especially abundant in energy.

Liu Qingge was; his amount of yang energy was exceptional.

But Mu Qingfang, while not seeming to lack in that regard, didn’t radiate energy with noteworthy excess. What he could do, however, was follow and flow with the pathways of other people’s spiritual energy with innate ease. It was, he thought sometimes, a little like how some people could figure out how to swim without being taught, whereas others would struggle and sink unless they had someone more experienced to show them the motions. When it came to healing, Mu Qingfang was a natural swimmer, because he had a gift for understanding how vital pathways worked - and how they might be disrupted.

So it didn’t take him long to discern the damage that had been done to Liu Qingge’s spiritual veins.

His core had not been damaged, but it was a near thing. Further stress would be very bad.
Liu Qingge watched silently as Mu Qingfang gently inspected him. Feeling eyes on him, the healer glanced up, and offered him a reassuring smile.

“You’re resilient,” he complimented. “But that was an ordeal. You’ve suffered considerable damage - luckily, nothing that can’t be fixed with the right healing regimen and medicine. Follow instructions and you should make a complete recovery.”

Liu Qingge’s expression didn’t ease much.

“Am I going to bedridden?” he asked, bluntly.

Honestly, Mu Qingfang appreciated patients who got to the crux of what they feared, or were concerned with. It saved him having to wonder if it would be better to dance around a matter or deliver it indirectly, or just get it over with. Nobles could be especially touchy about such things, and inconvenient when they were displeased.

“For a while,” he confirmed. “You’re obviously not an invalid, you can move around somewhat, but exertion would be very unwise. As long as you’re resting, this is the important point. Sitting for a few hours, standing for a few minutes, lightly walking a short distance, these should all be fine. But running, lifting, jumping, or engaging in any strenuous activities - whether in bed or not - will set back your healing, and possibly even trigger another deviation. The moment you feel tired, you must stop whatever you’re doing and lie down, and you mustn’t forgo any food or sleep.”

He glanced at Yue Qingyuan. The lord inclined his head in understanding. On that end, Mu Qingfang wasn’t worried. Lord Yue was a complicated man, and not always wise, but he wasn’t the type to endanger his husband by imposing upon him with his urges.

Liu Qingge didn’t look happy with this verdict, of course.

“If I don’t exert myself, I’ll get out of practice,” he protested.

“Mm, well - if you do exert yourself, and die or suffer qi deviation again, you will experience far worse setbacks,” Mu Qingfang informed him, plainly. He felt the sudden urge to reach over and pat Liu Qingge’s hand. Honesty was good. It was the patients who nodded along with everything while quietly deciding not to follow his advice that caused him more grief. After a moment, he decided it wasn’t too inappropriate, and went ahead and offered the friendly pat.
Though the younger man was clearly trying to disguise it, his anxiousness was apparent. He wasn't one for being idle, was he?

“I will have a treatment routine for you to adhere to instead of your normal daily regimen,” Mu Qingfang consoled him. “Looking after your health will keep you busy enough.”

Liu Qingge scoffed, but didn't argue any further.

Leaving him to mourn the state of the next few weeks of his life, the healer finally got up, and went to go inform Yue Qingyuan on what would have to be done. There were some remedies which Mu Qingfang would have to brew and send over once they were ready. Fortunately, the applications were simple enough. He took the liberty of prescribing some suitable distractions while he was at it - music, light conversation, reading, and the like. Yue Qingyuan listened to him well, and took note of what he was saying.

Whenever the man’s gaze drifted towards Liu Qingge, there was a certain trace of guilt in his countenance.

“Spousal duties aren’t… that is, with regards to his cultivation… and certain activities…” the lord ventured, as they headed for the path back out of the estate. Those remedies wouldn’t make themselves, after all.

Mu Qingfang raised an eyebrow, and watched the lord stumble his way over asking if he’d fornicated his new husband into a qi deviation.

“Take more care, in the future,” he simply advised, after a few minutes. “Don’t touch him while he’s healing, and don’t do it more than twice a week after he’s recovered. If anything worrying happens, or he experiences any notable distress or lingering discomfort, send for me.”

Yue Qingyuan nodded in understanding.

“Is there anyone else I should see to, while I’m here?” Mu Qingfang inquired. He couldn’t say for certain, but Liu Qingge’s deviation looked violent; it was possible he had lashed out during it. Yue Qingyuan had a bad habit of hiding his own injuries, but he had been watching for signs of pain, and hadn’t seen any.
The lord’s expression was reluctant.

“First Husband attacked some of the servants in his delirium, but no substantial injuries have been reported. I would not trouble Healer Mu to look at bruises, but… it would be good to have someone with more time come and see to them,” he decided. That explained the reluctance, then. Most nobles could and did mistreat their servants to varying degrees, and harsh punishment was not uncommon, but simply rampaging through an estate and attacking the staff… that was not good. Even with the explanation given, it would be a blow to Liu Qingge’s reputation.

As a fairly expensive physician to retain the services of, having Mu Qingfang examine the injured would create a lot of room for exaggeration, even if no one was very badly hurt. But then again, ensuring all injured parties received the best treatment wasn’t only moral, but also reputable as well. These were factors that, unfortunately, he had been forced to reckon with in many situations over the course of his career.

“I’ll send one of my students over, if you had told me from the beginning I could have brought them along from the start,” he said, and only the faint chastisement in his tone served as reproach. Yue Qingyuan had the grace to look abashed.

“Many thanks.”

“Of course. How is Shen Qingqiu?” Mu Qingfang asked, then. The question seemed to take the lord aback.

“Fine,” he said. “He wasn’t hurt.”

“And he hasn’t been showing any signs of an impending deviation of his own?”

The question seemed to double Yue Qingyuan’s surprised. He recovered after a moment, and to his credit, seemed to think it over seriously.

“He has been… stressed,” he admitted, after a long moment.

Mu Qingfang waited a moment. But he really had no right to inquire after private family matters more than he already had, even as a healer. So when Yue Qingyuan fell silent again, he only sighed, and raised a hand to rub at his temples.
“Major upheavals and changes to one’s household can create emotional instability, and make health problems more likely,” he said, as he lowered his hand, and adjusted his grip on his medical bag. “Master Shen has a tricky disposition to begin with, and has suffered multiple health grievances, in addition to his childhood neglect. I remember his troubles after that last incident at the palace. There was a tea that helped him recover. I’ll have my student bring some of it over, along with the medicine for Lord Yue’s First Husband. In fact, I’ll send twice the usual allotment - Lord Yue himself should drink some, too.”

Yue Qingyuan inclined his head gratefully.

“Again, many thanks,” he said. “It is a relief to know we can always count on Healer Mu.”

“I remember when your father was the lord of this estate,” Mu Qingfang replied, obviously startling the current Lord Yue with the mention. “Homes should be harmonious places. As an outsider, I know I have no place to mention anything. But as someone who has known this Lord Yue for years, I hope he will not mind me saying that the atmosphere in his home is not good for healing at this time. It is too reminiscent of what it used to be. Please take care with the situation. Many aspects of a patient’s recovery from unpleasant experiences are dependent upon their surroundings.”

Lord Yue hesitated. For a moment, Mu Qingfang thought he might be rebuked for crossing a line. But then his old friend just let out a gusty breath, and nodded in understanding.

“Knowing Healer Mu only speaks from a place of genuine concern, how could I ever resent his advice?” the man replied.

“Admittedly, the advice would be more useful if this healer could simply prescribe a few simple instructions on resolving it,” he conceded, for his own part. After all, it was one thing to say that a problem should be fixed, and another to know where to begin. Trying to make suggestions on that front would absolutely cross a line, however. So in the end Mu Qingfang could only leave it be, and head back to his own home with the lingering feeling that it would not take long for Yue Qingyuan to call upon his services again.

He sent medicines and tea along with one of his apprentices, before he had to hurry off to his next appointment, to check on Noble Consort Wen in the wake of her latest miscarriage. Then it was off to a consultation with a few other physicians on a sickness in one of the outlying cities, and the rest of his day was a bustle of activity fit to push the troubles of the Yue estate out of his mind.
The atmosphere in Yue Qingyuan’s home did not improve.

The next time Mu Qingfang saw Liu Qingge, it was after his harrowing ordeal at the hands of several demonic kidnappers. This time, at least, Liu Qingge was still standing, but Yue Qingyuan had suffered some substantial injuries from arrow wounds. Shen Qingqiu was reacting as he ever did to his lord’s injuries - trying to hide him away and hissing like an irate cat at anyone who got too close - but with Liu Qingge worried and confrontational as well, Mu Qingfang was startled to arrive on the scene to find several pieces of furniture broken, and the husbands literally moments away from exchanging blows.

“This is unseemly behaviour on all fronts,” Mu Qingfang said, trying to contain his alarm. Liu Qingge was still dressed in bloodied clothes. His apprentice, that Yang boy, had been beside himself when he had hurried over - and also worried that Mu Qingfang wouldn’t come without more gracious summons, too, but emergencies were emergencies.

“If you two are going to brawl, then I will leave and you can find a physician who is willing to put up with your conduct,” he added.

It was an empty threat. But few people actually knew that. Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge certainly did not; despite the lingering tension in the air, they backed down, and Mu Qingfang was able to convince them both to retreat to their courtyards so he could have the space to attend to Yue Qingyuan. He had brought two of his apprentices along for the matter, and was very glad - one he sent to go examine Liu Qingge, while the other assisted him with Yue Qingyuan.

The arrows had been poisoned. There was no fever, thankfully, but the poison was causing immobility and pain, and wasn’t a type which Mu Qingfang was immediately familiar with. He could eliminate most of the demonic energy, but he would need to perform some tests before he could be sure of an antidote. Treating the injuries themselves was also a challenge, since Yue Qingyuan had been hit from both the front and the back. Coming and going, and in his side as well. There was no good way for the man to rest; he had to stay sitting upright, despite his obvious exhaustion, so that Mu Qingfang could clean and stitch the deep, bloody openings.
There was a bite mark on his shoulder that was concerning too. Demon bites were especially liable to latent poisons and infections. He periodically checked Yue Qingyuan’s pupils as he worked, looking for any telltale lights that might indicate some of the worse afflictions from demon altercations.

“Shifu, Shifu!” he heard his second apprentice urgently calling, as he was bandaging up the last of the arrow wounds. Indicating for his other assistant to take over, he hurried to answer.

“Liu Qingge?” he guessed, grabbing up his bag.

His second apprentice nodded hastily.

“He’s showing signs of possession, Shifu, we had to restrain him!”

Dammit.

Mu Qingfang took a calming breath, and forced himself to wait just long enough to pass some hurried instructions to his apprentice.

“I need you to go and fetch the demon repelling charms from the black box in the work kitchen back home. Fly straight there and straight back, don’t stop for anything,” he instructed.

“Yes, Shifu! Right away!”

Given the nature of the situation, Mu Qingfang had brought several items of that nature with him already; but if something stronger was required, it was best to send for it in advance. As his apprentice jumped onto his sword to hurry away, he broke out into a run and headed straight for the First Husband’s courtyard.

There were no signs of struggle or conflict when he got there. That could either be very good or very bad. Mu Qingfang wasted no time in heading inside to find out. Liu Qingge’s apprentices were gathered at his bedside, anxiousness obvious in their expressions, while their master had gone deathly still and pallid. Reaching out, Mu Qingfang took Liu Qingge’s wrist. The moment he made contact, the younger man’s eyes flew open, and he renewed his struggles.
Whatever had been done to try and let something possess him, it wasn’t effective enough to entirely subdue his spirit, however. The struggles were uncoordinated and sloppy. In a fair fight, Mu Qingfang had no doubt that a combat specialist like Liu Qingge, with so much skill and power at his disposal, would be able to take him out. But this was not a competition match, and in matters of life and death, formalities were easily overlooked - Mu Qingfang struck several pressure points with deft, sharp jabs, and rendered Liu Qingge immobile.

Dark eyes narrowed at him.

“Release this person,” Liu Qingge demanded, in a voice with an unnerving echo.

“Isn’t that what I should be saying?” Mu Qingfang countered, narrowing his own eyes in return. He was close enough to detect the resentful energy stirring around his patient, then. The nature of the situation became more clear - it was a ghost that had been made to possess Liu Qingge. Not a demon spirit, but a dead human. That wasn’t too much of a surprise, actually; few demons ever had an interest in possessing human bodies, not even those of powerful cultivators. Mu Qingfang wasn’t entirely certain why, but his own shifu had dealt with a rare case of actual demonic possession, and had spoken on the matter back when Mu Qingfang was still an apprentice; barely twelve, at the time. It had been one of the most harrowing moments of his young life, so he had never forgotten the details.

The motivation for Liu Qingge’s kidnappers was probably to have a more amenable spirit in a powerful form; Liu Qingge was not the type to be easily subdued. He would have undoubtedly tried to break free, more than once, and even forced marriage would have been unlikely to break him. If his abductors wanted to keep him as a trophy, then making some deal with a ghost to replace his unsuitable spirit would have been… an approach, Mu Qingfang supposed.

Of course, it could also have just happened incidentally. He had no idea what route Yue Qingyuan had taken in bringing his husband home. Had they passed through the Ghost City? Been waylaid by any processions? It wasn’t just intellectual curiosity spurring on his thoughts - the motive for the possession would yield clues on the manner in which it had been achieved. Knowing that would make it much easier to figure out how to expel the unwanted spirit, if it proved too resistant to the direct method.

“Healer Mu, this one is not possessed. It is a mistake,” Liu Qingge tried to tell him. “That jealous Second Husband, he has set things up to torment me…”

Grabbing a limp arm, Mu Qingfang checked Liu Qingge’s pulse, and his physical injuries. Cracked ribs, those were probably hurting. He clucked his tongue and shushed the spirit trying to talk
through the young man.

“It’s better not to waste breath trying to deceive me,” he said.

“Healer Mu, the deception is not mine!”

“Oh of course it is,” Mu Qingfang refuted, checking Liu Qingge’s pupils and frowning at the dim, unsettling light he could see, deep inside the darkness of them. At least it wasn’t red. Small mercies. “Shen Qingqiu is a tyrannical, paranoid, and spiteful man, but he is not a demonic cultivator. Even if Liu Qingge suspects he might be. The signs of possession are too thorough, so the only way to ‘fake’ something like this would be to actually place another spirit within Liu Qingge’s body - which is not something a righteous cultivator could do.”

‘Liu Qingge’ made some unpleasant noises at that, but he couldn’t really struggle, not with his mobility so thoroughly impeded.

“Mercy,” the ghost tried, then. “Mercy, healer. Am I not a human soul as well? If you banish me, you’ll tear me apart!”

Mu Qingfang looked at the lights in Liu Qingge’s eyes.

He raised a brow.

“Do you imagine your humanity gives you some credit here?” he asked. “Humans become monsters all the time. Liu Qingge is my patient. You, on the other hand, are the disease afflicting him.”

Reaching out a hand, Mu Qingfang gently took hold of Liu Qingge’s face, to ensure the ghost possessing him could not look away, or mistake his sincerity.

“You are not my concern. If I have to, I will break your soul into a thousand tiny pieces, and personally draw each one out to scatter into a nothingness that you will never again reincarnate from. Do not doubt my conviction, nor my utter indifference to the fate of any parasite. Human, demon, or otherwise, it makes no difference to me - a sickness must be cured.”
Liu Qingge’s body trembled.

Mu Qingfang was hoping, but was still a little surprised when there was a sudden *whoosh,* and the surge of resentful energy around Liu Qingge’s body projected outwards. The spirit possessing him hurried to vacate his body of its own accord. Mu Qingfang wasn’t so startled that he neglected to act in time, and to his credit, Yang Yixuan also reacted in a hurry; moving to help contain the spirit, and trap it in a qiankun pouch.

The ghost was a little more powerful than expected, but it still only took a few minutes to subdue it. Mu Qingfang let the Yang boy seal the pouch, while he hurried to inspect Liu Qingge again.

Possession was a damaging and draining affliction, often very bad for one’s spiritual core. Once more, it was a lucky thing that Liu Qingge was so abundant in energy - it gave him a lot of metaphorical buffer room for such terrible trespasses. Mu Qingfang began transferring a small amount of spiritual energy, careful not to disrupt his equilibrium by being too invasive, as the man’s own spirit regained itself and his senses gradually returned.

For a moment, his expression was terribly blank. Then he blinked, and looked at Mu Qingfang.

Almost imperceptibly, the tension in his frame relaxed.

“Healer Mu,” he acknowledged.

“Master Liu,” Mu Qingfang acknowledged back. “It seems you brought along an unwelcome passenger.”

Liu Qingge closed his eyes, and let out a long breath through his nose. His brow furrowed, betraying frustration.

“Weak,” he muttered at himself.

Mu Qingfang clucked his tongue.

“You resisted possession and survived an ordeal in the demonic realm,” he scolded. “While still
recovering from a qi deviation, no less. What does Master Liu count as ‘strength’, I wonder?”

Liu Qingge frowned, and then scoffed quietly. But he didn’t answer the question, or berate himself out loud again. Mu Qingfang wasn’t naive enough to think he couldn’t still be lambasting himself with a scathing internal litany, but there wasn’t much he could do about that, in the end. He found himself observing his patient very carefully as he took over treating his remaining injuries.

Truth be told, he knew Liu Qingge more by reputation than by any extensive interactions between the two of them. And yet, the younger man was the type to leave a distinct impression on people. He had the sort of personality that was easily gleaned from the first meeting - proud, stubborn, single-minded, even rough at the edges, without being at all bad. But, no person was ever as simple a single layer.

Every time Mu Qingfang saw Liu Qingge, it seemed that the man was more hurt and more rattled than the last. From the very start, at his wedding day, something about him spoke of a certain unease with his surroundings.

It reminded Mu Qingfang of the times when large birds flew inside of people’s houses. How, even if there was nothing wrong with the birds, their fragility but also their capacity for violence seemed many times magnified. Liu Qingge existed in a space that was not designed in accordance with his nature. The longer he stayed in it, the worse his situation would become.

The situation bothered Mu Qingfang. It wasn’t even unique, or something he hadn’t seen before many times. Maybe that was why he couldn’t put it entirely out of his thoughts. He was a healer. Part of his job was to bear witness to the many ways in which people died, even when he couldn’t prevent those deaths.

Part of it was to try and help, no matter the low chances of success.

“Past is past,” Mu Qingfang said, gently patting Liu Qingge’s shoulder. “Done is done. Now you need to recover from it. I would recommend you focus on rebuilding your strength, rather than on berating yourself for having limits.”

Liu Qingge gave him an uncertain glance.

“Is that your professional opinion?” the man asked, gruffly.
Mu Qingfang chuckled.

A wry sense of humour - how unexpectedly charming.

“It is,” he said, with another shoulder pat. He kept the gesture gentle, in deference to the man’s injuries. “Your lord is also blaming himself.”

As if on cue, then, Yue Qingyuan came rushing into the room. Insofar as the man could rush with several still-healing arrow wounds in his torso. Mu Qingfang looked at him reproachfully, and with instincts honed by years of being his patient, Lord Yue slowed down and tread more softly into his First Husband’s bedchamber.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Nothing we couldn’t resolve,” Mu Qingfang assured him, before sighing, and getting up to check the lord for ripped stitches.

~

Bodies were an inevitable part of a healer’s line of work. Live bodies, dead bodies, young bodies, old bodies. Immortal bodies, demon bodies, sickly bodies, injured bodies, pregnant bodies. Tiny stillborn babes and fresh rotting corpses and old, weathered skeletons. Even animal bodies were part of the process, given the many animal parts which could be turned into medicine, and spirit beasts which sometimes bonded with cultivators or became complex problems of their own.

Respect for the machinery of life was not only a matter of morality or courtesy, but also of safety, too. Disrespecting or mistreating a body’s remains could give rise to ghosts or resentful energy. Death always radiated outwards. In the best cases, the worst result was grief; the ripples of loss passing through those who were closest to the person who died. But in the worst cases, a soul warped and distorted upon its death, and the ripples became crashing waves of resentment and
destruction. Danger could manifest in any number of ways. Death would become a beast that sought to reproduce itself, over and over, to spread itself to new targets and become virulent. A plague unto itself.

In Mu Qingfang’s opinion, healers who sullied their profession we guilty of spreading these kinds of plagues - and leaving the rest of them to clean up the resulting mess.

It was another long day related to such matters, when he found his steps veering away from his own home and instead heading down the city road that would lead to his parents’. His limbs felt heavy. His energy reserves were low. Yesterday, he had heard about one of the Ming family wives going into labour. By evening, he had heard of how the birth had ended in tragedy - mother and child both lost. The next morning, he had been urgently summoned by the Lady of the second branch, and arrived to find the midwife’s body parts strewn throughout the estate’s main courtyard, while the family’s second husband looked pale and guilty. Hunted, as jagged claw marks bled across his limbs.

Mu Qingfang had not required a decade of experience in his field to put the signs together. Power plays, rivalries, a mother and innocent baby killed; a healer suffering the cost of accepting blood-soaked bribes, and the instigator dreading the consequences of inadvertently transforming a mortal nemesis into an undead foe.

He had been sorely tempted to turn and walk back out, to tell them to call upon a cultivator to deal with the restless dead, and a different physician to close up the murderer’s wounds.

But that would have risked seeing the situation worsen. So instead, Mu Qingfang tended to the second husband, and captured the ghost. That would have been the end of things - a long morning, but not the worst he might see - except that the second husband became convinced that Mu Qingfang would send the ghost to Gusu, to let some of their cultivators commune with the dead wife and find out how to set her spirit at ease. Ghosts didn’t lie. Undoubtedly, the second husband’s crimes would have been revealed, and his own fate grim.

So instead, one of the man’s servants had tried to steal the pouch where he had sealed the ghost.

It was careless of him to leave it where he had, he could concede. He should have put it on his belt, and not the table, but he had been concerned that the stillborn child might have corrupted as well, and had been preoccupied with trying to summon it. There were no good, streamlined ways of simply summoning the dead; even demonic techniques centered more around corrupting the dead into vengeful ghosts, rather than calling a particular one forward. There were ways to try, though. All of them took a great deal of focus and concentration. The best involved musical instruments, but Mu Qingfang had given up his efforts at learning to play anything years ago, and wouldn’t have known the techniques in the first place.
When the second husband’s servant tried to steal the ghost he’d sealed away, she accidentally unleashed it instead.

Not a minute later, she was dead, and before Mu Qingfang could recapture the furious spirit, the family’s second husband was cut open, too. Bowels left to spill out as his stomach acid burned into his organs. It was a terrible way to die.

Mu Qingfang had seen it before, but it didn’t always make it easier. It had been a long time since he had struggled, but that day he had to fight certain visceral reactions in order to maintain his calm. It was a challenge to resist the urge to grin, to bare sharp teeth, to laugh at the murderer where he lay choking on the ground and reach down and grab the writhing intestines, or drive his foot into the open stomach wound, and ask the dying human how he liked the taste of such medicine. How it felt to reap what he had sowed.

It was exhausting and demoralizing, pulling his scattered thoughts back in order so he could react properly, and try to close the wound and mend the slashed stomach instead. Futile as well, in the end.

By the time it was all done and the bodies had been dealt with, the scent of blood had been thick, and his nerves were shaken. Most of the Ming household was traumatized. It was a somber atmosphere that he had left behind, and the thought of returning to his own small home wasn’t appealing. So instead, he kept going, until the street was dark and his footsteps had led him to the gate of his family home.

Mu Qingfang had taken over his shifu’s house, after her death. It was better for his work. His family was wonderful, but they tended to get underfoot and he needed more space and quiet to properly pursue his work. Luckily, though, his childhood home wasn’t far away. He had cleaned up before leaving the Ming residence, but there was still some blood on his clothing; there had been too much of it to avoid.

The large cat which greeted him at the gate only sniffed at him worriedly for a moment.

“Baba, pet cats aren’t that big,” he whispered in gentle chastisement. Was his father really walking around freely in such a shape these days? He was going to get careless, that ‘cat’ form was nearly up to Mu Qingfang’s knees.

As usual, his father didn’t bother to answer him, but instead waited until he was inside the gate
before winding around his legs and nudging the backs of his knees forward. Sniffing and pressing against him, before running off ahead. It was no surprise, then, that when Mu Qingfang finally got inside, his mother was already waiting for him.

“Little Kitten, what happened? Was it just business? Your father says it’s only human blood, so there were no demons, right?”

He hastened to reassure her.

“Right, right, it was just a long day at work,” he said. “I was closer to here when I finished, so I thought I’d trouble my family a little instead of walking any further in messy clothes.”

“Trouble? What trouble? It’s been weeks since you visited, I was on the verge of sending your sisters to drag you over,” his mother assured him. Her expression was soft, voice gentle; Mu Qingfang took after her in looks, though his figure wasn’t as round. His mother wasn’t very old, really, but she wasn’t a cultivator either. Age showed on her features, here and there; reminding him of the precious fragility of human life, even as he took comfort in the familiar security of her presence. There had been a time when Mu Qingfang was the stickiest child imaginable, always glued to his mother’s skirt or his father’s shoulders.

His moving out had worried her a lot. It probably still did.

“I’ll heat you a bath,” she announced. He shook his head.

“Mama, no, don’t go to such trouble, I can fetch the water and things myself. Didn’t I tell you not to lift so much? Your shoulder-”

“Is fine! If it hurts I’ll stop, I already promised I would! Do I have to promise again every time? Are you calling your mother a liar?”

“Why are you arguing to haul heavy water buckets, if I say I can handle it then just let me,” Mu Qingfang countered.

His mother made a face at him.
“You’re not too old that I won’t still look after you,” she insisted. “As if filling a bath is such a big deal, do you know how many years I spent carrying your whole self around? I hardly put you down until you were five years old! I’ve still got the muscles!”

So saying, she patted a bicep demonstrably. Mu Qingfang let out a helpless sigh.

“I’m not saying you’re weak, I’m just saying-”

“I’ll fill the bath.”

His father spoke as he walked by, footsteps silent even though he was tall enough that he stood head and shoulders over Mu Qingfang. His voice was a simple, deep rumble, that wouldn’t have sounded affectionate to anyone who didn’t know him; let alone fondly exasperated with his family’s ‘arguments’. Having just changed shape, he was only using a simple cloth to cover himself.

“Hey, hey, hey,” his mother protested. “I said I would do it! Me! My job!”

Her complaint didn’t earn a response. Mu Qingfang’s father just headed off to go fetch the water, scarcely concerned with his nudity.

“Put clothes on or you’ll upset the neighbours,” he said.

“The neighbours have already seen it all, there’s no mystery left,” his mother replied, dismissively. “Well fine, let me get you some food then. Did you eat today?”

Mu Qingfang hesitated a fraction too long.

“You didn’t.”

“Mama, I’ve been able to practice inedia for years-”

"No inedia!” his mother insisted, stubbornly. “It’s not good for you!”
“The whole point is that it’s fine…”

“It’s not fine, you need to look after yourself too. How can you tell others to do that with a straight face if you don’t even eat? I should your tell your grandmother-”

“Do not tell Grandmother!”

Mu Qingfang did not need to be subjected to his grandmother’s tearful admonishments. He had no resistance to them. The last time she’d found out he wasn’t eating, he’d felt so guilty he’d come back home every day for a month and neglected his research, having dinner with her just so she’d be satisfied and stop looking so woebegone.

His grandmother was small, like his mother and himself, but also old and frail. She wasn’t stern and she never raised her voice, but when something she didn’t like happened, her mouth would waver and her eyes would tear up, and whoever was responsible would feel like they were bullying a sweet little old lady. It was horrible. The only good thing was that, because of this, it was rare for his mother to really follow through on her threats to rat him out. Otherwise, she would have to see the crying, too.

“Alright, I won’t tell grandmother if you come and eat now,” his mother said, and tugged him along to sit and be fussed over.

Mu Qingfang sighed, but in reality, it felt good.

He let his mother get him some food and tut over his state. When his grandmother turned up, she didn’t say anything about him not eating; so Mu Qingfang only had to get his face held and be lightly scolded for working too hard. His sisters lived at home as well. They were big and tall, like his father, and crushed him between them as they called him ‘Little Kitten’ and didn’t say anything about the blood on his clothes. Not that they had much room to criticize. Unlike him, they took after their father in more than just stature. Beautiful and beguiling, their talents lay on the demonic end of the spectrum; whereas Mu Qingfang had only inherited a few of those traits, and learned cultivation from a human master instead.

His sisters hunted, sometimes. They were discreet about it, so he didn’t worry too much - and they picked good targets, so he didn’t worry too much on that end, either. They also only did it every so often. They liked living in the capital, but if anyone found out about their true natures, that would become impossible. As demons went, his family wasn’t powerful. If they had to run to a place like
the borderlands, it would be much harder to make a living - and it would end Mu Qingfang’s career, since he would hardly let them go alone.

After his sisters had finished harassing him, his father came to tell him that his bath was ready.

He did so by lowering a big, warm hand to the top of his head, and then patting him twice.

“Go get clean,” he said.

Mu Qingfang let out a breath and tilted his head up, and savored the feeling of comfort for a moment. Then he went to go take his bath.

The family’s wooden tub was big enough to accommodate his father and sisters, and therefore more than large enough for Mu Qingfang to have a good bath. He took off his bloodstained clothes and sank into the hot water with a sigh, and tried not to think about the messy thing that had happened to the Ming family’s second husband, or his reflexive response to it.

When he had been young, his shifu had explained to him that familiarity could only go so far for some people. Visceral responses still happened. He remembered that conversation - it was after he had watched a particularly unpleasant noblewoman’s wounds get stitched up, and had felt so gripped with instinctive distaste at the sight that he’d had to leave the room, lest he do something terrible. Afterwards he’d felt deeply ashamed, but his shifu had just sighed and patted his shoulder, and admitted that sometimes she still struggled through disgust and revulsion in order to perform necessary tasks, too.

Of course, Shifu had been human, so in her case, the revulsion was more for the sight of a damaged body or unpleasant bodily fluids, than a reflexive distaste for helping those who her instincts might classify as ‘enemies’. But the same theory still applied. Either way, it was a visceral response. Either way, it was inappropriate for a healer, whose duty was to focus on healing.

He thought about it, reminding himself of his shifu and her teachings, before he realized he had dried blood in his hair.

Times like these, he wished he’d inherited Baba’s sense of smell, along with his killer instinct; he’d have known right away that there was a spot he’d missed, if he had that. Cleanliness was vital for a healer. Physicians came into contact with many ill people, and even if Mu Qingfang himself couldn’t easily sicken, he could contaminate medicine or pass unclean things to his patients, and
make them worse instead of better. His shifu would have taken him to task for not washing up as soon as he could, actually.

…He missed his shifu. She was a good healer and an even better protector, and he’d never been certain if she figured out his background or not. Either way, she had taught him well, and left him with a very grand legacy to live up to. Being home made him feel small again, and a little overwhelmed by the weight of everything he did all day. People were complicated. Healing was complicated. Life, death, and ethics all hung in the balance. It was so easy to break things, to let one death become many, to undo the complicated instrument of a living body with just a sharp object or the wrong food. So much more challenging to try and put it back together.

Sometimes too challenging.

He washed and brooded until the water went cold.

Going to sleep with wet hair wouldn’t be good, so he did his best to dry it, and then stayed up to let it finish as he wandered around the quiet rooms of his family home. Just letting his gaze linger on familiar objects, and the sense of simplicity.

“Who died?”

His eldest sister’s voice drifted over to him. He turned and found her leaning against a wall behind him, arms folded, expression concerned.

“Someone you knew?” she pressed.

Mu Qingfang sighed.

“No,” he said. “A woman and her baby. Some servants, and the man who arranged the whole tragedy.”

“Good riddance to that last person, then,” his sister said.

He hummed noncommittally.
“I had a struggle,” he admitted. “When I saw his injuries. I wanted to make them worse, instead of better.”

His sister regarded him for a moment.

Then she chuckled.

“I think that’s normal,” she said.

“Of course you do,” he replied, with a sidelong look. His tone wasn’t very reproachful.

“Yes, yes, the most monster-y one in the family, that’s me,” she agreed.

“I never said that. You’re not a monster,” Mu Qingfang insisted, with more seriousness. His sister just waved him off.

“I didn’t mean it that way, don’t worry,” she assured him. “But truly, do you think that many people wouldn’t be angry about something like that? Wouldn’t want to punish someone for it?”

He went quiet.

After a minute, his sister sighed.

“It’s been awhile since this sort of thing bothered you. Or did you just stop talking about it?”

“No. It’s been awhile,” he confirmed. “I thought I had a better handle on it.”

“Well, more of your patients are people you know, now,” his sister reasoned. “It’s easier to forgive someone when you know their troubles. Or at least, to feel conflicted about just killing them on the spot.”
“And here I thought my control had improved,” he quipped, wryly. His sister walked over and ruffled his damp hair affectionately.

“Don’t be arrogant,” she scolded. “Instincts are instincts. Or did you forget? We’re not animals, we still decide how to act and what to do with them. They don’t say anything about us, just about the situation. Your instincts said a man was bad and deserved to die. So what? Were they wrong? Did you draw your flashy cultivator sword and kill him?”

Mu Qingfang sighed, and suddenly felt thirteen years old and awkward again.

He was a little grateful for it.

“No,” he said. “Of course not.”

“Right. You swallowed it back and tried to fix him, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“There you go. Good job, baby brother. You leave the assassinations to Jie-jie and don’t worry about a few bad thoughts now and then,” his sister insisted, even going so far as to playfully pinch his cheek. Mu Qingfang knew resistance was futile, so instead he launched the best defense against her harassment - he just gave her a put-upon look and endured it until she gave up.

“I am a grown man,” he reminded her.

She squished both sides of his face.

“What’s that Little Kitten? Meow Meow?”

“Must you do this? Can’t we just have a normal, mature conversation?”
His older sister mocked the rhythm of his words with meowing sounds until she finally got tired of it. Then she grabbed the towel he had been carrying around under one of his arms, and started drying more of his hair for him instead.

“You are the most embarrassing person I have ever met,” he said, voice muffled through the fabric on his head.

“Thank you,” his eldest sister replied. “Now go to bed, if you still look so tired in the morning no one will let you leave.”

“You don’t have to threaten me, I was just waiting for my hair to dry…”

“Hair’s dry. Go to bed. Unless you want me to braid it?”

Mu Qingfang hesitated, because actually he thought that might not be so bad. Reading his expression, his sister cooed enough to make him almost regret the thought. But then she pulled him under her arm and led him off, and kept her obnoxiousness to a minimum as she twisted his hair into ties that were comfortable for sleeping. He drew the line at letting her tuck him in, but the sound of her laughter lingered even after the lights had been doused, and he had climbed into his old bed.

In the morning, he woke up later than usual. So he wasn’t entirely surprised when his senior apprentice came knocking at the door in the middle of breakfast, first looking harried, then looking relieved as she caught sight of him.

“Shifu! Lord Yue’s First Husband sent for you, he says there’s an urgent matter he needs to discuss!”

Pure dread flooded Mu Qingfang’s entire body.

What had happened now?

He would swear he just resolved another major catastrophe at the Yue estate a week ago! No single client had ever taken up so much of his time over such a short period before. Even at the wedding, when he had anticipated trouble, he never could have predicted the degree or frequency of it. If Yue Qingyuan, Shen Qingqiu, and Liu Qingge weren’t all such accomplished cultivators, he would
have suspected someone of laying several curses on them, in order to get this kind of result. Even considering that, Mu Qingfang had still checked for signs of such things! Several times!

“Again? That unfortunate family,” his mother tutted, which, considering how rarely Mu Qingfang referred to his clients by name when he was at home, probably said something about the frequency of disasters, too.

“I have to go,” he sighed, and murmured several apologies, before finally getting himself out of the door. His apprentice looked nervous, but didn’t seem to know exactly what the issue was - just that it seemed to be of the utmost importance. She had brought his medical bag, thankfully, so they at least didn’t need to stop by his home to retrieve it first, and could head straight to the estate.

They were halfway there before he found a pair of wrapped bean buns in his pocket.

“Grandma,” he sighed. But he gave one to his apprentice, and his stomach let loose a suspicious rumble, ate the other himself.

By the time they reached the Yue estate, he almost felt rested and civilized enough to deal with the probable catastrophe.

The matter wasn’t anything he could have guessed, however.

Mu Qingfang regarded the emperor’s gift to Yue Qingyuan with a great deal of curiosity. He had never seen a Gem of Ensured Fertility before. It was a very strange looking treasure. The descriptive name of ‘gem’ was apt; if he didn’t know any better, he would have taken it for glass or some kind of unfathomably large, faceted stone. It fully looked like something that would belong in the imperial treasury. Mu Qingfang was careful not to touch it as he circled the place made for it in Yue Qingyuan’s chambers, and confirmed that it seemed to be even in size, and unblemished in its exterior.

When he’d finished examining the treasure, he gave Liu Qingge an apologetic glance.

“I fear I have no experience with this particular method of procreation,” he confessed. “But I am certain there are experts at the palace who have dealt with one of these before…”

To his surprise, Liu Qingge shook his head. His expression was resolute. Maybe even a little
“Consult with any experts necessary, but please assist with this matter. Considering recent events... there’s no one else I would trust with this situation,” the younger man beseeched. “Another physician might be susceptible to bribes or have allegiances to Second Husband.”

Mu Qingfang paused, surprised. Not by Liu Qingge’s blunt defamation of Shen Qingqiu - he had never beaten around the bush about their discord. But at the implied level of trust in himself. After all, he had known Shen Qingqiu for far longer than he had known Liu Qingge. He had dutifully attended both men’s health problems, and hadn’t thought he’d given any indication of a preference. Shen Qingqiu was a troublesome person, and his treatment of servants and enemies alike was exactly the sort of behaviour that made Mu Qingfang’s hackles rise. But as his sister had noted, familiarity bred tolerance; even strange sorts of friendships.

It would be difficult to look after someone for more than a decade and not feel anything towards them.

“This is putting a lot of trust in me,” Mu Qingfang observed.

“Healer Mu is reliable,” Liu Qingge said.

The value of a compliment could often be determined by the nature of its source. To be called ‘reliable’ by Liu Qingge, who had lived through a great deal of recent upheaval, and who clearly viewed such traits highly, was… unexpectedly flattering.

Mu Qingfang ducked his head.

“Then, for the sake of Master Liu’s comfort, I will assist to the best of my abilities,” he agreed.

Given the nature of the Gem of Ensured Fertility, its value, and the general instability of the Yue estate, Mu Qingfang wasn’t surprised when Yue Qingyuan offered to retain his full services for the duration of the matter. It was rare for Mu Qingfang to attend to a single patient exclusively. He was generally too expensive for such matters, unless there was some particular situation at the imperial palace. He’d attended to one of the little princesses for a month long fever, for example, but in most cases, people preferred to call upon him for special emergencies and unexpected situations. If the emperor assigned him somewhere, then that was where he had to go, of course - apart from his research, such jobs assured his status.
He had stayed at the Yue estate before, though. Back when he had been young and considered a talented up-and-comer, the emperor had wanted to assign his shifu to attend to the former Lord Yue. But then his shifu had offended the Wen clan leader, and met with an ‘accident’ where several of her research samples infected her with an incurable poison. In the wake of everything, the matter of Lord Yue had remained; and Mu Qingfang had been eager to distract himself with work, and reluctant to spend all of his time at his shifu’s home, with bitterness and memories.

The old Lord Yue was a foul man. It was a challenging job, and in its own way, precisely what he needed; Mu Qingfang’s restraint had been tested to its limits, watching everything that had gone on in that estate. Lord Yue had not been strong in body. An ordinary human who had never achieved the core formation stage of his cultivation. It would have been very easy to slip him just a little thing, a tiny item, and watch him slip away to where he would never do harm again.

Sometimes, he felt proud of himself for persevering. Other times, he regretted it. Was it vanity to prize his own ethics above the actual repercussions of a foul man’s continued existence? He learned then that such matters were not really an issue of affirming one's restraint and carrying on. They were questions that could linger. Repercussions could be so difficult to anticipate. If he had killed the old lord the first time he came across an opportunity to do so, then it was likely the new Lord Yue wouldn’t have ever been discovered or rescued from his life of poverty. Would things be better or worse, in such a situation? Would the ripples that came from the old Lord Yue’s death have been destructive waves instead?

There was no way to know. But there was also no way to say that saving a life was always empirically better than taking one. It was the path Mu Qingfang had chosen, however. Just as his sisters had chosen their own, alternate roads.

Moving temporarily into the Yue estate, he couldn’t help but compare the situation to that of the past. It was depressingly similar. The tense atmosphere remained. Stress was only thinly veiled behind a shallow celebration for the emperor’s blessing. Yue Qingyuan’s calm and noble demeanour showed cracks of exhaustion and anxiety, Liu Qingge was tightly wound, and Shen Qingqiu had apparently locked himself away in protest.

Yue estate was large, and wasn’t hosting many guests while the lord was expecting his firstborn. Mu Qingfang was given a very nice courtyard to stay in. He scarcely saw it, though, since Liu Qingge asked him to come help guard the gem against sabotage, and it was difficult to refuse a man so desperate to protect his unborn child. Not that there was much to do, when it came down to it. Mu Qingfang consulted with more experienced physicians at the palace, when needed, and examined the progress of the infant’s development within the gem with interest. But there were still many hours in the day; so he taught his apprentices and brought his research along with him, mostly doing paperwork and studying some of his colleagues’ more recent writings, that he had yet to catch up on.
He was idling some time with his studies, ever so often glancing curiously at the gem in the middle of the room, when Liu Qingge seemed to succumb to his own capacity for boredom and approached him.

The younger man had been spending a lot of his own time meditating. He seemed to have a suitable disposition for it, but his restlessness whenever he finished was obvious as well.

“What are you reading?” he asked Mu Qingfang, gruffly, as he took a seat next to him.

Mu Qingfang glanced up, and then smiled.

“Well, in this case, to do with the repair of damaged spiritual veins,” Mu Qingfang admitted. Then he leaned closer, and said in a confiding tone of voice: “it’s not very good, actually. Some of the extrapolations seem to be following logically from the initial theory, but that theory is based on an outdated premise that’s been disproved for a few years now.”

Liu Qingge glanced at the booklet.

“Why read it, then?”

Mu Qingfang clicked his tongue.

“Because others might read it and begin incorporating it into their own treatments. Or attempting
to. In the event that a patient is mistreated because of that, knowing what mistakes another physician may have made can be invaluable. But also because I’m going to get one of my apprentices to write a refutation,” he explained. “Obviously, in order to make certain her work is accurate, I need to thoroughly understand what she is rebutting.”

Liu Qingge grunted again in comprehension.

“If the premise was disproved years ago, why are new theories still being based on it?” the man asked.

Mu Qingfang sighed.

“Because knowledge doesn’t spread instantly, of course,” he explained. “Even in the capital, it takes time for theories to become practice, for practice to fail, for theories to be revised, and for everyone to catch up. In the meanwhile, life goes on and healers must work with what we know, to the best of our abilities.”

“Your apprentice should write quickly,” Liu Qingge opined.

Mu Qingfang chuckled.

“Fortunately, she does,” he agreed. “And her calligraphy is nicer than mine.”

The friendly interlude was interrupted, at that point, by one of Liu Qingge’s servants reminding him that it was time for his daily meeting with the estate steward. Mu Qingfang put aside his paperwork, seeing the hesitant look that Liu Qingge shot towards the Gem of Ensured Fertility.

“I think I’ll do another examination, while you’re gone,” he suggested. “And keep a close eye on the little one.”

The line between the younger man’s brows eased, fractionally. He nodded once in acknowledgement, but finally let himself be led from the room.

Mu Qingfang walked quietly over to the magical incubator, and found himself smiling. It was the
first time he had managed to look upon this particular development with something like optimism. The life of the nobility was a fraught existence, but Liu Qingge seemed bound and determined to be a good father. Just so long as his child could be born.

Silently, as he performed and ‘examination’ that was little more than carefully watching the odd clouds of matter within the walls of the gem, he vowed that he would do everything in his power to make certain it would be. This household had been through so much. Maybe a baby really would be the key to calming things down again. Little ones had a way of rearranging priorities, and winning over even hardened hearts.

His thoughts drifted, involuntarily, towards the memory of that second husband who had sabotaged another spouse’s pregnancy.

Liu Qingge was right to be cautious. Mu Qingfang wondered whether Shen Qingqiu could ever really be a danger to the child of Yue Qingyuan. Even if that child wasn’t his own. But he would be vigilant, even so. He’d do his best.

“You do your best, too,” he quietly encouraged the burgeoning life before him.

He had a feeling that when all this was done, the tides would turn for the Yue estate again.

(He was horribly, horribly right.)

~

Shen Qingqiu did not die right away.

It was the dead of night when Mu Qingfang was woken up by urgent knocking, and Yang Yixuan
at his door, telling him to come quickly - telling him that Yue Qingyuan’s runaway husband had been found, not a day after his escape, not a day after being told by his lord to kill himself. Such a strange thing, to be called with fierce urgency to try and save a man who had been slated for death; summoned by the apprentice of that man’s rival, no less.

He didn’t waste any time.

He flew to the estate, through the rain that was pelting down from a dark sky. The surface of his sword went slick with it, but Mu Qingfang knew how to keep his balance just the same. When he arrived, Yang Yixuan wasted no time in leading him to the nearest indoor space. Not Shen Qingqiu’s courtyard - the man had clearly been hurried to the closest available shelter, to get him out of the elements and attend to his injuries.

Mu Qingfang’s steps faltered, when he saw just what those were.

Shen Qingqiu looked as though he had been nearly cleaved in half.

His entire lower body was crimson. There was a diagonal slash wound across his midsection, and then another, almost bisecting him. A normal man would have been long dead from the blood loss and trauma. Shen Qingqiu’s face was waxy white, and only the gurgle of his breaths, the mouthfuls of blood tumbling past his lips, betrayed the fact that he was still clinging to life.

Yue Qingyuan was holding him. Feeding spiritual energy into him with reckless abandon; he was already on the verge of passing out, trying to use his own energy to spare his husband from the inevitable, to keep his body functioning in defiance of its massive physical trauma.

“A-Jiu,” he was saying, “A-Jiu, no, no, no, Qi-ge didn’t mean it, hold on, A-Jiu, I love you, hold on, hold on…”

Mu Qingfang’s throat tightened.

He was an experienced physician. Even knowing that this outcome was a foregone conclusion, he found himself picturing his hands putting all of Shen Qingqiu’s parts back together; stitching the virulent and often unpleasant man whole once more, and somehow mending this disaster.

He gritted his teeth, and rolled up his sleeves.
As long as Shen Qingqiu was still breathing, he could try. Miracles happened, sometimes. He started with the biggest wound, trying to assess the damaged organs. With a word he sent Yang Yixuan back out to fetch his apprentice and more supplies, and then turned to some of the more dangerous remedies he had on hand. The first thing he did, though, was cut off Shen Qingqiu’s nerves at the neck; total numbness. No more pain.

The man still coughed blood, but he turned his head towards Yue Qingyuan.

“Let… go…” he gasped. Or something like it. His voice wasn't clear.

“Just endure it a little while,” the lord replied. “Just endure it for now, A-Jiu, then I’ll let go. Then you can hit me and curse me and refuse me all you want. You can leave, I'll help you find someplace, you can do whatever you wish.”

There was a time limit. Mu Qingfang’s throat was still tight, as he noted how bad Yue Qingyuan’s own condition was becoming. The man was strong, but he’d suffered two qi deviations in a short time, and his situation was always compromised by Xuan Su. He had probably already damaged his cultivation doing this. They probably had a few minutes at most before he wouldn’t be able to keep it up any further, and then there would be nothing to stop the blood and organs from spilling entirely out of Shen Qingqiu’s body, unless Mu Qingfang worked fast enough.

He didn’t delay. Quick hands were steadier anyway.

It didn’t matter.

Barely a minute, maybe two, and Shen Qingqiu’s time ran out.

“A-Jiu,” Yue Qingyuan called. “No, no, no, no… no please, no… I can’t… you can’t… don’t leave!”

Mu Qingfang tried to revive him. He truly did. He had an opening, he reached into his chest and tried to use a small amount of energy to make the man’s heart beat again, to get something, some spark, some lingering life he could work with…
It was no good.

Yue Qingyuan was as cleaved in spirit as his husband had been in body. Mu Qingfang’s arms were bloody as he watched him clutch Shen Qingqiu’s remains and howl like a dying wolf.

*I went to their wedding*, he couldn’t help but think. Shocked, and surprised to find himself so.

He had never liked Shen Qingqiu, socially.

Such a virulent man.

There was no satisfaction in watching him die.

Mu Qingfang tore his gaze away. He knew the body had to be tended to, that Yue Qingyuan needed to be as well, but he knew that until those howls were silent, there would be nothing for it. He turned, panting from exertion - had he really tried to treat those wounds? - and came up short again as he saw Liu Qingge.

The man was standing in a corner of the room. Staring.

His front was absolutely covered in blood.

Mu Qingfang swallowed. Shen Qingqiu had tried to escape, and been caught by someone who fought with him. Those wounds were inflicted by a sword. Someone very strong must have been wielding it. Someone either skilled or lucky, too, in order to get past the cultivator’s guard.

Had Liu Qingge…?

The younger man met his gaze.

As if reading his thoughts, he hung his head. The look in his eyes seemed… conflicted.
“Luo Binghe caught him,” he said, quietly. Underneath the sounds of Yue Qingyuan’s mourning. “I… that boy, he seemed… maddened. I saw him strike… he was so fast…”

Luo Binghe?

Shen Qingqiu’s mistreated apprentice? The one who had betrayed his confidence, possibly even set him up when Liu Qingge’s unborn child was destroyed?

“I don’t think he even meant to kill him,” Liu Qingge murmured.

Suspicion formed in the back of Mu Qingfang’s thoughts. How old was Luo Binghe? Just a young teen, wasn’t he? Coming into his own… unusual strength, uncontrolled moments of instinct…

Quietly, Mu Qingfang put the suspicion away again. People with certain ancestry ought not betray one another without due cause. Luo Binghe wasn’t any of his business, in the end. He was not in the practice of avenging the dead, only protecting the living. If it really was the little apprentice who had done it - and he didn’t think Liu Qingge was lying - then… Shen Qingqiu had really made his own bed, with that.

Somehow it didn’t make him feel any more comfortable with the outcome of things.

*He used to try and bribe me.*

The stray thought crossed his mind, as he looked back at the macabre scene. He kept his eyes up, on Shen Qingqiu’s face. Yue Qingyuan had closed his eyes; had pressed a hand to his husband’s cheek, shaking and still wracked with denial.

It was oddly endearing. Mainly because Shen Qingqiu had only tried to bribe him into behaving as a physician ought to; treating injuries properly, not meddling with things at the behest of other political interests, not sabotaging anyone’s recovery to serve some interest or another. He remembered a sharp-tongued boy, blinking in confusion a few weeks before he was set to leave for Gusu, to study.

*Ethics? What are ‘ethics’? Why don’t you just take the money, are you already in someone else’s pocket?*
Mu Qingfang closed his eyes for a moment, and then turned back to Liu Qingge instead.

“Lord Yue’s state is not good,” he said, quietly. “Can you help me coax him away?”

Liu Qingge looked at where his lord was still clutching a cooling corpse.

“I’ll try.”

~

News of Yue Qingyuan’s death was not surprising.

Mu Qingfang wasn’t the physician to attend to that matter. He had been in the midst of another emergency, and so one of his colleagues had gone to confirm Lord Yue’s death. In a way, he was grateful for that. In the same way that Shen Qingqiu’s physical wounds had already told Mu Qingfang, as soon as he arrived, that there would be no repairing such extensive damage, he had looked at Yue Qingyuan in the aftermath, and seen the emotional equivalent.

When the news reached him, he paused for a long moment, and spared a thought to the old Lord Yue.

For the first time, he considered whether it might not have done Yue Qingyuan a favour, to have his father die before he could be rediscovered. To have never found out about his bloodline; to have lived whatever life he and his A-Jiu might have, without that door ever opening at all.
Mu Qingfang examined the thought, turned it over for a moment, and then abandoned it to the realm of uncertainties that came with working extensively in matters of life and death.

He went to the Yue estate. Not to see Yue Qingyuan’s remains, but to see the live man left standing in the aftermath.

Liu Qingge was still his patient, after all.

He was welcomed into the estate. Mu Qingfang hadn’t been entirely certain he would be; some people became incredibly reclusive in their grief. But no, he was permitted to go in, to see Liu Qingge already dressed in mourning white. To witness the stunned grief on his features, the look in his eyes that said he was trying to wake up from a very bad dream.

Mu Qingfang wondered, if Liu Qingge could wake up - could start things over again - where would he begin from? Yue Qingyuan’s suicide? Shen Qingqiu’s death, that triggered it? The death of his unborn child, that set this calamity into motion?

Or even his wedding day, perhaps?

He waited patiently to be acknowledged. It felt like he was there to bear witness to the injury; he was content to try and examine it, to see if there was anything he could do. Grief was the most dangerous of all emotions. It swallowed people whole, could be as consuming as passion, as disorienting as rage, as debilitating as depression.

No physician worth their status would neglect to take it seriously.

“I thought I could save him,” Liu Qingge said, quietly.

Mu Qingfang wondered who he was talking about. Yue Qingyuan? Or Shen Qingqiu?

It was Liu Qingge, after all, who had carried the injured second husband back to the estate; had tried to save him from dying at Luo Binghe’s hands.

Given the enmity between the two men, something told him that the desperation spurring such
actions wasn’t unrelated to Liu Qingge’s thoughts on what Yue Qingyuan might do, should Shen Qingqiu die. Especially under such circumstances.

“...I know that feeling,” he ventured, in the tentative moment that followed.

Liu Qingge looked at him. Mu Qingfang met his gaze, steadily.

“I suppose Healer Mu would,” the other man agreed. It wasn’t much consolation; both of them could tell.

Neither of them knew what to say for a long moment, after that.

Finally, Mu Qingfang just gave in to what his instincts were telling him, and walked over to put a hand on Liu Qingge’s shoulder. The younger man glanced at it. For a moment, he thought he would be shrugged off. But then Liu Qingge sagged at little, and even seemed to lean in towards the point of contact.

“Is Master Liu going home to his family?” Mu Qingfang asked.

Liu Qingge made a small, affirmative sound.

“For now. My lord has no acknowledged kin to inherit. He left a note, he… left it all to me.”

All but the title, Mu Qingfang supposed. That would be… contentious. Not that there were many people to contest it. And the Liu family had a lot of resources, they would probably be able to secure Liu Qingge’s prospects for him. Still…

The world wasn’t kind to widows.

“If you need anything, ask,” he offered. It wasn’t an idle offer either, not simply politeness. “If it comes to it, I have a spare room. None of my apprentices are brave enough to use it, they fear some of my experiments in medicinal alchemy too much to sleep around them.”
Liu Qingge nodded in acknowledgement.

“Healer Mu is kind,” he said.

“And sincere,” he promised.

Though he knew it likely wouldn’t come to that. Liu Qingge had family, and presumably friends who were much closer to him than his beleaguered physician. But one never knew. Trying to reconcile himself to the sudden loss of Lord Yue and Shen Qingqiu brought home the reality that fortunes could turn very, very quickly.

“I will remember that,” Liu Qingge assured him.

The visit more or less came to its natural end, then. Mu Qingfang had no good reason to linger more than he already had, and he still had work to do. If he went to his family home again in the evenings, and tried not to think of gracious Lord Yue swinging from a white silk rope, or Shen Qingqiu’s blood rushing up the lengths of his arms, then that was his own business.

In the subsequent mourning period, he didn’t see Liu Qingge much. They crossed paths a few times, mostly by accident. Liu Qingge, to his relief, didn’t completely shut himself away; though he was still obviously grieving. He was also functioning, going places, doing things. His family seemed to take good care of him. Mu Qingfang often found him in the company of his younger sister, Liu Mingyan. It assuaged a good deal of his worries.

Until the kidnapping.

It took a few days for the rumours to reach him. He was in the midst of research at the time, having experienced a lull in house calls. When he found out, everything inside of him sank. Oh no, he couldn’t help but think.

Perhaps it had been naive to assume that Liu Qingge’s terrible luck would have died with Lord Yue.

That poor man.
Mu Qingfang was so distraught he put aside what he was doing, and sought out his father at home. The demon lord who had taken Liu Qingge was called Mobei-Jun. Kidnapping widows was far less common than spouses, but it still sometimes happened; particularly if the targets were considered to be wealthy and ‘unguarded’. Liu Qingge had recently started living at the Yue estate again, trying to get things back in order and install some of his own family there. It was probably where he had been taken from; a household with no lord, but still with a reputation among the demonic nobility. After all, Yue Qingyuan was the man who struck the final blow on Tianlang-Jun, and Liu Qingge himself had been rescued from previous kidnapping attempts. In terms of demonic politics, there was a lot of potential statements to make there.

“Baba, what do you know about Mobei-Jun?” he asked his father. The man was in his human form again, wearing actual clothes while he tended to some outdoor chores.

He made a low, warning sound at the name.

“Powerful,” he said. “Ruler of the northern desert. Or all of the north, really.”

Mu Qingfang frowned.

“How powerful is ‘powerful’?”

His father pointed upwards.

“Not heavenly. But close.”

Mu Qingfang closed his eyes, and then ran his hands down his face. That was bad news. With Lord Yue gone, Liu Qingge would only be able to rely on his maiden family to come to his rescue. The Liu clan produced a lot of talented cultivators, but he was fairly certain that Liu Qingge was the strongest of them himself. Or maybe Qi Qingqi was? They were both a lot stronger in martial prowess than Mu Qingfang was himself, anyway, and definitely up there.

“Do we have any family in the north?” he asked.

His father shook his head.
It was a long shot anyway. His father had plenty of relatives, but they weren’t close.

Even so.

“Liu Qingge’s a good man. He doesn’t deserve that kind of fate,” he said, letting his frustration seep into his tone.

“It is what it is,” his father said, patting his back. Somehow, when he voiced the sentiment, it sounded consoling rather than dismissive.

It still wasn’t a set of answers that Mu Qingfang had been hoping for. He headed back to his own home after sharing a meal with his family, pulling open drawers of old research he’d done on demon anatomy and abilities, and looking for anything that might be helpful that he could offer to the Liu clan. He couldn’t find much. Ice demons were weak to especially potent fire, but that was already widely known…

A few days later, just when he’d finish putting together the best offering he could manage, he was woken up in the dead of night by pounding at his door.

Accustomed to such incidents, he pulled on a robe and went to go answer.

Red eyes gleamed for a brief moment, a flash on the other side of the door that nearly had him shutting it again in alarm. Demon! An unfamiliar demon was knocking at his door? That situation was not usual for him. The only demons he had ever treated were his own family. Their background was not an open matter, not among humans and not among demons, either. Thus, no demon in their right mind would ever think that a cultivator such as himself would be a good choice to go to if they were injured and in need of help.

The only reason he could think of for a strange demon to approach was violence. Assassination, or something along those lines. All at once he woke up completely. In the moment it took him to shift perspectives from healer to combatant, he finally took in the whole picture of what was standing at his door.

A young man - whose eyes were brown and dull, no longer flashing red - was standing there. The man’s features were, in fact, vaguely familiar, but Mu Qingfang couldn’t place him. More startlingly, he was holding another person in his arms.
This person was familiar.

Mu Qingfang opened his door wide, and hurried the strange demon into his home - because the man in his arms was Liu Qingge.

“Through that door, put him on the table,” Mu Qingfang instructed, not bothering about other matters for the time being. “What happened to him?”

The familiar stranger carried Liu Qingge over to the emergency table.

“We were attacked by an ice demon. His arm took the worst of it, he was stabbed a few times too, but I didn’t see all of it,” he explained. “If you help him, I’ll reward you.”

Mu Qingfang ignored that last point of order - he had fees; people paid them. If this person couldn’t afford it, Liu Qingge certainly could, so it wasn’t an issue worth discussing. Instead he set about examining his patient.

Even without being told, he could have guessed that an ice demon - or several - was responsible. Liu Qingge’s clothes were stiff and frosted over in several places. His lips were blue, and his pulse was weak. Mu Qingfang didn’t dare move him too much, without knowing where all his injuries were, and so he grabbed a pair of sheers and cut the clothes from his body.

The arm was indeed the worst of it.

The flesh was blackened and frostbitten, damaged all the way up past the elbow. Two fingers were already missing, along with several chunks of flesh that looked as though they’d been bitten off by some beast or other. There were more bite marks on his leg, and two stab wounds - one his shoulder, the other just shy of puncturing his lungs. A bump on his head capped the whole disaster off. Those injuries were bad, but the arm was the worst.

It was going to be a long night.

Mu Qingfang sent the familiar-but-unknown man out to go and alert his apprentices, and started doing what he could to salvage the mangled limb. Which, in the end, wasn’t much. It had already been too damaged for too long. He had to get Liu Qingge’s temperature up, gently, and as he tried that he discovered the ice shards clinging to his limb; slowly working their way up the bones of his
arm, like an infection that would spread throughout his skeleton and freeze him from the inside, if left unchecked.

With that discovery, amputation was the only thing left.

*I'm sorry.*

There was no satisfaction in tying the tourniquet and putting the saw through Liu Qingge’s flesh. He cut as cleanly as he could, ignoring the eyes on him, instructing his youngest apprentice to leave; the boy wasn’t ready for such sights yet. In a few years, maybe, but not yet.

He had no wherewithal to pay attention to the unfamiliar demon in his home. Liu Qingge’s injuries and amputation absorbed him full, demanding his focus throughout the rest of the night. He kept his patient unconscious, sent out quiet thanks that he had a full vat of his best healing salve, properly fermented, and then dealt with the poison in his remaining bite wounds. The man had been dragged through hell, again, and he looked like it.

But he lived.

When dawn came, Mu Qingfang finally let himself slump into one of his chairs, not far from where Liu Qingge was still laid out. His best apprentice was carefully loaning the patient some spiritual energy, as per his instructions. When she was finished, they could move him to a bed. Let him rest more comfortably, and clean up.

Liu Qingge’s severed arm was set aside.

It could be examined, and then properly disposed of.

“Healer Mu.”

Mu Qingfang stilled, as he suddenly recollected the matter of the demon.

In the grey light of morning, it was easier to make out more details on the tall, imposing figure. Again, a sense of familiarity nagged at him, but he couldn’t place it. The demon - half demon? -
looked entirely human. If he hadn’t seen the flash of his eyes (irises, not pupils, so it wasn’t possession), or if he could have convinced himself that he imagined it, he would never have guessed he wasn’t just a dark-clad cultivator. There were some slashes in his clothes, and bloodstains barely visible on the dark fabric; but he couldn’t see any wounds. Just skin, beneath the torn fabric.

Still…

“I’m sorry, are you injured as well? I should have asked sooner,” he said.

The man waved off his concern.

“I’m fine. Ge-ge was the one who needed your help.”

At the civil tone, Mu Qingfang allowed himself to relax a little again. Thinking about it, he realized that there was no reason to suspect this person knew anything about him or his family. The man probably hadn’t betrayed his own nature on purpose, either, in an attempt at making some kind of threat or statement. Stressful situations could bring out the wrong traits, when on wasn’t careful, and if he’d been exerting himself a lot in order to get Liu Qingge to help…

But.

‘Ge-ge’?

Who was this person?

“Thank you for bringing Liu Qingge here,” he said, carefully. “I had heard about his capture. Did you rescue him?”

“I did.”

The man shifted in place. Something about the gesture finally caused a flare of recognition, the way the confident stance faltered into a more uncertain posture, it put the pieces together at last. Mu Qingfang remembered another exhausting night; arms covered in blood, defeat making his
body feel heavy, as Liu Qingge spoke softly of a youth with unexpected strength and tragic results. A suspicion he had tucked away, out of kindred courtesies.

“Luo Binghe?” he guessed.

The man’s eyebrows went up.

“Healer Mu remembers me?” he said.

“It took me a while. You were much younger the last time I saw you.”

Although it wasn’t as if the young cultivator had disappeared, of course. Rumours abounded after Shen Qingqiu’s death. Luo Binghe was a frequent sight at various night hunts, though he wasn’t well-connected enough to show up at the conferences or exposition tournaments. Even with Shen Qingqiu’s reputation, killing one’s own shifu was not a move that was bound to engender a lot of trust or respect.

As if following the direction of his thoughts, Luo Binghe offered him a sardonic smile.

“I suppose this disreputable rogue is not up to the caliber of most of Healer Mu’s clients,” he said.

Mu Qingfang blinked.

“What?” he asked. “Don’t be foolish. I’m glad you brought Liu Qingge to me, thank you for helping him.”

“No thanks are needed,” Luo Binghe said, but he seemed a little relieved at this response as well. At least until his gaze landed on the clean sheet that had been thrown discreetly over Liu Qingge’s severed arm. Then his expression shuttered itself off, and he folded his arms.

“He’ll be alright?” the man asked him, quietly.

“He should recover,” Mu Qingfang confirmed. “It won’t be easy. But, he’s a very strong person.”
Luo Binghe nodded in understanding. Reaching for his belt, he pulled free a heavy coin purse, and tossed it onto the table beside him.

“For your trouble. I have to go,” he said. “There are some matters to attend to, now that he’s safe.”

Mu Qingfang hesitated. He had no idea what had transpired to bring Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge into contact with one another again. It wasn’t his business to ask, either. But the man’s worry was plain as day.

“It might be good for him to have his rescuer around when he wakes,” he suggested.

Luo Binghe shook his head.

“It’s doubtful that the sight of this person will bring him much ease. Ge-ge will take more comfort from a friend a like Healer Mu,” the young man insisted, before offering him a salute. “Please look after him. When he has recovered, let me handle any debts incurred on his behalf.”

Mu Qingfang let the matter go, and returned the salute. Before Luo Binghe left, he opened the coin purse, and tutted. Pulling out the actual fee for a night’s worth of emergency work, he left the rest in the purse, and then handed it back to the younger half demon with a reproachful cluck of his tongue.

“Don’t just throw money around, A-Luo, this healer does not haggle or inflate his charges. Liu Qingge will be fine, the fees I set are what they are for a reason,” he said.

Luo Binghe looked uncertainly from the coin purse, and then back towards him.

“Keep it,” he insisted. “If there’s extra, use it to give him better treatment. If you're worried about being in my pocket, I'm not trying to buy you.”

“I wouldn't fit in anyone's pocket, and I only ever give the best anyway,” Mu Qingfang assured him, not letting up, and still pressing the coin purse back to its owner.
After a moment, Luo Binghe huffed.

“Have I offended Healer Mu?” he asked.

Mu Qingfang jostled the purse.

“No offense taken, so long as A-Luo doesn’t forget his purse.”

With some obvious bemusement, Luo Binghe reached up, and took the remaining coin back.

“I thought Healer Mu was expensive.”

“I am,” he said, before letting out a breath, and dropping back into his seat. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t set strict standards. Physicians must be trusted, allegations of bribery are no small matter. Is A-Luo certain he won’t at least stay until Liu Qingge wakes up?”

Luo Binghe barely blinked at the change of topics. He did sigh, though.

“It can’t be helped,” he said, and tucked his purse back away. With a last nod of acknowledgement, he turned, and headed back out through the door.

~

Liu Qingge was not a terrible patient.
Mu Qingfang had dealt with too many truly awful ones to ever make that claim. Terrible patients hurled abuse at healers and servants, they refused to take their medicine, they neglected to explain their symptoms, didn’t follow instructions and then blamed their physicians when they didn’t miraculously recover despite doing nothing they were supposed to.

On that scale, Liu Qingge was not a terrible patient.

But he wasn't precisely a good patient, either.

The amputation was a particularly harrowing instalment in the saga of Liu Qingge’s terrible injuries.

After Luo Binghe left, Mu Qingfang sent a runner to go and take a letter to the Liu clan head. He didn’t want to delay too long, or cause too much shock, so he made it very clear that the message contained delicate information and was for the eyes of Liu Qingge’s grandmother only. The matriarch could decide how to dispense the facts throughout the rest of the family, but the last thing anyone needed was for concerned relatives to break into unexpected hysterics because they weren’t prepared for the reality of their son’s condition.

The person hardest hit was Liu Qingge himself, after all.

Mu Qingfang made it clear in his letter that the man’s situation was delicate, and moving him right away wouldn’t be wise. It would be best to let Liu Qingge recover in a familiar place, with his family for support, but Mu Qingfang still needed to watch him. So it was just the two of them, in the end, waiting for the Liu clan matriarch’s response, when Liu Qingge finally woke up.

There was no screaming.

Mu Qingfang sat, and let Liu Qingge take in the room around him. The daylight passing through the windows, the blankets of the bed, the familiar face nearby. It was still a little surprising when Liu Qingge looked at him and visibly crumpled with relief.

“Not dead,” he said, in a tone that implied he was surprised at himself.

“Not dead,” Mu Qingfang confirmed. “But badly injured.”
“My arm,” Liu Qingge agreed.

“It couldn’t be saved. I’m so sorry.”

Liu Qingge must have gotten a good look at his injury before he passed out, because he didn’t seem at all surprised. But that wasn’t necessarily a good sign. Screaming and hysterics were obviously bad, but shock could create detachment, too. Sure enough, Mu Qingfang checked his patient more closely, and found that he had gone cold, and was trembling slightly. As he reached for Liu Qingge’s remaining wrist, the man’s breaths became ragged.

“You’re safe,” Mu Qingfang soothed. “Look at me, Master Liu. Try and match your breaths to mine. Inhale, and exhale…”

Liu Qingge latched onto the instructions like a man who badly needed something to help keep him afloat. Mu Qingfang had meant to politely transfer a small amount of energy, to help ease the cold of his shock, but Liu Qingge shifted his grip when their hands came close, and so he found himself holding the younger man’s hand instead. He still managed the transfer, accompanying it with a reassuring squeeze as he pressed his other hand to his chest, to help illustrate the rhythm of his breathing.

Gradually, Liu Qingge’s false calm gave way to something a little more genuinely relaxed.

“Good,” Mu Qingfang praised, keeping hold of his hand. “Very good. It’s alright. Just keep breathing with me.”

Liu Qingge frowned.

“I know how to breathe,” he grumbled.

“Of course,” Mu Qingfang placated him. “How does Master Liu’s body feel?”

“...Terrible.”
If he was saying so, then it was definitely the truth. Liu Qingge downplayed pain, rather than exaggerating it.

“I’ll get you something to help,” he said.

“I don’t need it.”

“Ah, yes. Suffering needlessly. That’s much better, I’m very impressed.”

“...Fine.”

The grip on his hand didn’t ease up. Mu Qingfang waited until it did, not mentioning the matter at all, before he finally stood and went to go get a pill for Liu Qingge. He brought some water to help it go down, and took the liberty of checking the man’s eyes while he was at it. There’d been no signs of possession, but with one thing and another, there also hadn’t been good opportunities to check.

His intuition said that wasn’t a problem, however, and he was proven correct. Liu Qingge took his medicine without complaint or ill affects. He managed more water and a small amount of thin porridge, before resting for a few hours again.

Even exhausted and injured, however, it didn't take long for the patient to become restless.

Liu Qingge was not the sort of person who paced, necessarily, but he was the sort who vastly preferred being on his feet rather than off them. Losing a limb was a disorienting experience, in many, many ways, and resting was vital to healing. But so was one’s emotional equilibrium. Mu Qingfang patiently dealt with Liu Qingge’s various efforts to move around, to inspect his surroundings, and to poke his nose where he wasn’t supposed to while he himself tried valiantly to clean the blood off of his operating table without letting the other man see the state of the room.

“I’m not squeamish,” Liu Qingge insisted, with a frown.

“No one's saying you are. It’s my house, you can't go into places that aren't for guests. Sit and read in the spare room,” Mu Qingfang countered, handing the younger man a booklet of poems and steering him back to bed.
It was a bad choice. Flipping pages in a light booklet was harder to do one-handed. He’d neglected to consider that, and so when he finally got the room suitable enough for his apprentices to take over, he went and found a frustrated Liu Qingge scowling at the wall while the poetry book lay tellingly on the floor.

“That was thoughtless of me,” he apologized.

Liu Qingge shook his head.

“It’s fine,” he insisted. “...At least it wasn’t my sword arm.”

“You would have managed, even if it was,” Mu Qingfang opined, leaning down to pick up the book. “You’ll manage this, too. I have every faith in your determination, Master Liu. With help I don’t doubt you’ll be getting into trouble with all sorts of foul beings again in no time.”

Liu Qingge snorted. The comment nevertheless seemed to reassure him.

“I suppose I won’t have to worry about any more suitors trying to bang down my door, now,” he mused, glancing at his stump. He didn’t shy away from looking at it. In fact, his eyes critically assessed the changed state. Mu Qingfang discreetly checked for signs of trouble. Liu Qingge just seemed to be taking stock, however; neutral, for the time being.

“Why not?” Mu Qingfang wondered.

Liu Qingge gave him an odd look.

“I’m crippled,” he said, bluntly.

“So?” the healer countered. “Before Master Liu was impressive. Now, he’s veering into the status of legend. If he escapes the clutches of another demonic captor, that will be three times. People will never stop talking about him then. The beautiful warrior so compelling that countless demon lords tried to tame him, and so mighty that none could succeed. I can hear the songs being composed already.”
Liu Qingge blinked at him, blankly. Then his face turned bright red. That was good, he was recovering from his blood loss quite nicely.

“Ridiculous,” he scoffed.

“These things often are,” Mu Qingfang agreed. “Alas for you, my friend, I don’t think you will see a decline in admirers.”

“I don’t want them.”

The words seemed to come without Liu Qingge’s permission, judging by his expression after he spoke. It wasn’t a typical admission for a young nobleman in his position, Mu Qingfang would concede; but nobles were bizarre folk with often absurd standards for living. As someone with two happily unwed sisters and parents who’d married for love, and little interest in romance himself, Mu Qingfang couldn’t blame Liu Qingge at all. Marriage had not been kind to the man, nor had it suited him. Washing his hands of it wouldn’t be unreasonable.

“I wouldn’t want them either,” Mu Qingfang said, and settled down with the poetry book. “Courtship is a silly practice. Shall I read you some poems?”

Liu Qingge hesitated, then finally leaned back in a more restful pose.

“...Do what you want, it’s your home,” he said.

Mu Qingfang nodded, and then made sure to only hold the booklet in one hand as he read. He was accustomed to such things - taking notes could go faster with a brush in one hand and a booklet in the other - and very clearly turned the pages with his thumb, as he carefully read through a few of his favourite poems.

Liu Qingge, as expected, watched. But he was undoubtedly exhausted, and they didn’t get through many pages before Mu Qingfang looked over, and found his patient asleep again.

Good.
The younger man was still resting when Liu Mingyan showed up, windswept as if she had flown the whole way nonstop. She was only the first, had beaten her parents and grandmother there. Mu Qingfang was glad he’d gotten some cleaning up done, as he hurriedly made sure all necessary doors were still shut, and then tried to make his home presentable enough to host his impending deluge of visitors.

~

It took a few days before he deemed Liu Qingge’s condition stable enough for him to leave. By then, Mu Qingfang was relieved to no longer have an anxious martial arts expert breathing down his neck, but he found it difficult not to worry. The thought would cross his mind every so often, how was Liu Qingge doing? How was his health? Was he looking after himself? Neglecting some things? Veering towards another qi deviation?

Adjusting?

...Keeping out of trouble?

Mu Qingfang paid a few visits to the Liu estate, to check the progress of Liu Qingge’s recovery. He found himself contemplating making more. Social calls, really. But Liu Qingge was surrounded by his family, and he worried that disrupting that might be unwise. Mu Qingfang often, unfortunately, tended to remind his patients of their ailments, and times when they were sick and injured. He didn’t want to set things back by inadvertently making Liu Qingge dwell.

Six months later, Luo Binghe turned up on his doorstep again.

This time, there was a different injured man hanging in his arms.

General Pei Ming was not someone whom Mu Qingfang knew personally, but he had seen him enough to recognize him, and of course knew of his reputation. Mostly for having the biggest
harem in the imperial court, after the emperor of course. He didn’t have much interest in military accomplishments, but bedridden people often developed a great enthusiasm for gossip, and the topic of the General’s latest marriage was usually only second to the topic of who he might be sleeping with casually. For a second, when he looked at the man in Luo Binghe’s arms, all he could hear was his eldest sister’s voice as she derisively and repeatedly referred to the man as ‘That Slut Pei Ming’.

“Put him on the table,” Mu Qingfang instructed, as he shook the thought away. “What happened?’’

“The General got into a conflict with a demon. He was stabbed a few times, and then hit on the head very hard,” Luo Binghe explained. Unlike with Liu Qingge, there wasn’t much of a sense of anxiety about him as he set Pei Ming onto Mu Qingfang’s table.

“Apologies for troubling Healer Mu with this matter, but there was no one else to rescue him, and I don’t know many other physicians.”

“It’s fine, this is my job,” Mu Qingfang assured him.

Then he turned his focus to his patient, who had indeed suffered several stab wounds, in addition to a blow to the head. He spared a single sidelong look at Luo Binghe, before he started cutting away clothing and pulling off damaged armour. He sucked a breath in through his teeth; cloth fibers had gotten into the stab wounds, and they weren’t the type to easily come out.

Absorbed in his work, he didn’t notice Luo Binghe leaving.

He did find a coin purse with his exact fee in it, however, waiting for him once he was finished. General Pei Ming woke up very confused and insisting he’d crossed blades with a Heavenly Demon Lord. Mu Qingfang had no idea if the man was the type to embellish tales in order to cover up his defeats, or if he was the type to mistake any strong opponent for a legendary foe, but he just made reassuring sounds and promised to have his message sent straight to the palace so that the emperor would know about the danger. He suspected the Pei Ming had actually run afoul of Luo Binghe himself, and Luo Binghe was a half-demon cultivator. Certainly no Tianlang-Jun!

Pei Ming’s First Wife came to collect him without much delay, and Mu Qingfang put the incident from his mind.

Until it happened again.
And then again.

The fourth time Luo Binghe showed up with a human cultivator and a vague non-explanation for the conspicuous injuries on said human cultivator, Mu Qingfang took him aside before he could make his subtle retreat - the patient’s injuries weren’t life-threatening, at the moment - and put a three-hundred year-old talisman into his hand. His father had made it, when he was younger and less good at disguising himself. It wasn’t as nice as the ones his sisters used, but it still worked and would do the trick.

Luo Binghe frowned down at the item in his palm.

“Wear it, and maybe fewer people will attack the ‘evil demon’ they find lurking around human city centers,” Mu Qingfang told him, meaningfully.

He felt eyes burning holes into his back as he returned his attention to his patient.

It was a risky move, he knew. If Luo Binghe asked where he had gotten such an item from, he had an explanation ready; but that might not assuage his suspicions. And if the young man decided it was too dangerous to have Mu Qingfang know - or suspect - his secret… then a fight might break out. He didn’t know the man’s skills, but he could infer from the people he’d brought that he wasn’t lacking. Mu Qingfang would probably have to run, but luckily, he was experienced at hiding. Luo Binghe clearly was not. If he gave chase, few people would side with the disreputable cultivator who had slain his own master and showed signs of demonic heritage, over a fairly renowned and scrupulous physician.

In the end, Luo Binghe left as usual that night. Silently, with exact payment left behind.

He turned up again two weeks later.

It was daytime. To Mu Qingfang’s surprise, there was nobody slung over his shoulder or being carried in his arms.

Just the three-hundred year-old talisman in his hand. Utterly depleted.
Not broken. Not damaged. Just… depleted. As if it had been worn out from trying to do the task it was designed for.

Yes, it was old, but his father had intended that talisman to last a thousand years, if needed!

“Can Healer Mu get more of these?” Luo Binghe asked him. “It worked well, but it seems to be done.”

Mu Qingfang nodded in understanding.

…How terrifying.

“I’ll see what I can do.”
Excerpts from Airplane-bro's writing! Peppered liberally with some fluff to soften the blow. There will probably be more of these at some point, if people enjoy them! I should warn, though, that everything that's implied to have happened in that story... happens... so, content might be an issue. If so, skip the italics segments and please just enjoy the fluffy tidbits! These chapters will likely be a bit shorter than average.

Also, there is some more from the wonderful Kookooberry!! It's of the BvB Bonus, go check it out! <3

https://twitter.com/kookooberi/status/1112485583723655175
https://twitter.com/kookooberi/status/1110780902181953538

The night was stormy. Luo Binghe drew moist breaths of air as he followed the green shadow that had passed by the wall of the Yue estate. His heart was in conflict. His heart was always in conflict. Who could have expected the way that the situation with Lord Yue’s precious gem would turn out? And he had played a part in it. Shen Qingqiu was a doomed man.

Because of Luo Binghe’s lie. The only people who knew what Luo Binghe had done were the ones truly responsible for killing Lord Yue and Liu Qingge’s child, and also Shen Qingqiu himself.

Maybe that was why he felt so compelled to follow after his hated master. Shen Qingqiu had never looked at Luo Binghe, not fully, not until he had betrayed him. The rain tasted bitter as he gave chase. He had his revenge, but it didn’t feel right. There wasn’t enough satisfaction in it. And, some part of him, shameful and still so young, wanted Shen Qingqiu to know.

He had lied and thrown his master to the wolves, yes, but he hadn’t been the one to kill Lord Yue’s child. Luo Binghe’s actions were against his master. They were targeted at him, they were retaliation for all the man’s sins. How many nights had he been locked in that woodshed? Made to kneel over some impossible slight? How many times had he had items flung at him, harsh words hissed at him, condemnation spat at his feet for the crime of... what? Not being good enough?
He had done his best. He had done his best but his master didn’t care, would never look at him with anything other than spite.

Luo Binghe wanted Shen Qingqiu to know how much he hated him. That he had destroyed him, on purpose. But he didn’t want the man to think he would have just targeted anyone, that he was the one without a sense of morality or principle. It was personal.

It was personal.

So he gave chase. With every step, the chase seemed to become a hunt. Luo Binghe found his focus narrowing. The dark shadows of the nearby buildings were long and deep, and didn’t matter. The cold rain on his skin couldn’t bother him. His lofty master scurried like a rat, taking unexpected shortcuts and avoiding flight as the weather worsened.

Luo Binghe’s eyes turned, briefly, back in the direction they’d come.

Someone else was following.

The thought of being caught before he could do the catching, of someone else reaching Shen Qingqiu and stealing what might be his last chance at confrontation, spurred him on. He drew the sword he’d stolen from Yang Yixuan, and when Shen Qingqiu vanished around another corner, he jumped up and around the same rain-slicked building, and cut him off by dropping to the ground in front of him.

“Shizun,” he said.

Politely.

He had to keep a civil tongue in his head, after all. This was the man who had threatened to cut it off, otherwise.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes widened briefly in alarm, before they narrowed in rage.

“You!” he spat.
“Me,” Luo Binghe confirmed. “Where is Shizun going in such a hurry? Isn’t his white rope waiting for him?”

Shen Qingqiu trembled with rage. Or perhaps fear? With the rain, Luo Binghe could not smell anything. But without it, he might have been able to. He had always had a keen sense of smell, good enough to tell the difference between fear sweat and exertion. Some part of him quailed reflexively at the sight of his master’s rage.

But he was defiant of that impulse. He had cowered for too long before his abuser.

“You wretched beast!” Shen Qingqiu raged. Xiu Ya was a white flash as he drew it. Luo Binghe barely had time to dodge. His bare feet slid against the muck of the alleyway. His own sword, when he drew it, was nothing compared to Xiu Ya. He had to rely on dodging instead, but years of evading Shen Qingqiu’s wrath had made him practiced at it.

And his master’s emotions were making him sloppy.

“A beast, am I?” Luo Binghe replied. Rain slid down his beautiful, youthful features. Even in the muck, there was something about him at that moment that would have made an observer pause. “I thought Shizun would be proud. The liar’s apprentice has finally learned his craft.”

“Demon!” Shen Qingqiu accused. “I never taught you to murder infants or practice vile cultivation! How dare you?! You killed… you killed-!”

“I didn’t!” Luo Binghe refuted, standing resolute.

His voice rang out too loud. The sound echoed out of the alley.

“I lied about what Shizun did. I planted the pin on his clothes, so he would be blamed. I ruined him. But I didn’t touch Lord Yue’s child. I didn’t know that would happen.”

Luo Binghe’s voice faltered on the last note, despite himself.
If he’d known...

Shen Qingqiu stared coldly at him. Luo Binghe looked. He wasn’t sure what he expected to see. Maybe some flicker. Acceptance, or denial. Surprise, even. He realized that even now, he wanted his master to see him - even now, some part of him wanted acknowledgement, for Shen Qingqiu to concede that he had deserved some retribution, that Luo Binghe had even just done a good job betraying him...

In his master’s face, he saw nothing but disdain.

“...I don’t care,” the man suddenly said. Cold, detached. He lowered his arm. Sheathed Xiu Ya again. “Luo Binghe. I don’t care about you. I never have. You didn’t ruin me. You never mattered enough to be the one who would ruin me.”

Shen Qingqiu turned his back on him.

In that moment of such utter disinterest and dismissal, Luo Binghe had never felt more enraged. His Shizun had been his entire world. The sun he looked up to. He had dedicated these past years of his life to trying so hard to meet even a single one of his standards. He had even unmade him, but for Shen Qingqiu, it would never matter. Everyone else was just dirt to him. He probably had killed Lord Yue’s child himself! This person who cared about nothing and no one but himself, couldn’t be allowed to escape justice for all his transgressions!

“Shizun!” he shouted again.

Then he adjusted his grip on his sword, and attacked.

Luo Binghe knew he was biased, but he was pretty sure that he and his husband had still managed to create the most adorable baby possible.

His daughter was busily trying to fit her entire foot into her mouth, while Luo Binghe watched her efforts with rapt fascination. Shizun insisted that Ling-er took after him in looks, and he could kind of see where he was coming from. Being a baby, Luo Lingxi was, of course, very round and plump and soft, but there was a certain similarity to the shapes of their faces and mouths that would probably be more apparent as she got older. The thick hair on her head was more like his own in texture, too.

On the other hand, the eyes that looked over at him, and crinkled in happiness when she confirmed that he was still there?

Those were entirely from Shizun. Those were his A-Yuan's eyes, and they were her most captivating feature, shining out from her cute little face.

His daughter gnawed on her toes until she fell over. The blankets all around her were soft and comfortable. She made a happy sound, despite her failures, and resumed her efforts with the benefit of a new angle.

That’s right! Keep on trying, little one!

Luo Binghe could no longer resist the cuteness, and swooped in to scoop her up and pepper kisses across her little head.

It took him a few minutes to notice Shizun’s apprentice lingering by the doorway, with the sort of affected disinterest typical of a cat that wanted to socialize, but definitely didn’t want it to be known.

“You’re making weird noises again,” the young man drawled.
Luo Binghe chuckled.

“That’s because I’m holding an adorable baby,” he said, in a cutesy tone of voice, before gently shifting his hold on his daughter and blowing raspberries against her. Her little feet kicked and she giggled, and smacked at the side of his face with a tiny fist in retaliation. She was going to be such a good fighter! If she wanted! When the abundant and embarrassing display didn’t chase A-Jiu off, Luo Binghe determined that he was being solicited for attention. He motioned Shen Jiu over.

“Come to play with the baby?” he guessed.

“No,” Shen Jiu scoffed. “I’m looking for Master Shen.”

“One room over,” Luo Binghe supplied, gesturing towards the study, where Shizun was taking a reading break.

Shen Jiu glanced in that direction.

He visibly hesitated.

Luo Binghe’s daughter, displaying a brilliant grasp of the nuanced situation, promptly gave her shixiong an excuse to stay and play with her for a bit when she made a plaintive noise and stretched grabby hands up at him.

“What?” Shen Jiu asked her, even as his voice softened and reached over to take her. “You aren’t getting enough attention already? You have to harass me too?”

Luo Lingxi babbled in happy triumph. Her father looked proudly over her achievement.

Another Shen won over by that innate Luo charm!
Adrenaline pumped through Luo Binghe’s veins. His heart was still pounding, as his demon-enhanced senses took in everything about the situation. The palace of Mobei-Jun was a dark and sinister place, full of enemies, and he knew he should be cautious. But the narrow storage room which he and Liu Qingge had ducked into, after the demon guards had nearly caught them, wasn’t big enough to avoid contact between their bodies.

Only a sliver of light made its way past the door frame. It was a bright slash across Liu Qingge’s eyes, highlighting their pleasing shape, and his delicate birthmark.

Luo Binghe shifted. Their bodies brushed together.

Liu Qingge let out a harsh breath.

“Don’t move,” the older man admonished. Outside, they could hear the sounds of footsteps. Demon trackers, trying to follow them. Focusing, Luo Binghe tried to reel back his demon blood, to let his human side take over and keep his presence from betraying their location. He needed so much attention to do it that he reflexively reached out to steady himself. His hands settled on Liu Qingge’s hips with a tight grip.

Liu Qingge’s breaths quickened.

It had been a long time since anyone had touched him so intimately, or so boldly! Despite himself, he felt his body reacting.

“What are you doing?!” he hissed.

“Quiet,” Luo Binghe said. His voice was low and commanding. The natural dominance of his aura demanded submission, and despite himself, Liu Qingge found it worsened his state. He went silent, but was keenly aware of the press of thumbs against his hips, and the way Luo Binghe seemed to be steadily drawing him closer.
He put a hand on the younger man’s shoulder to try and maintain some distance.

For his own part, Luo Binghe found the physical proximity seemed to help keep his focus from spilling outwards into the kind of aggression that would draw their enemies’ attention. Liu Qingge was a handsome man - no, he was downright gorgeous, in fact. The way anger glittered in his eyes only seemed to make him even more enticing. Despite never having lain with anyone before, Luo Binghe had strong instincts. He could tell that this person, trembling in his grasp, was into him.

“Ge-ge, how about we settle our argument a different way?” he suggested, as the sounds of their pursuers moved past the door.

“What?” Liu Qingge asked.

Then he broke off into a gasp as Luo Binghe dragged him down for a fierce kiss!

The effect was magnetic. Liu Qingge stiffened in surprised, but his body was already reacting. Luo Binghe pulled him closer in the dark, narrow space. Still following his instincts, he plunged his tongue into the other man’s mouth, and ground their hips together. He was bigger than Liu Qingge. Even through the fabric of their clothes, he could tell. The thought excited him. He rubbed their hips together again, and bit down on Liu Qingge’s bottom lip.

The other man made a barely-suppressed sound of outrage, and drove a fist into his shoulder.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” he demanded.

It was like a rush of cold water fell over Luo Binghe. What was he doing? They were trying to escape, and he’d let his instincts get the better of him!

Before he could apologize, the door to the store room was blasted open in a hail of ice shards. Luo Binghe threw up his arms defensively, but Liu Qingge was next to the flimsy wooden barrier, and was knocked into the back wall.

The interlude was over - Mobei-Jun had found them!!!
One of Liu Qingge’s blows connected hard enough to send him spinning towards the cracked earth.

Luo Binghe recovered quickly, but still found himself reluctantly impressed - Qingge was getting faster! And he was already very quick for a human, even an expert cultivator and warrior. Speed was almost always on a demon’s side.

“Not bad,” he said, as Liu Qingge declined to follow through. It was getting late, and staying outside the palace bounds when what passed for ‘night’ happened in the demon realm was a little more trouble than they were looking for, that day. Luo Binghe wouldn’t have had a problem, but Liu Qingge was sweating and exhausted, and those pale robes of his would make him like a beacon in the dark.

“Next round, I’ll win,” Liu Qingge said.

It was what he always said. As ever, Luo Binghe managed to convey skepticism without outright scoffing.

“It’s good to have dreams, Qingge. Even a few impossible ones.”

The other man gave him a sour look as he sheathed Cheng Luan, but didn’t keep up the back and forth. He was probably too tired, actually. They hadn’t managed a spar since before Ling-er was conceived, between one matter and another, so when Liu Qingge had asked, Luo Binghe had set aside half a day for him. It wasn’t precisely a challenge on his end, but Liu Qingge was a skilled and inventive fighter, and a very good barometer for the skills of other human cultivators, too. Since it wouldn’t do to get too complacent about his skills against such opponents, he appreciated
“Want me to carry you back?” he quipped.

The sour look turned positively scathing over Luo Binghe’s ‘innocent’ offer.

Very pointedly, Liu Qingge started to walk back towards the palace. He set a brisk pace.

“Bastard,” he grumbled, as he walked by.

Luo Binghe grinned, unrepentant.

“I’m just trying to help. Shizun will be disappointed if you’re too tired to have dinner with us after you came all this way,” he said. “Then I’ll get in trouble for beating you up too badly. It’s alright, carrying you wouldn’t strain me at all. I have plenty of strength left.”

“*Insufferable* bastard,” Liu Qingge amended, not once breaking stride, even as he glared at him.

“Is that any way to talk to a good friend?”

“Hmph!”

They walked in silence for a while. Until the brisk pace actually did start to slow down a little. Luo Binghe didn’t mention it, then. He just adjusted his own steps accordingly, and shot his friend a glance when he wasn’t looking. He might have landed that blow on his ribs a little too hard. He never forgot he was fighting a human when they sparred, but Liu Qingge was strong, and some of his attacks were legitimately dangerous; evading them often meant he couldn’t pull any punches. He knew Liu Qingge didn’t particularly want him to, but it wasn’t actually a joke that Shizun would be upset if he beat up their friend so badly that he couldn’t come socialize after.

Maybe next time they’d leave Ling-er with A-Jiu, and all three of them could spar. It had been too long, he thought, since they did that. Usually it was two-on-one, Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu against him. He rarely had a more exciting test of his skills, and Liu Qingge tended to be more restrained when Shizun was around. It was just that it felt a little dangerous, leaving Ling-er in the
human world while both her parents came to the demon realm; but sparring at the other estate was harder, especially if they really wanted to unleash some potent skills. Which was half the point in the first place.

Before they reached the palace gates, Liu Qingge paused.

He was looking up at something.

Luo Binghe couldn’t pick up on anything wrong, but he followed the direction of his friend’s gaze. The sky above them was crackled like dropped porcelain. Fissures of dark night were opening, limned with flashes of fire here and there.

“What?” he wondered.

Liu Qingge grunted, and resumed walking.

“Nothing,” he said. “I just… forget that it’s sometimes beautiful here.”

Luo Binghe wasn’t sure why, but the admission made him smile.

“In that case, Qingge should visit more often.”

The Heart Devil sword was a legendary weapon of immense power. Few could tame it, and fewer still could survive using it for extended periods of time. It was a sword only suitable to an exceptional person.
But there was nothing in this world that Luo Binghe could not dominate.

As he wrestled with the blade he felt like a thousand knives were stabbing him through. If the Heart Devil sword thought it could top him, it would have to do better than that! He gritted his teeth and did not so much as drop to one knee, instead forcing the blade down with his hands. Its counterattacks were strong. He could feel it trying to roll him over and again an edge.

“Submit!” he demanded, as his fiery blood raged. He would master this sword. Now that he had grasped it, there was no doubt in his mind. This weapon would be his!

As his determination focused, the initial struggle began to fade. The Heart Devil sword’s energy flowed in tandem with his own instead. It was a little like holding a purring cat against his soul. Luo Binghe’s many muscles trembled from the exertion. His bird was hard.

But he had won. The sword had yielded. Its hilt pulsed in his hand and felt slick from all the sweat. Luo Binghe lifted up the blade and began to caress his touch up and down the warm shaft. He felt answering pulses of pleasure in his own immense pillar. As he stroked the Heart Devil Sword, he realized that the length and width of its handle was the same size as his other ‘weapon’.

An idea came to him.

He lift the handle to his lips and swiped his tongue over the bulbous pommel.

There! He felt it! Like a warm wet tongue had brushed across his own ‘bulbous pommel’!

A startled sound escaped him before he mastered himself. His skin was tingling. The sword was his, it was giving itself to him. He ought to reward it. Parting his lips, he began to take the hilt into his mouth. It was hard and seemed to get warmer by the moment. His muscles started trembling for a reason other than exertion. The more he took in the more pleasure he could feel. He pulled the Heart Devil sword back out and dragged his tongue across it. Then he took it into his mouth again, and repeated the process. Wet sucking noises filled the hidden chamber.

When Luo Binghe fell to his knees he didn’t know. He pulled aside his clothing. The Heart Devil sword hovered in front of him as he hurriedly freed his bulge, and started to rub at it. It maximized the pleasure while his head bobbed back and forth to take his sword deeper and deeper. With his incredible stamina no handjob could be enough but with his own mouth pleasuring himself it came
He wondered what it would feel like to plunge the Heart Devil’s hilt into his husband’s chrysanthemum.

When they left the cave he decided the two of them would find out.

-Excerpt, “Intrigues of the Immortal’s Harem”, Book II, Chapter 34 - The Heart Devil Sword. Translation courtesy of Bad to the Boner Club.

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“Will Husband let me…?”

Luo Binghe felt a rush of excitement as his husband’s throat bobbed, and he nodded without any delay. Shen Qingqiu’s cheeks were flushed, and his clothes were disheveled. His hair was freed from its ties. It had become a soft, silky curtain that draped elegantly down his shoulders, and let him hide behind it in a display of his habitual shyness; disguised as elegance. Reaching out, Luo Binghe carefully brushed the loose hair behind his ears. Then he murmured his thanks, before he sank to his knees, and began to pull open A-Yuan's robe.

A-Yuan's posture slid a little in his chair. His hips squirmed as his flushed cock was exposed to the open air. Luo Binghe licked his lips, familiarity bringing the taste to his tongue before he actually swiped it over the tender, needy flesh. He swirled his tongue across the head of his husband’s cock, and blindly swept his fingers into the jar of ointment he'd conveniently brought along. The better to slick his palms with. Then he closed a hand around the shaft, to keep warm and tease the soft skin all the way down to the taint, before he could work the entire cock into his throat.
The taste of the ointment was the only part he didn’t like, and it wasn’t bad.

He’d have put up with many more unpleasant things, truth be told, just to watch the way A-Yuan’s thighs trembled at the stimulation, and feel the heat of his arousal pressing against the back of his throat. His husband’s scent was intoxicating. But best of all were the noises, the broken breaths, the tiny, half-swallowed moans, and the small whispers of his name. The way they got louder as he started to move, and let his mouth do all the work while he tightened his grip on A-Yuan’s thighs.

“Binghe, Binghe slow down… s-slow…” his husband admonished. The admonishment cut off as Luo Binghe sucked at him.

One of A-Yuan’s hands sank into his hair. There was a gentle tug, and he felt a renewed rush of arousal flare beneath his skin. Tilting his head, he locked eyes with his husband, and moaned around his cock.

A-Yuan shuddered. His hand clenched and unclenched as a rush of familiar, salty fluid filled Luo Binghe’s mouth. He kept his gaze on his husband’s beautiful, wide eyes and flushed face as he swallowed. Then he trembled a little himself when A-Yuan bit his bottom lip, and let out a ragged breath.

“Binghe,” his husband complained, when he had a moment. The flush of his face darkened further, and his voice dropped back down to something quiet and secretive. “If you do that then I can’t… again…”

Laughing, Luo Binghe moved upwards again, and nuzzled at A-Yuan's cheek.

“This lord knows. Husband likes it best when he comes while my cock is inside him. He was being selfish, taking all his tasty offerings like that,” he purred.

His commentary earned him a smack to the shoulder.

“Binghe!”

“Punishment?” he suggested.
A-Yuan huffed, but also rubbed gently at the spot he’d hit.

“No,” his husband said. Not in the mood for that, then. That was alright. Luo Binghe decided he could just punish himself by not coming until A-Yuan was ready to again. With a soft hum, he sated himself with a few kisses instead, and started working on getting them both fully undressed. His husband grumbled a little about them doing it in his study and having to move all the way to the bedroom and his legs being like jelly.

He jumped a little in surprise when Luo Binghe got him half-naked, and then scooped him out of the chair and into his arms.

“Binghe!”

“A-Yuan doesn’t have to walk.”

As ever, the use of that name made his husband’s flustering worsen, and reduced him to a tongue-tied, red-faced mess. It was very satisfying. He was going to take his time working A-Yuan open, he decided. Making sure to touch every sensitive place inside and out as he went slow and steady and got him up again, turned him pliant and listened to his needy breaths, took him with such care that he’d go from whispering admonishments to crying his name when he came for the second time.

The very thought of it made him shiver in delight. He wanted the gift of his husband’s submission, his pleasure, his acceptance.

Shizun narrowed his eyes at him.

“Don’t be too troublesome, I have a busy day tomorrow,” he mumbled, probably knowing what his expression meant.

Luo Binghe kissed his forehead.

“Binghe will be good, Husband. Don’t worry!”
What do you desire? Xin Mo asked Luo Binghe.

In his heart, there an was answer. But it was a dream he had long known to be impossible. The foolish yearning of a child who didn't understand the way this world worked.

What do you desire?

He stared at Liu Qingge's spent body, as his husband slept, depleted and defiled. Utterly taken by him, in every possible way. He owned this man now, and yet... it wasn't enough.

What do you desire?

"Power," he said. "Dominion over all things." Strength enough to never lose whatever it was he managed to gain. To never be denied by what he sought. To be impossible to ignore.

Xin Mo thrummed in recognition.

Power, it could give.

This is more SQH backstory than a lot of actual ship-y stuff, I must admit, but the moshang train trundles along! Warning for some references to domestic abuse and (vague) depictions of it.

It had taken Shang Qinghua a while to realize that he’d transmigrated into the setting of his own novel.

In his defence, the first few years were something of a write-off, since he’d spent them as a baby. Babies didn’t exactly have access to a lot of information about the wider world around them. For most of that time, he had just been freaking out about the fact that he was an infant in the first place! No wonder babies cried so much. It was a frustrating existence and everything else was huge and he was utterly helpless and Shang Qinghua would not recommend it. The only good bit was the frequent cuddling. That, he almost got used to.

When he could finally start to talk and move around on his own, even though he internally wept thinking about how limited he still was, he threw himself into it at all with as much eagerness as possible. It backfired. He tried to talk in full sentences and ended up just garbling nonsense until he gave himself the hiccups and burst into tears. When his legs could support him he tried to walk the wrong way, and too often, and as a result fell down and crashed into things and exhausted himself often. Even more than most toddlers did. His parents fretted over how strange his behaviour was compared to his ‘older brother’ - and said older brother resented the new baby all the more for the extra fussing, and as result, developed a habit of harassing Shang Qinghua whenever no one else was looking. His brother was only a small child, around four years older than him, but even though a child shouldn’t have been intimidating to anyone with an adult’s mind, the differences between a four-year-old and a baby were insurmountable too.

Shang Qinghua couldn’t exactly take revenge on a little kid, or resolve the jealousy issues. So as he got through his toddler years, most of his energy was reserved for surviving his brother’s bullying and his own misguided efforts to start doing things for himself as fast as he could again. There were lots of bruises and stumbles, it seemed like there was always some injury that was healing on him, and he was really glad that infants were resilient by nature.
As he was coming into his early childhood, though, his family hit upon hard financial times. His parents owned a shop that had once occupied a place of privilege along a busy city thoroughfare. When they had procured it ten years ago, it had been one of those places that was guaranteed to turn a profit just by the amount of foot traffic that went by. They could have sold anything and it would have made some money. However, over the years, new markets had opened up and the amount of passersby had dwindled significantly. Most of the other businesses in the area were stalls, and their owners had moved along to where the traffic was. With fewer other merchants to draw people in, and less traffic in general passing by, business had begun to dwindle.

By the time Shang Qinghua was five, there was nothing for it. His parents sold their store at a huge loss from their initial investment, and his mother took to traveling, resuming her old trade work to try and keep them afloat. She could be gone for weeks, even months at a time. Shang Qinghua’s father, on the other hand, took to drinking.

It was a familiar scenario of a fraught home life, with an absent mother and neglectful father, even if it wasn’t quite the same as his first childhood situation. Luckily, Shang Qinghua’s father wasn’t a mean-spirited drunk. He was more prone to fits of melancholy, crying and wallowing, going out to drink with friends in order to forget his troubles, and then coming home to make messes and look sorry in the morning. One of the first ‘useful’ things Shang Qinghua remembered from his old life was a hangover remedy that he’d had to make for his old roommates. He never really drank much himself, but he had the recipe memorized; the only trouble was trying to approximate substitutes for some ingredients.

It was actually his first clue that he had transmigrated into his own novel, though he still didn’t quite realize it at the time. Despite being in a place that heavily resembled some forgotten time period in ancient China, coffee beans could be bought at market. They weren’t rare items, either. Shang Qinghua wasn’t an expert on agriculture, but peering around at various food stalls, he felt pretty sure that a lot of the items on display wouldn’t have actually been found in a historical Chinese market. At least, not in abundance?

He was only five, though, and whenever he went to the market stalls he had to go with his brother. His brother didn’t like him talking to people or asking questions. Shang Qinghua didn’t like to get hit, so the end result was that he had to keep a lot of his thoughts to himself. He managed to make his father the hangover remedy, even so, with only a few trial-and-errors to figure out how to use their house’s tiny kitchen. Luckily, most of it was just a matter of mixing things together. The hardest part was heating up the coffee.

His father drank the offering with the air of a guilty man humouring a cute child, despite being dubious about the contents of his cup. It wasn’t until he actually felt better, a few minutes later, that he turned a curious eye to Shang Qinghua and asked what he’d put in the drink. And it wasn’t until three more trial sessions that the man agreed his concoction really was good to fixing headaches.
He didn’t seem to know what to make of it.

It also occurred to Shang Qinghua that a five-year-old knowing a headache remedy was a little weird, but since the oddity had led to a good outcome, it was eventually shrugged aside as a matter of luck. Shang Qinghua must have just randomly mixed things together and then stumbled upon a winning combination!

His father dubbed him his lucky star.

His brother, aching for parental affection and even more unsettled by the family’s insecurity, hated him all the more for receiving such praise.

Shang Qinghua’s only reprieve for the next few years was when their mother came home from her travels. His brother would be too busy trying to soak up as much of her attention as possible to waste much time with him, and their father did his best to try and regain some resemblance to a functioning adult while she was around. Shang Qinghua was content to try and fade to the background, to be unobtrusive and not compete for her time, but she still sought him out. His mother was loud and brash and talked a lot, but for some reason she was always quieter with him. Leaving more openings that compelled him to fill the silence himself, until he inevitably discovered that at some point he’d begun babbling about this or that idea, this or that event, this or that problem. Simple stuff, because he was supposed to be a little kid, after all. But she always listened.

He liked that. He hadn’t had a lot of it in his other life. Being listened to was addictive, no matter what it was that he actually managed to say.

But times were still rough. Before he had turned seven, just getting together enough money for food was becoming a serious challenge. His parents sold their city house and moved out to the countryside, to a little backwater where he and his brother had to share a room, and the corners of the house always felt drafty, and there was enough space for a proper vegetable plot and a chicken coop but the soil was hard and infertile. Shang Qinghua developed a deep and abiding fear of chickens in very short order - who knew they were so aggressive? - and didn’t know if he was more worried about their father drinking himself into liver failure, or their father drinking them into debt.

By then he was old enough to be pretty competently mobile and articulate, so, he did what he always did whenever survival was on the line - he went out and tried to find ways of making money on his own.
His first attempt was fertilizers. Remembering some tips from his past life, and his own brief attempts at growing a windowsill garden and researching for one of his fluff novels, he messed around with some combinations until he found a pretty winning fertilizer formula. Using it on their home’s vegetable patch was good. But packaging it up to sell was even better. Shang Qinghua only had a limited understanding of sales, but he learned quickly. Going around town, he convinced as many people as he could to try some free samples of his Amazing Miracle Fertilizer. Only a few did, at first, but when they saw the results, he actually began to make sales! And then he began to make more sales, as people around town talked among each other and admitted that the weird, scruffy kid with the perpetually bruised shins had a good thing going. Farmers from further afield even started to come in, ordering his fertilizer in enough batches that the whole yard ended up smelling like it.

Shang Qinghua didn’t even try to pretend that it was his own concoction, either. He told everyone it was a family secret.

There was probably something kind of hilarious in the idea that, in the end, it was his hunt for better fertilizer ingredients that finally clued him in to the fact that he was living in a fantasy world. As in, a world with magic and cultivation and demons and monsters and whatnot.

Well, admittedly, he’d been told some stories about demons and monsters before. But what small child wasn’t warned that if he didn’t behave, some awful creature would come along and steal him or terrify him or eat his eyeballs or something? That was standard child-rearing stuff! He had no reason to think any of it had more basis in this world than it did in his last one. Although, his parents had worried about ‘demons on the road’ when they’d been forced to pack up and move. But again, metaphors and hyperbole were a thing, and so was superstition. And, okay, so his brother did play-pretend at being cultivators with the other children he ran around with - but again, why would he assume that was at all real? Didn’t all kids make up games based on fantastic things they’d heard?

…Actually, that probably should have tipped him off the most. His brother was a lot of things, but ‘imaginative’ didn’t really make the list.

So, in the end, the situation only started to become clear when his hunt for fertilizer ingredients unearthed the apparent controversy of using ‘demonic’ ingredients for such things. Naturally, it wasn’t long after he’d first started to puzzle over the meaning of this distinction, that someone came along and accused his family of selling fertilizer with ‘demon blood’ in it.

There was no demon blood in Shang Qinghua’s fertilizer, of course. But the seriousness with which people argued about things like possible means of acquisition and trade integrity made him feel like it was maybe more than just some superstitious yokel type situation? Which got him asking questions. The more he asked questions, the more the answers twigged something in the back of his mind. It wasn’t until he started piecing together matters about cultivation that he
realized the truth, and nearly panicked.

His mother, back from one of her long trips, had smiled at his questions and patted his head.

“I’ve met a few cultivators,” she told him. “Even a person with the surname Lan from Gusu. Lan Qiren, I think his name was? He was very stern! We traveled the same road for a few days and I don’t think he smiled once…”

Shang Qinghua felt, all at once, like he’d been rooted to the spot.

…Lan Qiren?

From Gusu?

That… had to be a coincidence, right…?

As soon as he thought that, though, he had to wonder why it would be more difficult to believe than the entire phenomenon of his transmigration in the first place! Although transmigrating into his own novel was just too unexpected. How could that be real? He wrote it! He remembered coming up with it! Every good idea and every bad idea and all those sleepless nights of staring at the blinking cursor of his word processor, wracking his brain for ideas, scrolling through the comments sections for a sign of where to go. The endless requests for more papapa and the hate mail and the scathing articles calling him a blight on the genre. The take-downs and hosting site migrations and VIP bonus content.

How could it be real?

But it was!

Once he accepted it, his first sentiments were relief. He wasn’t just in any weird old world after all, he was in his own book! He knew far more things than he ever would have suspected, just by virtue of that. Suddenly, there was a lot less for him to figure out than he might have imagined. Heck, he knew the secret to immortality! He knew how to cultivate! Provided all those draft notes and bits of creative license he’d taken really were valid after all, anyway. It seemed like as good a starting point as any…
But almost as soon as he felt the relief, dread chased after it.

He was in his novel.


The story that was an utter crapsack world for… basically everyone. Even the protagonists, in the end!

Oh, *fuck*!

Shang Qinghua had spent a few weeks more or less panicking whenever he could spare a private moment for it. He was gonna die! He was gonna die! Unless he could avoid the main plot altogether, of course, but would he ever be so lucky? His mind had already started puzzling over the situation in a fresh light, and with the right leads, he realized what character he had transmigrated into. That cowardly traitor cannon fodder who Mobei-Jun had killed!

Mobei-Jun!

*Mobei-Jun was real!*

That thought had Shang Qinghua sweating bullets as he lay awake in bed.

Mobei-Jun…

The first time Shang Qinghua had managed to write a whole novel, his main character had basically just been himself but better-looking. The love interest had been his dream guy. The entire piece had been pure fluff, and hadn’t gotten a lot of traffic. But it had garnered just *enough* attention for him to realize he could probably make money with his hobby.

Unfortunately, though, commenters could be ruthless. Having a character so like himself meant
that every critical remark about his leading man left him feeling personally attacked. People thought his protagonist was annoying, too insecure, too incompetent and boring and OP at the same time… it was exhausting, until it reached the point where he just abandoned that pen name and novel altogether.

For his second outing, he tried to make a protagonist who was more likable to other people. The criticisms didn’t really die down, but they also didn’t hurt as much. Only, the comments directed at the main love interest could be just as cruel - and Shang Qinghua found himself not liking them any better. His dream men were great, okay? Who didn’t like strong, stoic tops with tons of masculine energy and internal conflict and pecks you could bounce a quarter off of? Apparently there were some people who weren’t into that! Shang Qinghua wouldn’t have cared except that they made it their life’s mission to insult his dream man, whatever form he happened to take, and that was rough! It was like they were trying to drag his very own hopes and dreams right through the mud!

So, for his third novel, he tried something different. He kept all his own interests off to the sidelines, and then spared just enough of himself for the protagonist and the romantic lead to keep him from feeling completely bored with writing them.

It worked.

The criticism bounced right off of him!

Sure, sometimes people still made remarks about his side characters, but that didn’t hurt nearly as much. It was almost enough for him to start feeling indifferent to all of the criticism, in fact! After all, in many ways, no one was ever telling him stuff that he didn’t already know. That segment was rushed? Well, yes, he wrote it an hour before he was supposed to meet his posting schedule, because he got hungry and overslept. That character was one-dimensional? Of course she was, she was only there to do a job and then get out two scenes later! Why would he waste energy on fleshing out every meaningless NPC? The sex was unrealistic? Who wanted realistic sex, realistic sex was just painful and embarrassing and anticlimactic anyway! Shang Qinghua’s ill-fated one-night-stand had put him off of real sex for good!

Getting easier at handling the trolls and critics also made it easier to write more.

So then, Intrigues of the Immortal’s Harem had happened.

Shang Qinghua had intended good things from the start. He really had! Some of his commenters had made a few legitimately good points on his last novel, and he’d wanted to do a subversion of
some of the more popular novels floating around at the time, too. One of the big stories going around was a master/slave relationship that people were talking (and fighting) about nonstop. The idea had bitten him at three in the morning, while he was rummaging around making ramen and flipping between a documentary on lions and an imperial harem drama.

Next thing he knew, his ramen was going cold while he typed frantically, outlining the basic premise of a story with many books and three major arcs - and a different protagonist for each arc. But the first protagonist would still carry through to the next two arcs as a side-character. Shang Qinghua decided to make him a legitimately good-hearted and noble person, who was absolutely hopeless at everything to do with inner court intrigues and political machinations. The sort of character no one would expect to see in the role of a damsel, a warrior with tremendous skill and resolve, like the displaced hero of a fighting game.

Liu Qingge.

The first arc, Shang Qinghua decided, he’d write just like a traditional ‘ancient love story defies odds’ type tale. There’d be the jealous First Wife - only he’d be a guy - and the dreamy, rich, kindhearted love interest, and all the cliche misadventures and rampant scheming and intrigues. Only, instead of rising above it all by virtue of his good nature, the protagonist would instead suffer increasing misunderstandings and fall victim to more and more sabotage. Ultimately, he would uncover the truth that even the person he thought was his primary enemy the entire time had, in the end, just been another victim of a society that would happily grind most people into minced meat and feed them to the rest!

The second arc would be where most of the revelations would come in, and things would switch over to the perspective of a character who had a chance to rise up from the bottom. Luo Binghe would go from being mince meat to sitting in the throne of the emperor himself! But in the process, that character would utterly lose his perspective, and instead of living up to his potential to free the world from its struggles, he’d become petty and vindictive and only perpetuate them instead. Liu Qingge would fall from the arms of a man who was good but ultimately ineffective, to one who was effective but ultimately no good.

It would only be in the third arc that things would finally begin to change, after Luo Binghe died tragically at the hands of his own student. Said student, Wei Wuxian, would be the one to tear down the barriers of the corrupt society while on his own quest for revenge. It would be bittersweet, Shang Qinghua had thought, as daylight began to sneak in through his windows, and his ramen had congealed into an unappetizing mess. Under Liu Qingge’s tutelage and with his own goals driving him forward, Wei Wuxian would be the downfall of society. On the one hand, this would leave room for a better society to rise up and avoid the same corruption as the last time. But on the other, the subsequent chaos and destruction would cost many lives. And there was always the chance that past mistakes would still be repeated anyway. Shang Qinghua got to the tearful conclusion where Wei Wuxian literally tore himself apart to try and banish some of the very evils he had created in his quest, while the man he loved struggled to reach him, before he finally sat back.
There’d have to be an epilogue, he decided. Maybe going back to Liu Qingge again…? Of all his characters, he felt like that one deserved a happy ending more than most. It would be nice to think of one for him. End on a hopeful note.

But that was enough of an outline to be going off of, he had decided, and finally gone back to bed to sleep off his creative fervor.

The first book, as he wrote it, had gone off without even much of a hitch. So had the beginning segment of the Book II. Shang Qinghua had, for the first time in his life, really felt like a proper writer. Like he was making something that was going to be good. Maybe even meaningful! Or epic! Even though a lot of people abandoned the story at the start of Book II, his overall readership saw a steady increase. He didn’t even mind when a group of his regular readers threatened to track him down and beat him senseless if he didn’t stop tormenting Liu Qingge. He was happy to see them defending his protagonist, in fact! That was a nice change of pace! He’d never had his readers want to rescue a character from his own writing before.

So when it came to Mobei-Jun, he felt confident enough to let himself cut loose a little bit.

Mobei-Jun was a side character. A minor villain turned ally, who was destined to become more important in the third arc, when he took control of most of hell and allied the demons with Wei Wuxian. Since he wasn’t going to be anyone’s love interest, Shang Qinghua felt like it was safe to just indulge and channel a lot of his preferences into him. It wasn’t long before Mobei-Jun was his secret favourite. Even though the demon king kept up a cold veneer, he was actually a keen observer. He was unfailingly loyal to anyone who earned his admiration, but ruthlessly dismissive of those who didn’t. Like Shang Qinghua, his family had been at turns negligent or outright villainous towards him. So in his heart there lived a deep loneliness, that even Mobei-Jun himself struggled to acknowledge. He was the sort of character who was immensely dangerous to random NPCs, but also invaluable as an ally to any protagonist who might win him over. And he was very tall, and broad, and powerful, with strong features and piercing eyes and ice powers so he functioned as a perpetual air conditioner because it was a sweltering hell of a summer when Shang Qinghua dreamed him up.

But then.

Then.

His laptop had died.
It was a fucking disaster! Okay? A genuine major setback! New computers were expensive, even the cheap ones were hundreds of dollars! His laptop had already been old. Shang Qinghua had additionally made the mistake of forgetting it on his table in the midst of said sweltering summer (with no air conditioning), and while he’d been trying to desperately cool himself with a bath, he’d fallen asleep. By the time he woke up, he’d smelled melting plastic and hurried into the main room, only to find that his antique laptop was utterly fried.

It, and all the notes he’d put into it, too.

But in order to get a new computer, he needed to post chapters. And in order to post chapters, he needed to write.

Shang Qinghua would be the first to admit that the chapters he’d written on his phone were not very good. And the computer disaster had happened after those articles had started coming out flaming his story, so he didn’t feel as though he could admit what had happened and ask for donations from his readers or anything, because probably a bunch of his hate-readers would just throw a party and celebrate his misfortune instead. Nevermind that the whole point was to get around to subverting everything they were criticizing anyway, who would believe him?

In the end, though, despite him not saying anything, some of his actual fan readers had pieced together that something was up, and his donations had increased. His father had also remembered to send him money that month. Shang Qinghua bought the cheapest computer he could, and wept over it. Lovely readers! Thank you for eternity!

On the spot, he vowed then and there that he would do whatever his loyal readership wanted. Forget the haters! He had real fans, and they were saints! Whatever story they wanted to read, he’d write it!

Well, it seemed like a good resolution at the time! He’d lost his outline, and while his memory for a lot of his fiddly world-building details was good, he tended to lose track of plots and things without a frame of reference. He didn’t have time to just sit back and try and write a whole new outline based on his existing material, either, because he needed to keep updating if he wanted to keep eating. So, since the people genuinely enjoying Luo Binghe’s antics were the ones who had supported him in his hour of need anyway, why not just play his ‘subversion’ pretty straight anyway, and let the demon king reign?

Luo Binghe ought to papapa with Liu Qingge right away? Sure, might as well!

Luo Binghe needed more powers? Excellent idea!
Luo Binghe ought to go to a brothel and just sleep around for a few chapters? Shang Qinghua could definitely write that with no trouble!

Luo Binghe should make that pretty Gongyi Xiao his concubine? Well… okay…

Luo Binghe ought to kill that annoying side character and wave his head around on a stick? He could… definitely do that…

Luo Binghe needed to teach that Mobei-Jun a lesson and utterly dominate him? …Ah… if it would make the readers happy…

Luo Binghe should use some of that aphrodisiac incense to get that cute doctor character into his bed? …That seemed like it was bound to backfire, but… well…

In his defense, Shang Qinghua hadn’t stopped thinking about what he was writing, while he was writing it. He tried to work with what he could work with! He really did! He still figured that Luo Binghe would die tragically, but with all the characters who had been reduced to harem members by the ravenous demands of his horny readership, it seemed inevitable that his comeuppance would come from that direction instead. If it came at all. Shang Qinghua was making good money, so he was content to leave the end of what was technically just the second arc to one side, while Luo Binghe more or less papapa’d his way into a perpetually deeper grave. Some days he even felt like maybe this was an even more effective approach! A lot of his original themes still applied, right?

Right?

But most of the time, he knew he’d kind of a made a hack out of the entire situation. It still didn’t bother him too much. People read his work, even enjoyed it, and the satisfaction of a real person had to be worth a lot more than the pretense of fiction. Right? Even Mobei-Jun, his beloved character who he ended up betraying so badly, wasn’t a real person. Not like the reader who’d wanted to see him debased and subjugated.

Or so he had thought.

Lying in his bed, reviewing his life choices, Shang Qinghua suddenly wanted to protest.
Why was it real?! Was Mobei-Jun really real? Was Liu Qingge? Luo Binghe? And if so, did that mean… could it really be that Shang Qinghua had put actual people through all of that…?

That wasn’t possible.

He wasn’t a god! How could something he wrote be real?!

He wanted to find out who had made his worst novel into reality just so he could shake them and demand to know if they were a sadist. Wasn’t the whole point of writing dark fiction that it wasn’t real? That it could have bad things happen without genuine consequence? Shang Qinghua wasn’t a maniac! He’d never torture or rape or murder anyone! His mind shied away from the concept that he’d somehow become an accessory to such things anyway, simply by writing them out.

It couldn’t be! Right? Right?

A piteous wail escaped him.

“I’m sorry!” he exclaimed. “I’m so sorry, I never would have done it if I’d known! Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me, ahhh, it’s not my fault, I never wished you any harm I swear! If I’d known I wouldn’t have done it! I’d have written nothing but fluff for all my days! Happy endings, just happy endings, I wouldn’t have even made anyone get a head cold, those are awful! Please forgive me, please forgive-”

His ramblings were cut off by his brother waking up and coming to hit him.

“Shut up, you little freak!”

“Ge, was I talking out loud? I’m sorry!”

“If you wake me up again I’ll feed you to the chickens!”

“I didn’t mean to! I really didn’t!”
In a weird way, getting beaten up almost made him feel better. He felt like he deserved retribution, and even if his brother was giving it for the wrong reasons, maybe this was why he had been saddled with such a rough life in his own world. A lot of his readers had been quick to assure him that he deserved misery. Maybe the universe had agreed. Maybe every story a person wrote became a real world somewhere, and Shang Qinghua had betrayed his own inspiration so badly, he’d been sent to witness his own mistakes firsthand.

…It seemed really unfair for authors to face such dire situations without even a warning beforehand, though!

~

In the end, when Shang Qinghua calmed down, he decided that he couldn’t really be responsible for everything bad that had happened. However the world had come to be, he definitely wasn’t a god. And since he wasn’t a god, he couldn’t possibly control the lives or actions of other people. And this world was full of other people! Ergo, nothing was his fault and it never would be, so he was allowed to keep breathing and not just kill himself in shame.

That didn’t mean he stopped thinking about the situation a lot, though.

For example, if he really was his own traitorous side character, then he had some idea of the time frame of events. He was young, so, the actual events of his story had yet to happen. That meant that even though it wasn’t his fault and he couldn’t be blamed for it, he still might be able to do some things to prevent the unjust suffering of a lot of characters.

Maybe.

Shang Qinghua couldn’t pretend he was actually… good… at… most things. Or anything, really. Not even writing, as it happened. But! There still might be some chance! Right? After all, if he really was in the role he thought he was in, then he was pretty much destined to meet Mobei-Jun someday. Wasn’t he?
...Oh.

Oh shit.

He was destined to meet Mobei-Jun someday!

Mobei-Jun would want to kill him. And actually, all things considered, that might not be unfair! Shang Qinghua had really... really not done him justice. Not that the real Mobei-Jun would know that, of course. He'd just think he was annoying and kill him off the minute he was no longer useful. But either way, fair or not, merited or not, Shang Qinghua didn't want to die! Again! He may have designed Mobei-Jun with the intention of making him hot, but he'd also made him a violent and powerful demon lord who could treat other people like ants without remorse!

That was only hot in fiction! In real life it was just terrifying! Well maybe also still a little hot, but mostly just terrifying!

It would be better if he never met Mobei-Jun at all. Or any of the other characters, either. Maybe he could think of a way to change things for the better without having to ever... actually... see anyone?

Although he kind of wanted to. Those were his creations! Sort of. If he was even allowed to claim them while also disavowing all responsibility for their fates.

Unfortunately, Shang Qinghua had never written out this minor character’s first encounter with the demon lord. So on that front, he didn’t even know when it would happen or how he might avoid it. He’d had a nebulous concept of something kind of important going down - otherwise, why would Mobei-Jun ever tolerate that weasely little human to begin with? But he’d never even bothered to make a note for it, since it hadn’t seemed important enough.

He wanted to weep. He really wanted to weep! And curse his past self out! Not important?! As it turned out all of it was vitally important!

But weeping and cursing only made his brother angrily wake up in the dead of night and beat him up. So after a few more weeks, he forced himself to calm down, and try to think of a plan. A solution. Some kind of... approach, at least.
When he finally alighted on an idea, he calmed down.

Of course.

Xin Mo!

Never before had Shang Qinghua been so grateful for that terrible plot device (although, in fact, he’d been grateful for it well enough several times while writing that novel). That sword was easily his most evil child! And as such, it was responsible for a lot of horrible plot twists and tragic events and warped situations. Over time, while he’d been writing, Shang Qinghua had even come to think of Xin Mo as the pure concentrated perversion of himself and his readers. Not just perversion in the horny sense, either - although there definitely was that - but in terms of all the weird violence and revenge fantasies and other dark scenarios that got requested, too! In point of fact, it was fair to say that towards the latter end of things, Xin Mo was more of a protagonist of the story his novel had turned into than Luo Binghe. Little though Luo Binghe himself knew it. Like a parasite, the cursed sword had latched onto his soul, and the longer he kept it for, the more entwined the two became.

Of course, Xin Mo wasn’t actually the first miserable scenario that Shang Qinghua had written out. All the tragedies of the first act, and the first part of the second novel, were purely a matter of human faults and political machinations. But, comparatively, the suffering for that part of the story wasn’t very widespread. Mostly it was just four people who bore the brunt of it - Shen Qingqiu, Yue Qingyuan, Luo Binghe, and of course, Liu Qingge.

Maybe it was ruthless to think that those four were mostly doomed no matter what, but Shang Qinghua couldn’t see a way out of it. What was he going to do? Walk up to Yue Qingyuan and give him love advice? He hadn’t even transmigrated into someone who could prostrate himself at Lord Yue’s feet! He was too lowly!

No, those four people were probably doomed to a measure of unhappiness no matter what. Shang Qinghua would light incense for them, when the time came, but he couldn’t assume he’d be able to influence anything, when his family was still struggling to keep food on the table.

And if possible, he really thought he should avoid Mobei-Jun, too. What he could do, he decided, was find Xin Mo. He had some idea of where it would be, after all! The trouble was that it would be in hell, so… not someplace he could just visit on a whim. He’d need to be capable of surviving the trip. And it would be better if his family was in good financial shape, because then he could hire bodyguards, too! So long as he got rid of Xin Mo before Luo Binghe was old enough to try and claim the sword, then the worst of his writing wouldn’t have a chance to turn the world into an utter crapsack!
Well, more of one than it had always been, anyway.

A little kid definitely wasn’t going to survive that kind of task, though, so Shang Qinghua’s first order of business was:

Make money!

And since he knew that he was in his own novel, he had a lot more ideas of how to go about that. Fertilizer was just the beginning! Dumb details were always the ones that stuck best with him, so even though Shang Qinghua had forgotten which order Luo Binghe married his husbands in or whether or not he’d actually resolved that plot arc with Tianlang-Jun, he definitely remembered that his setting had certain convenient amenities (like magic toilets) but lacked several other modern conveniences (like bubble tea and face cream masks).

With such glaring gaps existing in the world, what better way to make money than to fill them?

And so, Shang Qinghua’s fertilizer business began to expand!

He started off simple again. Mostly just making things and offering them to the neighbours, and when they seemed to go over well, making more on demand in exchange for trade items or coin. His father was in the midst of another downward spiral, and scarcely seemed to notice. His older brother…

To Shang Qinghua’s surprise, after initially reacting the same way he always did - with distaste and bullying - his older brother seemed to begin to change his tune.

Maybe it was because he was growing up a bit more. But as Shang Qinghua set about peddling his wares, his brother started to spend more time just watching him. And then, after a while, he actually approached Shang Qinghua with a smile on his face, and slung an arm over his shoulder. He didn’t try to choke him or anything afterwards, either!

“Didi’s pretty good at coming up with stuff,” he noted.

Shang Qinghua nearly fell over at the endearment alone, nevermind actually being complimented!
“Ge, a-are you making fun of me?” he asked.

His brother scoffed.

“What, you think I’d only make fun of you?” he demanded, retracting his arm. In his haste to get back the rare display of affection, Shang Qinghua scrambled to deny it.

“Of course not, Ge! I-I just… do you really mean it? You think I’m doing good?”

His brother looked like he might roll his eyes. But he didn’t.

“We-ell, good as you can, with some of it,” the older-but-younger boy hedged. “Nobody takes such a tiny salesman seriously though! You’ve got all this stuff but you get cheated all the time. And it costs money to make things, too! You need to be more smart about the numbers.”

Ordinarily, Shang Qinghua would take it with a grain of salt that a preteen was lecturing him on finances. But this was his older brother. Despite the weirdness of their life situation, some part of him had just become trained to feel intimidated by him - and in return, he found that it wasn’t so hard to think that maybe this kid knew better than him on some topics, too. After all, Shang Qinghua hadn’t really had much of an education in this world. Nor had he been any sort of salesman in his past life.

“Ge, do you know what I should do differently…?” he asked, fidgeting with his sleeves.

His older brother smiled.

“Since it’s for the good of the family, how about if I handle a lot of the sales stuff, and you focus more on making things?” he offered.

And that… actually didn’t seem like a bad idea.

Shang Qinghua had not been particularly big in either of his lives, but as a child, he was of course
especially small. It was hard for him to haul his goods around town. His brother, on the other hand, was pretty strong. He’d inherited more of their father’s looks, too, which meant he had an honest-seeming face, and bright, spirited eyes. Shang Qinghua always looked sort of like something that should be dragging along the ground behind a cat.

It probably did have an effect on sales.

He wasn’t stupid, though. He knew his brother was probably just being nice because he wanted money. But that was okay! If he helped make more, then he could have more money, for sure! Shang Qinghua wasn’t stingy, he put everything he earned back into the family. Even the money he stashed away was mostly just hidden so that their father wouldn’t buy drinks with it when they needed food instead. His older brother liked having nice things. He still intensely missed the home they’d lived in before, and the clothes and toys he’d had when they were younger. Him wanting money wasn’t a surprise; what was a surprise was that he was actually willing to do something to get it, to work with Shang Qinghua and maybe even recognize his efforts.

Who knew? Maybe if they kept it up, their relationship could keep getting better! And they could really be like brothers!

So, Shang Qinghua readily agreed, and started focusing more on things he could come up with, while his brother worked on the selling and trading aspect of things.

Of course, their village wasn’t really wealthy, so there was a limit to the amount of business they actually could do. Even for useful items, most of their neighbours had few coins to spare. Bartering tended to work better, since it was easier for people to part with goods they had in abundance than to get their hands on actual banknotes. Shang Qinghua had never minded bringing home baskets of eggs or bags of rice in exchange for his goods; if anything, he liked it better, since it was harder for their father to drink the results. But his brother often came home fuming about the cheapness of this backwater they lived in.

In truth, he struggled more than Shang Qinghua when it came to selling things. But then, he was an actual child. As long as they were staying afloat, it was fine! They had time. His brother would learn, and in the meanwhile, he’d stopped hating and resenting Shang Qinghua’s weirdness so much. That already made things a lot better at home. It was a good trade-off!

It really was!

When Shang Qinghua was ten, and his brother was fourteen, he finally figured it was time to start taking things more seriously, and approached their mother with the matter of his ‘inventions’.
Previously, their mother hadn’t known much about it. She was away too often, and had naturally assumed that her husband was working. Shang Qinghua hadn’t anticipated the level of ire she’d directed towards their father, when she found out that he wasn’t really doing much of anything. If he’d thought it through, then he would have explained things differently; but at the time he’d just wanted to illustrate that he had a good thing going! However, instead of getting excited and figuring out how to expand their operations, at first, his mother had just dragged his father out of a neighbour’s house and brought him home so she could beat him.

It wasn’t a light beating, either.

“You useless son of a bitch!” she snarled. “I’ve been traveling day and night to bring home money, but what have you been doing? Hmm? What have you been doing?! The boys are supposed to be studying! We agreed, why are you letting them do all the work to support you?!! Shameless piece of trash! Just see if I let you stay here any longer!”

Shang Qinghua and his brother both watched in shock as their father took the beating, crying and groveling on the floor.

On the one hand, some part of him definitely understood where his mother was coming from. He was sick of his father’s neglect, too. But on the other hand… the man was just pathetic. Every time he got another hit, Shang Qinghua flinched. His old man didn’t even fight back, he just took it all, but that was almost a relief. He didn’t want to see a two-way fight between his parents, the one-way beating was bad enough. His mother’s expression was hard with fury, and for a moment he was genuinely afraid she’d just drag his father out to the street and lock him out there.

But his father clung to her legs and begged and pleaded, and after he was covered in black and blue bruises, she finally relented.

“We’re going to do things differently, starting from now on,” his mother declared. “Very differently.”

That had kind of been the end goal, but looking at the dismal atmosphere of their home, Shang Qinghua couldn’t help but feel like he’d done a terrible job of handling the situation anyway.
The new arrangement ended up being that Shang Qinghua and his brother would travel with their mother, while his father kept up their house and only had to look after himself in the meanwhile. His mother didn’t kick him out, in the end, although she threatened it several times. But his father just made himself seem so pathetic that it was also impossible for anyone with an ounce of pity to stomach being really cruel to him.

Shang Qinghua understood the tactic. It was a little surprising to realize he had something in common with a member of his transmigration family, in fact!

…It would have been nice if it could have been something a little less… ignoble, though…

Oh well. At least he wasn’t also an alcoholic! *He* was perfectly good at being pathetic while sober, thank you very much!

Traveling with his mother was exhausting, though. Shang Qinghua took it back, he didn’t really need a plan and they definitely didn’t need to expand operations; he could go back to looking after his deadbeat father and selling fertilizer! It worked out! And there was less walking, which was amazing because he had already thought that there was too much walking in his life. But somehow, even with the donkey cart his mother managed to buy, nearly all of traveling meant walking from dawn until dusk.

His brother liked it even less than he did, and their relationship took a sharp turn back to what it had been before their tenuous truce. The only reprieve was that their mother was around all the time, and so his brother had to be sneaky to really get away with hurting him. Most of the time it was just glares and sometimes tripping him.

In addition to all the walking, of course, there was also work to be done. His mother wasn’t a cultivator, but she carried a sword and knew how to use it. She started teaching them the same things, and Shang Qinghua took the opportunity - given his age as well - to begin putting into practice some of his theories on cultivating in this world. To his relief, a lot of it seemed to hold up; while he was far and away from a proper cultivator, he could feel himself making some progress, in the lull periods where travel became too dull to otherwise countenance. He wasn’t actually much good with a sword, though.
His brother was better, and that pleased the youth enough to improve his mood. At least until the part of the day where they had to load and unload the cart, or look after the donkey. The donkey bit.

Shang Qinghua couldn’t help but curse that he hadn’t come up with one of those world settings where all the animals were unrealistically nice and friendly. Maybe not one of the ones where they talked, because in his opinion that could lead to some creepy situations and also weird ethical conundrums, but definitely one of those ones where birds and deer and things would just randomly flock to pure-hearted maidens and bond with them and stuff. He wasn’t a pure-hearted maiden, but he figured he was at least well-meaning enough to merit an elderly donkey’s lack of total disdain.

…Unless the donkey knew what he’d written.

Anyway. Apart from loading and unloading goods, sometimes he and his brother also had to help set up a market stall for his mother, too. That was more work, but usually if they were in a city, it at least meant that they’d get beds to spend the night in. Shang Qinghua hated sleeping on the ground, even though his current body had never known the comfort of a foam mattress, he felt like his soul could still remember it.

Unfortunately, he had no idea how to make memory foam. Or else he definitely would have tried it!

The other products he managed to pull out of his ass tended to sell pretty well, though. His mother praised him a lot, which was nice. And she seemed to agree with his brother’s ideas about a division of labour, because she taught him a lot about manning a stall or shop and being a salesperson. Focusing more on having him handle the customers, while Shang Qinghua was just left to fiddle with things and come up with products on his own.

Two years later, their prospects had seen enough improvement that his mother decided to purchase a shop in one of the mid-sized townships near Yunmeng. It was a good place to do trade from, because of its situation along one of the major riverways, without being too expensive to live in or restrictive in who could own land there. With the shop being in town, there was no reason to keep their village house; so they packed everything up and moved again, in a long slog where they left most things they couldn’t fit in the wagon behind.

Shang Qinghua saw his father again for the first time in two years. The man seemed to be in as much of a sorry state as they’d left him in, and hadn’t done well with looking after the house in their absence. The vegetable garden was barely tended, and the chickens had all died or been sold off. But somehow, his father managed to almost seem upbeat once they were on the road; excited
for the prospect of opening another shop.

“You’re not going to run it,” his mother informed him, rolling her eyes.

His father didn’t seem discouraged. In fact, he seemed convinced that no matter what anyone said, this shop they were getting would still be his. Shang Qinghua almost admired his selective hearing. It was definitely nicer to live in a fantasy than to deal with other people’s disappointment and resentment.

He understood. He’d never taken it so far himself, though, and from the outside, it was also pretty obnoxious. There was a real world, old man! Please pay attention! Their livelihoods were at stake!

Though thinking about that just gave Shang Qinghua a headache, because of the nature of this ‘real world’…

Anyway, as it happened, things mostly worked out. The shop their mother bought wasn’t big, but it had a good location. The house was even better; it had belonged to a friend of his mother’s mother, and had been left in disrepair for some time after this friend’s death, since all of his children had moved on. Initially, Shang Qinghua had a lot of mixed feelings. From the outside, the house looked very nice, if a little neglected. From the inside, it clearly required a lot of work. Sleeping the first night was musty and unpleasant. But, there was a lot of potential. Even though he internally complained - and also externally, sometimes or maybe a lot - the more they worked, the more Shang Qinghua began to think that this house might end up being the nicest place he’d ever lived in.

In both lives, actually! His family in his first life had been rich, but their opulence was relative to city living. A big apartment was expensive, and could be very nice, but in the end it was still an apartment. There were trade-offs. But at this house, Shang Qinghua had his own bedroom once more, and the outdoor space was big and had the thumbprint of some really nice landscaping. Best of all, though, was the work shed.

The space was little more than an empty box full of must and cobwebs. He mother took him out to it, and told him that if he cleaned it up, then it was all his. He could make all the inventions and concoctions he wanted to in his own, separate space, without having to worry about other people barging in and interrupting.

Having the workspace was amazing. But just having a whole area where no one would bother him, that was even better. Shang Qinghua had missed solitude! And privacy! There wasn’t a lot of it on the road, okay? And he’d had plenty in his past life. More than enough that he probably should
have been sick of it, but some things, a person just got used to. It had its ups and downs, really. The work shed at least meant that if he needed to choose, he had someplace he could retreat to - even if it was just to pretend to work.

He could maybe even write in it! Though, it needed furnishings.

In the end, while Shang Qinghua cleaned up most of the house and weeded the garden, and his mother and brother started setting up the store, it was his father who was tasked with handling the furniture. Most heavy things in this world were a lot easier to build where a person wanted them, than to ship across long distances. Shang Qinghua hadn’t thought to make an equivalent to IKEA for his setting, more was the pity. He did still remember some basic designs from the old desk he had put together years ago, though, and after a while, he talked the matter over with his father, and they came up with something suitable to put in the work shed. His father bought the materials, and while he still managed to drink a fair bit throughout the project, he also got the furniture built.

That was the good stuff.

The bad stuff was the fighting that seemed to happen every night, arguments that, when the weather was warm enough, chased Shang Qinghua out to sleep in the work shed to avoid them. His relationship with his brother settled on being generally bad again - his brother spent his days at the shop, and took out any embarrassment or frustration he’d had on Shang Qinghua. Or, sometimes, their father too. He seemed to have picked up their mother’s general disdain for the man. If something went wrong during the day, his brother would keep a cool head in front of their mother; but then turn around and take it out on them, in turn. And his mother did mostly the same thing with his father. It made the atmosphere of their home stressful.

Shang Qinghua found himself retreating more and more to the work shed. Sometimes, when he was busy, he let his father hide there too. His father even built a cot for the space. They didn’t really talk about it, but there was some silent, unspoken agreement that some things were just better to avoid.

One evening, Shang Qinghua was staying up working late, trying to remember a the recipe for homemade lotion bars. He’d only tried making them once in his past life, and it hadn’t worked, but he’d gained a new respect for trial and error; generally, if he could recall the basics of a thing, then he could figure out how to make it work with enough tries. His father was hiding out on the work shed cot, but it didn’t feel intrusive.

“Erlang,” his father said. “Where do these ideas come from?”
Shang Qinghua paused.

He’d been asked a variation on that question before, but usually it was specific. Like ‘where did this recipe come from?’ or ‘why put wheels on a chair?’ For some reason, few people ever asked him about his ‘ideas’ as a whole.

Blinking in the lamplight, he turned and glanced back at his father. Who looked inconveniently sober.

“Where does anyone get an idea?” he countered. “Just from thinking.”

Well a lot of thinking was involved anyway!

His father hummed.

“Thinking about it, is there a limit to such things? Could Erlang's ideas run out?” the man asked.

Shang Qinghua hesitated, at that. There was definitely an upper limit to the amount of stuff he could bring over from his past life. It was something he had thought of before.

“Probably,” he conceded.

“Then, Erlang should work on finding someone to look after him,” his father opined. “My sons don’t get along, so it would be better if the younger met someone else and got married into another family.”

Shang Qinghua bit back a nervous laugh.

Get married? Who’d want to marry him? If anything, transmigrating to this world had just made him even more weird and annoying to the general populace. Besides, if his father was advising him to follow his own example… he’d really prefer not to. Maybe he could become one of those lone hermit cultivators. After he took care of Xin Mo, anyway. Just living out on a mountain somewhere, writing, sometimes taking on disciples who would eventually carry his great works back to civilization whenever they flew his little nest…
…Or more likely he’d end up dead in the demon realm, trying to atone for the unforeseen consequences of being a terrible writer. Anything he wrote would probably just be like some kind of curse, anyway.

His fingers twitched atop his desk.

“Meet someone kind,” his father advised. “With a lot of money. But no other spouses. Someone who thinks Huahua is amazing, with all his clever ideas, someone who wants to spoil him all the time. We should go see a matchmaker…”

Shang Qinghua sighed.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” he said.

“Sure it is. It’s a good idea,” his father insisted.

Well, it would probably be forgotten in a few days anyway. Shang Qinghua let it go, and instead focused on mixing a few ingredients together and trying to get them to set up in some wooden molds he’d hammered together.

(The idea was indeed forgotten - like most things his father said or promised or dreamed up, nothing ever came of it.)

Instead, Shang Qinghua kept most to his work shed, and his brother kept mostly to the shop. His mother started traveling again, once they had enough money to afford to hire help. She’d developed a taste for it, she said. Wanderlust. They bought a maid to look after the house, and Shang Qinghua’s skin crawled over the lowkey human trafficking involved. Guilt gnawed at him - would it have made a difference, if he’d written it differently? If he’d just changed this or that little piece of world-building, to make it all less awful? Was there any place where his story and this world just naturally didn’t align?

What about plot holes?

…Nothing answered his wondering, of course.
He did his best to be nice to the maid. She was a quiet girl, a year younger than him. She liked candies, so Shang Qinghua figured out how to make some confections for a while. He never could get blown sugar right, but he remembered a recipe for hawthorn candies that sold really well. He taught it to her.

When he was fifteen, his mother acquired a second store. When he was sixteen, his brother got engaged to a fisherman’s daughter, who wasn’t quite of age to marry yet herself. When he was seventeen, the sickness started spreading up along the river.

His brother’s fiancee was the first to catch the illness. Shang Qinghua did his best, he really did. He knew a couple of good cold remedies, but more importantly, he knew more about the actual way that illnesses spread than most other commonfolk in this world. He knew about viruses and bacteria and asymptomatic carriers, and he tried his best to get his brother to wear a mask whenever he visited his fiancee, to wash his hands, to not do anything that would run the risk of spreading the sickness whether or not his brother showed signs of getting sick himself.

But it was no good. As the weather turned cold, their father got sick. Their mother came home, and it wasn’t long before she started showing signs of illness, too.

Shang Qinghua looked after them, along with their little maid, while his brother kept the shop running.

His brother’s fiancee died.

It wasn’t a good time.

His parents had fevers and chills, vomiting and all kinds of sick mess. Their stomachs pained them terribly, to the point where he had rushed inside on more than one occasion to find one of them outright wailing. But there wasn’t anything he could do for it. There seemed to be a never-ending stream of work that needed to be done, too, to look after his parents, to keep the house from falling into disrepair, and to make certain sensitive stock items for their shops. He was terrified of getting sick as well and found himself running ragged, getting up in the night to the sounds of wailing and hacking, and trying desperately to think of a solution.

There were plants that could cure almost any mundane illness, but he had no way of getting them.
There were skilled healers who could probably figure out better remedies and solutions, but he had no means to approach them.

He knew things, but he was no one. So it didn’t even matter. All it meant was that he could torture himself with all the things he couldn’t reach. In the end he even tried to, a few times! There was a valley, and he had only a vague idea of how to get there, but there was a flower that bloomed only in midwinter and its petals could be made into a remedy and he didn’t actually know the remedy, but maybe if he got the petals, he could find someone who did...

He tried to make the trip, leaving the maid with instructions to look after his parents and his brother with a note that he’d be back as soon as he could. But in the end he was only a day out before he got robbed and beaten up and had to drag himself back home, alive only thanks to the progress he’d made with his meager cultivation and fighting skills.

When he got back, his brother beat him again for ‘running away’.

It… wasn’t a good time.

Their father died first.

It was probably the weakness from all the drinking that made it so. He went in a haze of fever and pain, not gently but not terribly conscious of his surroundings, either.

Their mother lasted a few months longer. She was lucid more often. Wailed less. Talked to him more. Shang Qinghua’s workload was halved with his father’s death, and he felt bitterly guilty that it did make some things much easier. He wished it was just a story. Afterwards, when he knelt in mourning, he wished it didn’t actually feel real.

He should have made a world where people never got sick.

Shang Qinghua was eighteen the first time he picked up a brush to try and write a story again. It was a trite thing that would have gotten probably zero stars on any hosting site, back in his old life. A family of beautiful immortals lived in a lush, comfortable garden, where the weather was always mild, and the hardships were nonexistent. His writing was nearly illegible, so it wasn’t as if anyone else would ever be able to read it anyway. It was short, and sweet.
When he was finished, he crumpled it up and threw it away. Unsatisfied and hollowed-out.

He wanted to write out the hurt instead. Wanted to spill the agony onto the page, and as the oppressive silence fell around the main house that he struggled to venture back into, Shang Qinghua found himself picking up the brush again. And then writing out another, different story. About a family that struggled through sickness. The details flow easily, effortlessly. The pain passed from his hand to the parchment to words that describe frustration and helplessness. Death and dismay.

When he was done, he burned that story.

He wasn’t afraid of it becoming real, he found. It had already been real.

It was a few months after that, after all that - all that death and dismay and exhaustion - when Mobei-Jun stumbled into town.

~

So the thing was, Shang Qinghua knew full well that Mobei-Jun had nothing to do with the winter sickness that had killed a dozen people in town, including his parents. But there was no good way for him to explain that. Even just trying would make him look like he was colluding with a demon, and the townsfolk, having experienced much of the same struggle and strife that he’d lived through as well, were all too eager to have an actual target to blame for everything. An ice demon showing up in a mad fever of his own, randomly attacking things and staggering unabashedly through the streets in broad daylight, was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Reasoning wouldn’t work. But no one was suspicious of Shang Qinghua involving himself in the ‘demon hunt’ either, because both of his parents had died, after all. His brother was working and hadn’t seemed to have heard what was going on yet. Thank fuck. Shang Qinghua would never know for sure how he managed to drag a grown man who was considerably taller than him, and bigger, and broader, and eye-catchingly gorgeous, all the way back to his house without getting caught.
They left a massive blood trail and everything.

He had to literally carry Mobei-Jun the whole way, and because of the demon king’s wounds, he couldn’t risk slinging him over his shoulder, either. He carried him bridal style, mentally apologizing the whole way because he kept fucking up and accidentally smashing Mobei-Jun’s shapely calves into random things (and also one time his head but that was a secret that Shang Qinghua would take to his grave, thanks).

It was such a harrowing experience that he didn’t really even stop to register what was going on until he got the demon stashed onto his cot in the work shed, and then had run back out to deal with the mob, and then came back to find that yup, demon was still where he left him.

Demon.

Beautiful, unreal ice demon.

*Mobei-Jun.*

Apart from looking in the mirror, Shang Qinghua had yet to see one of the actual characters he had created in person. It solidified the reality of his situation in a way he wouldn’t have expected. Mobei-Jun’s chest rose and fell with his laboured breaths, as a few deadly, silvery butterflies hovered a short distance away. As if they were waiting to see how things would progress. Even beaten and bruised, the demon lord was utterly, unreasonably gorgeous. He looked like how Shang Qinghua had imagined him, and yet also not. His imagination couldn’t really have ever done the reality justice. Sometimes, Shang Qinghua had tried to imagine certain actors or idols in place of his characters, to try and get a better feel for how to describe them. Like, if he could cast all his characters in a movie, who would he pick to play them? But Mobei-Jun didn’t really look like any of the famous people he might have imagined for the role. He looked like no one Shang Qinghua had ever seen before, but he was still familiar in a way that, unexpectedly, ached.

It felt almost nostalgic. A strange, impossible, undefined yearning was there, too.

His hands were careful, trembling and gentle as he cleaned Mobei-Jun’s wounds and tried to help him cool down.

The butterflies became less numerous. One by one, they flew away, until at last Shang Qinghua
looked up from something that felt like a trance, and found that they had all gone.

He stared back down at Mobei-Jun’s fevered, silent face.

He had to cover up their tracks. He’d managed most of the blood trail on the way to the house, to keep the mob from tailing them, but the house itself was another matter. And he needed more water. But for a moment, time felt like it slowed down. Shang Qinghua couldn’t resist the urge to reach out a hand, and gently trace Mobei-Jun's features.

Just as his thumb brushed the corner of the demon lord’s mouth, he realized what he was doing. Quickly, he snatched his hand back. Did he have a death wish?! This wasn’t a fantasy! This was the real deal, he had a fucking noble ice demon who could kill him without breaking a sweat, stashed in his work shed! Even if Mobei-Jun didn’t bite off his head as soon as he woke, the town would hang him if they found out!

He couldn’t just sit around petting the man! Anyway, that was really creepy of him to do!

Hastily, Shang Qinghua got up, and left the sleeping demon where he lay. He couldn’t afford to forget the situation he was in. Not if he wanted to keep breathing, anyway.

After Mobei-Jun woke up, the demon set about reminding him just how deadly dangerous he really was. His stare alone was enough to make Shang Qinghua feel like his blood was freezing, like his heart might turn to ice and shatter on the ground. It was terrifying! Oh fuck, why had he made everyone so terrifying?!! Why had he made Mobei-Jun so terrifying?!

And beautiful!

Like a deadly, masculine flower! But with ice shards instead of petals!

…Alright that made no sense but in his defense, he apparently had a lot of troubles looking at Mobei-Jun and thinking at the same time. It was definitely the overwhelming terror caused by the man’s powerful demonic aura. Having him sleeping off his injuries in Shang Qinghua’s work shed was a little like having a tiger just… there. Except that Mobei-Jun was, in fact, many time more dangerous than a tiger. Also more beautiful. Which was terrifying in its own way.

And somehow Mobei-Jun himself, with his keen, murderous gaze and disdainful bearing that
somehow managed to still look regal even while he was recovering from a fever, wasn’t even the most pressing problem he had to deal with.

Because he… maybe… possibly didn’t do a good enough job of cleaning up after things when he dragged a half-dead demon through the house.

His brother found the blood in the back garden. Some pools which Shang Qinghua hadn’t bothered to wash away because his brother usually never went in the back garden and also because Mobei-Jun had woken up and freaked him out.

“What’s this?” the man demanded, pointing at the rusty stains across the pale earth.

“I don’t know, Ge. Some spill from one of my fertilizers, probably?” Shang Qinghua tried, valiantly.

His brother narrowed his eyes, and looked towards the work shed.

Lifting his hands, Shang Qinghua moved into his line of sight.

“Ge, what are you thinking? What’s with the suspicious face?”

“What did you do?” his brother snapped, not letting him off in the least. Shang Qinghua’s heart plummeted. Why was he so accusatory?! He hadn’t even been there! For the whole mobbing bit, he’d been in the store! Why would he even guess that Shang Qinghua had done something other than what he said? Even he himself could scarcely believe what he’d done, and there was no possible way his brother would know he’d even have a motive to rescue some crazy demon!

“Why would you think I did anything?” he asked, wringing his hands.

His brother’s expression was dangerous as he stormed past him, heading right for the work shed.

“No, Ge, wait! I’ve got experiments in there, you shouldn’t disturb them—"
“I’ll do what I please, Qinghua! It’s my house now, in case you forgot!”

“But—”

His brother reached for the door to the work shed.

Shang Qinghua lunged, and grabbed him around the waist. The two of them tumbled to the ground. His brother hissed and kicked him off, and then once he got started, he seemed to get sidetracked with beating him up for a while. Shang Qinghua covered his head and waited it out, hoping against hope that it would somehow satisfy things. But then with one last kick, his brother reached over and, before he could stop him, yanked open the door.

There was silence.

Shang Qinghua got ready to try and stop his brother and Mobei-Jun from killing one another. When he looked inside, to his surprise, the demon was gone.

He must have gotten better enough to open a portal…

Unfortunately, cleaning up after himself was another matter entirely. Shang Qinghua gulped as his brother glared at the bloodied blankets on the cot, the red-stained wash cloth, and the empty bucket and bowl of water.

For a moment, the silence was deafening.

“What did you do?” his brother snarled.

“I just… I wasn’t feeling… feeling well…” Shang Qinghua tried. His brother grabbed him and pressed him angrily to the shed wall.

“I knew it,” the man hissed. His voice was low. “I always knew there was something wrong with you. You colluded with it, didn’t you?! You’re one of them!”
“What?”

Shang Qinghua gaped, baffled, and didn’t even remember to go loose as his brother shook him.

The thing was, over the years, Shang Qinghua had spent a lot of time hauling heavy buckets of water, and wood, and furniture, and digging out large crops, and carrying supplies to his work shed - sometimes from as far away as the next town over - and supporting his sickly parents. All while working quietly on his cultivation theories, in between one task and the next. Whereas his brother had spent most of his time selling people products, with strapping young hirelings to help do all the heavy lifting. He had never thought much about it, but somewhere along the line, his older brother had stopped being bigger and stronger.

When he went to shake Shang Qinghua again, without him going limp enough to allow it, his frame didn’t move an inch.

Reading this stiffness differently had his brother’s eyes widening, just a little.

“Ge, what are you saying?” Shang Qinghua asked. He met his brother’s accusatory stare evenly, because he was genuinely confused.

His brother swallowed.

Slowly, his grip loosened. Shang Qinghua wasn’t sure what to make of it, as he was abruptly released.

“What do you want?” his brother asked.

“What do you mean, what do I want?”

“I mean, what do you want? All these years, pretending to be my brother-”

“Ge!” Shang Qinghua protested, in a rush of panic. How could he have figured it out?! Shang Qinghua had been here since literal infancy! There was no chance of his brother guessing the truth, was there? It just seemed too absurd…
“You’re a demon!” his brother snapped.

...Oh.

Suddenly, the situation made a weird sort of sense.

Shang Qinghua paled.

“I’m not,” he insisted, quietly.

“Of course you are!” his brother hissed back, equally vehement. “You’ve never been normal. I always knew it. Mother and Father knew it, too. But I was the only one who wasn’t too afraid to try and reign you in a little! They always just let you do whatever you wanted, hoping you wouldn’t just wake up some night and rip out all our throats-”

“Why would I do that?!” Shang Qinghua protested in shock. “That’s ridiculous! Do you hear yourself? Ge, I looked after Mother and Father while they were dying! Are you telling me you left your sick parents alone in the hands of a person you thought was a demon this whole time?!”

“What choice did I have??” his brother snapped back. “At least I hoped you might have enough conscience to save them!”

“You don’t think I tried?!”

“I think you probably killed them yourself?”

Stunned, Shang Qinghua could only gape in utter shock at the accusation, while a strange, dull roaring began to fill his ears.

His brother glared at him.
But somehow, despite everything, the argument ended there. Or maybe it didn’t. Maybe it kept going, but Shang Qinghua could no longer go along with it. He remembered just the end of it, the silence afterwards. His brother left. The work shed was empty. Like a stray figment of his imagination, Mobei-Jun was gone.

It wasn’t that Shang Qinghua didn’t know his brother was wrong. He wasn’t a demon. He hadn’t infiltrated this family on purpose, hadn’t meant to do any harm, hadn’t poisoned anyone or sabotaged their recovery or sapped their strength like some ghostly leech. He didn’t even know how or why he’d ended up in this world. Sometimes - most times, really - he just tried not to think about it anymore.

But the accusation still hit home.

Because his brother had the wrong facts, but not necessarily the wrong idea.

Had he done it, he wondered? He couldn’t even remember if he’d ever made some passing note in some margin somewhere. ‘Shang Qinghua’s parents died of illness when he was young’. Try as he might, wracking his brain for all it was worth, he couldn’t recall if he ever had or hadn’t written anything like that. Part of him thought not. His character wasn’t that complex or fleshed-out. He was just a plot device more than anything. Set dressing. A way to handwave some explanations of how Mobei-Jun, a demon lord who despised humans and kept away from them as much as possible, would know anything at all about the goings-on of the human world. Originally, the character had also been a demon; but then Shang Qinghua had changed his mind, figuring that it was simpler just to make him some cowardly human traitor. It would be better because then he could easily kill him off without having to cross-check any of his references on the demonic noble families.

Just some random, over-ambitious, spineless human who would sell anyone out to get ahead.

But he threw in a lot of random things for ‘flavour’, too. So he couldn’t say that he never would have just dropped something like that in. A passing line, to give a little more context to a character’s disposition or outlook. Not relevant for more than a moment after it had been said.

One sentence.

He didn’t know. He didn’t know how much difference it would or wouldn’t have made, if he had or hadn’t written such a line.
He didn’t kill his parents.

Right?

His head still felt like it was ringing when he went back into the work shed, and started to clean up the blood that Mobei-Jun had left behind.

~

His brother never mentioned the demon thing again. Shang Qinghua didn’t bring it up, either. He wasn’t sure how to. They’d never spoken extensively, not when they could avoid it. Since Shang Qinghua spent most of his time in the work shed anyway, it wasn’t hard to avoid his brother as much as humanly possible. His brother hired on a few more staff people to look after the house, since they had the extra room now; and so there were plenty of go-betweens.

Most of the new staff seemed to treat Shang Qinghua like he was touched in the head.

That was fine. They weren’t cruel, so, whatever his brother had told them, at least it wasn’t that he was some kind of demon.

It was a month after Mobei-Jun left when his brother started bringing over guests to entertain. Shang Qinghua wouldn’t have thought much about it, except that he was required to make appearances. For some reason. That was unusual, because he was sure that his brother still couldn’t stand his presence very much. And yet, whenever these guests came to call - mostly men - Shang Qinghua would be summoned from whatever he was doing, made to ‘clean himself up’ and sit awkwardly, while his brother interrogated his visitor on things like their career and family and other odd, kind of invasive topics. How much this person made in a year. How much property they owned. Livestock, businesses, family connections…

Shang Qinghua thought they were prospective business partners at first.
Almost none of them came back for second visits, anyway, and his brother seemed unsatisfied with all of it.

It went on for an embarrassingly long time before he overheard a conversation between their maid and the housekeeper, and finally clued in.

His brother was investigating marriage prospects for him.

Shang Qinghua didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

Because on the one hand, he was horrified! How couldn’t he be? None of those people who had come ‘visiting’ were even remotely his type! And not only that, but his brother hadn’t even had a single conversation with him about it. Trying to talk to him during the visits themselves was awkward, because there was an outsider in the room. But outside of them, they almost never saw one another! He hadn’t agreed to this. He hadn’t even been asked.

But on the other hand… if he were to have guessed, to anticipate what it would have been like if his brother were to have married him off before, he wouldn’t have expected the man to be so picky about it. If anything, he’d have anticipated getting flung at the first likely target so that his brother could just wash his hands of the whole thing. He knew it was fucked up, but some part of him was weirdly touched that Ge was, at the least, being so picky?

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Maybe deep, deep… **deep**… VERY deep down, his brother didn’t really want to go through with his apparent idea?

Shang Qinghua clung to the hope of that idea as he finally tracked him down.

He went to visit at the store, only because it was harder for his brother to just walk away if he was there. Too many chances to bump into customers or risk causing a scene. When he came in, he hesitated. It’d been a while since he’d actual been in the shop. The shelves were still arranged the way their mother had last set them up. Back before she’d even gotten sick. Even though they were supposed to have been changed by now, most likely.

His brother looked at him with an unwelcome expression, that gradually sank into something like resignation.
“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Can’t I come here?” Shang Qinghua countered. “I didn’t think I was banned.”

“You’re not.”

Awkward silence followed. It was the slow time of day, so there wasn’t really anyone else in to place an order or browse the stock. He’d tried to time it like that especially. Outside, the sun was bright, but the air was cold.

“Ge, what’s going on?” he finally asked. “You can’t just…”

He trailed off.

His brother’s gaze slipped down to the counter in front of him.

“Do you really think I’m a demon?” he asked, quietly.

It was almost an easier question to ask than some of the others, because it was wrong. But it was also easy not to really fault his brother for making that kind of mistake. He knew he was strange. Looking around the shop, though, he couldn’t help but feel like he might be justified in insisting that it wasn’t necessarily bad. Hadn’t he helped? Even just a little?

“...I don’t know,” his brother finally said, banging a nearby drawer shut. He looked like he’d aged ten years in a month. It made something bitter twist inside of Shang Qinghua’s gut. He remembered being very small, and looking over to see this other child. This younger child, who was older at the same time; who had so much power over him, and seemed to hate him with every inch of his being.

“When have I ever hurt you?” he couldn’t help but ask.

When his brother looked surprised, Shang Qinghua suddenly felt emboldened. He clenched a fist, and took a step forward.
“You know what the biggest flaw in your idea is? You spent our whole childhoods beating me up. You think a demon would have just sat back and taken it like I did?” he couldn’t help but demand. “You’re a shitty bastard! If I was a demon I’d have killed you years ago! If I was some monster, and not your brother, you think I would have killed our parents before I killed you?”

Almost as soon as he said the words, he regretted them. He wanted to swallow his own tongue and choke himself. Gyah, how stupid! Could a person defend themselves by talking about how much they wanted to kill their own brother?! He braced for the retribution, paling and cringing back in on himself.

But his brother just stared at him.

“I know,” he finally said, to Shang Qinghua’s surprise.

There was another, longer, even more awkward pause.

His brother looked down at the countertop in front of him, and nodded to himself.

“I know,” he repeated. “Qinghua, you’re only still alive because I know that if you were going to kill someone, it would probably be me.”

Swallowing, Shang Qinghua anxiously fiddled with his sleeves. He didn’t know what expression was on his brother’s face, because he couldn’t bring himself to look.

“...I don’t want to hurt you, Ge,” he said.

“Mm.”

He flinched as another drawer slammed.

His brother sighed.
“Don’t you think this is the best way to go about things, in the end?” the older man asked him, not quite managing to cajole the way he might have years ago. “We’ve never gotten along. We’ve never understood one another. You can’t run a business, Qinghua, and I can’t look after you. I want a home that doesn’t feel cursed. I want a life that doesn’t feel tethered to your… to whatever you are.”

Guilt stabbed through him.

‘Whatever’ he was. Even he couldn’t really qualify it. Transmigrating was strange enough; being a sort of not-god, not-prophet in a world he’d thought he created himself…?

He couldn’t blame his brother. Even though some part of him dully noted that it wasn’t entirely fair, that he really had done his best. How could he protest?

“I can stay out of your way…”

“And the next time you bring a fucking demon home?” his brother snapped.

Shang Qinghua finally looked up at the sound of his voice. At a loss.

*He’s not wrong*, a little voice whispered. No matter how he tried, even just the plan with Xin Mo was destined for trouble, wasn’t it? He could try and contain things, but the event with Mobei-Jun had mostly just been luck. And without trying, even with him obviously changing some things about his family situation, it had still *happened*, too. Involving himself with any element of the story he’d written was bound to be risky.

Could he put it aside? Just give up on the whole idea? Let things go as they would and keep his head down and stay away from all of it?

It was probably too late for that already.

He’d made his choice the minute he’d rescued Mobei-Jun. Even though it hadn’t really felt like much of a decision at the time.
“I don’t want to marry some stranger,” he said. “Ge, if you hate me so much, I’ll just go.”

Could he start over from scratch? Maybe. He was sure he still had a few lucrative ideas up his sleeve. Possibly he could find some work as a cultivator, too. He wasn’t that good at fighting but he knew a lot of weird information, and that was bound to come in handy. He even knew where to find some items that would enhance his cultivation further, and maybe some people would be willing to take him on as a student… if he made the right connections, was it possible he could build up enough allies to go and get Xin Mo without needing hirelings? Maybe wealth was the wrong road to pursue after all… although he’d still need some money to start out with, he didn't want to starve...

His brother’s expression was stony, as he let out a long, aggravated sigh.

“Go?” he parroted. “You think our parents will rest easy with the thought that I just kicked you out to become a crazy beggar somewhere?”

“Hey, now!” Shang Qinghua protested. “What makes you think that would be the outcome?”

“Because it would be!” his brother snapped. “You’re a burdensome person, Qinghua. Without someone to look after you, you’ll just make a mess of things! And then if you get desperate you’ll come crawling back for help. I won’t have that hanging over my head.”

The barb hit home. Again. For someone who didn’t actually know the situations he was talking about, his brother was amazingly good at hitting him where he hurt. Shang Qinghua swallowed. For the first time in a long while, he thought about his old life in a context beyond his stint as an ill-fated author. He thought about the word burden, and all the years he’d spend trying to minimize the weight of that on his father. Knowing that he was unwanted, that looking after him was an obligation to be endured, that his own efforts to become self-sufficient were unstable and inadequate. No matter how much he tried.

His brother was right. On his own, he’d struggle and fail.

Even his past life’s successes, the things he used to hold up and say ‘at least I accomplished this for myself’, had led to catastrophe. Hadn’t they?

He didn’t want to think about it.
He didn’t want to, but he couldn’t stop. With a miserable sound, he moved over behind the counter, and dropped to his knees.

“Gege, I’m begging you!” he said. “Just let me figure something out! I promise, if you let me leave on my own terms, then I’ll never come back. Even if I’m dying, I’ll stay away!”

His brother took a hasty step back. Shang Qinghua thought he might get hit, but for some reason, no blow fell. In fact, he hadn’t been hit since the day that Mobei-Jun left. His brother shied away from him as if he was too revolting to touch.

“Stop it!”

“Ge, please-”

“I said stop it! I’m going to find someone strong enough to keep you. Do you understand? It’s the only way anything will ever be good again. I’ll find you someone and you’ll be looked after and you’ll never come back. If you leave on your own, how will I ever sleep soundly again?”

Shang Qinghua cried.

“I don’t want-”

“I don’t care!”

The denial cracked like a whip. He was so frightened! He really didn’t want to be married off! Sure, there was a chance it would be alright, but there was an even higher chance that he wouldn’t even like the person who got him. And that this person wouldn’t like him, either. And maybe that would be alright, if they just lived like roommates or something, but he knew he was pretty intolerable to live with. He had it on multiple authorities! Besides, if he was married, then it would be much harder for him to do anything he needed to. Even little things.

When he tried to keep protesting, though, his brother finally seemed to give up his image in favour of just running out the shop.
Shang Qinghua knelt behind the counter in shock.

He really felt… he was in a lot of trouble, this time…

And he had no idea what to do.

~

Qi Qingqi wasn’t a bad person.

Shang Qinghua knew this, because she’d been a side character he’d done a fair amount of conceptualizing on, even though he hadn’t gotten to use her very much in the end. After Mobei-Jun, she was the first ‘substantial’ character from his story that he actually got to meet in person - and that was only on their wedding day.

In a way, it was almost a relief that he had at least been married off to someone who he knew some things about.

Qi Qingqi was a cultivator, and a noble lady of fairly good standing. She’d inherited her title from her father, and spent a lot of time traveling. If she could have had her own way, she’d have only married her First Wife, but her Second Wife had come as a package deal from her First Wife’s family. The two women were sisters. And after having the sanctity of her heart with relation to marriage sort of blown out of the water from day one, Lady Qi had treated her harem more or less as a kind of corporation, and her trips elsewhere with her First Wife as her actual private life. Shang Qinghua didn’t have to worry about the sex issue, since he really wasn’t someone his new wife would be interested in at all.

In a way, it was more like he was being hired on as an employee, rather than taken as a real concubine! Right?
He consoled himself with a lot of thoughts as he stumbled his way through the necessary bows. Since he was just a concubine, there wasn’t much of a ceremony. He was really glad he’d ditched his initial idea of concubines getting ‘bound’ in the nude with sexy jewelry and things like that while he was writing his first draft. At the time it had just seemed like too much fanservice and silliness for his initial concept, but he had whole new reasons to be appreciative of that rare moment of restraint when he was actually supposed to be the person on the chopping block! His figure wasn’t really meant for that kind of thing. And Qi Qingqi wouldn’t have even appreciated it, either!

Not to mention, it was cold out.

Nonsense thoughts passed through his mind and it was a monumental force of effort not to say any of them out loud. Somehow, he managed. He didn’t tell Qi Qingqi that she looked nothing like he’d pictured in his head, but still very befitting of her character. He also didn’t say anything about how he really hoped he never offended her Second Wife, because she was vicious and tended to take out her resentment of her own situation on the other members of the harem. He burst into uncontrolled giggles at one point, but thankfully that was after the drinks had been poured, so it was chalked up to his drunkenness. Everyone thought he was silly and stupid.

Well there were worse things to be taken for!

His wedding night he spent alone, in a room that was just a bit bigger than his work shed. It really wasn’t so bad, he decided.

Like this, he did have some access to the cultivation world, and the upper echelons of society. Right? And that was where most of his story had taken place. At least he’d be able to hear about things. Rumours, and whatnot. And his room really was bigger than his work shed, and he’d spent most of his time there anyway, so what was the real difference? He’d just have to… adapt. Keep his head down. Stay out of the way.

Everything he’d already been doing before.

It was fine, he thought. Lying awake. Not sleeping a wink, not even as the sky lightened again, and he realized he hadn’t changed out of his nice clothes. The air smelled unfamiliar, and the few
things he’d brought along from home hadn’t entirely been put away. Most of it was in a stack.

Shang Qinghua got up, and found his favourite wedding gift; a sheaf of blank parchment, from the maid his mother had bought.

He hoped his brother treated her alright.

As he rummaged around to find a brush and some ink, he decided to write a story about a miserly shopkeeper who was, nevertheless, boundlessly generous to the maidservant his family had bought when he was younger. And then he thought that maybe he would write a story about a humble little concubine who everyone left alone, who lucked out and managed to destroy a cursed sword and then ran off and lived alone. All alone, where he was never a burden to anyone.

The brush stalled in an ink blob at the top of the parchment.

The first page ended up too wet for him to write on. Ah, he really was a mess! Such a terrible waste of some of his gift...

After a minute, though, he got another piece of paper out, and tried all over again.
Borderlands, Part Two

Chapter Summary

The continuing adventures of Shen Jiu and Totally-Not-Lord-Yue!

Chapter Notes

Another one of the beautiful artists on twitter has produced some excellent Shizuns!!!

https://twitter.com/seryphi/status/1117620547460853761

Thanks Seryph your art is wonderful! ^-^

Also I made OC's for this chapter. Mainly because I needed them. I also named them, dun dun DUN! (Banking on the fact that demons often have stupid names to help me out if I did a bad job lol...)

Yue Qingyuan did not seek him out that night.

Not to confess his terrible disguise, nor to try and get anything ‘else’ from Shen Jiu either. So at least the lord probably wasn’t angling to arrange some kind of honey trap scenario to test his sexual morals or something along those lines.

Or if he was he was trying to play a long con with it.

The morning after an uneventful night in the dingy inn, their party set out again. Shen Jiu hadn’t exactly planned to ‘mingle’ a lot with the group of hirelings, but given the situation with Yue Qingyuan, he couldn’t stick to his original plan of riding up front and ignoring everyone else with an air of authoritative detachment, either. Riding inside the carriage also would have left him at something of a disadvantage for observing his suitor, so he magnanimously permitted the other two freelancers to ride inside, while he took one of the Night Mares. It was easier to keep the untested humans somewhere out of the way until they arrived at their destination anyhow.
Since he was too tall for the carriage, Yue Qingyuan had to ride along with one of his retainers regardless.

Shen Jiu watched askance as ‘Yue Qi’ climbed up into the saddle behind one of the two fire demons in his retinue.

The Night Mare snorted and stomped, nostrils flaring in obvious discomfort at having a human cultivator on its back.

Dimly, he found himself recalling a story Shen Qingqiu had once told him, about how Lord Luo used to take him riding together on hunts.

“That’s not going to work,” Shen Jiu said, tutting in annoyance. “Yue Qi, you’re giving off too much of a threatening aura for a demonic mount.”

Yue Qingyuan looked confounded.

“It’s not my intention to threaten anyone here,” he said. “Certainly not the horses.”

“Be that as it may, I think you’ll have to ride with me. My steed has the best patience for such things,” he determined. It wasn’t even a lie. Shen Jiu’s horse had been one that was specially trained by Lord Luo to accept riders such as himself and his master. She easily had the best temperament of any of the Night Mares, and was also one of the biggest.

There was an awkward moment where the disguised lord looked as though he might refuse, and several of the demons present shot him ugly glares. Reminded, no doubt, of just what kind of person was in their midst; probably sizing up Yue Qingyuan for future reference. But if anyone thought that Shen Jiu would permit them to skirmish or fight, they could guess again. He gave the Yue Qingyuan an expectant and unimpressed look as he waited for him to respond.

“...I... isn’t that improper, Master Shen?” he suggested. “I’m only a lowly hireling, perhaps it would be better if I simply flew...”

“I’m hiring you to fight. It’s no good if you tire yourself out along the way, or run into trouble on your own,” Shen Jiu countered. “And anything is fine if I say that it is. Will you ride with me or not?”
Yue Qingyuan looked around himself, as if searching for some kind of escape route.

Shen Jiu narrowed his eyes.

He’d thought… but, if he was so reluctant, did this man even actually like him after all…?

Finally, ‘Yue Qi’ heaved a sigh, and slid off the fire demon’s skittish mount. He grabbed the small pack he’d added to the saddle bags, and brought it along over to Shen Jiu’s mare instead. One of the nearby riders hissed threateningly at the man. Shen Jiu shot a quelling look over his shoulder, but didn’t catch the culprit. Everyone looked perfectly arranged for travel, only politely waiting for this last inconvenient human to climb up onto their leader’s horse.

Yue Qingyuan hesitated for just a moment more.

Then he elegantly lifted himself into the saddle behind Shen Jiu. A broad chest settled at his back, but he didn’t feel any hands come near him. Another glance behind himself revealed that Yue Qingyuan had opted to grip the back of the saddle instead, in order to keep his balance.

What?

Was he too repulsive to touch all of a sudden?

“Ride properly,” he snapped, annoyed, and reached back to grab one of the man’s hands. He settled it onto his shoulder in compromise. Who knew that Lord Yue was such a prude? But if he didn’t want to touch Shen Jiu’s waist, then fine. Fine. “It’s a long trip.”

He heard Yue Qingyuan swallow.

“A-ah…” the man agreed, and after a moment, settled his other hand on Shen Jiu’s opposite shoulder as well.

Finally, they were able to set out.
Most of the landscape around this borderlands settlement was dry scrub and flat earth. It was deceptive. For a few hours, it looked as though they were only heading across a vast, open stretch that spread out until it met the sky. In reality, however, this was just the top segment of a steep cliff. The road only led as far as the bottom of the cliff, cutting into the terrain like a slash from some ancient giant’s sword. Then long shadows spilled over them, cast by the jagged rocks, and the landscape ahead revealed itself to be broken up by greenery and mountain ranges. Cold, narrow streams cut across their path and forced them to divert. Gnarled, ghostly trees twisted their way towards the sky. Their bark was split in places; the oozing sap looked like blood.

“So, Yue Qi, do you spend much time in the borderlands?” Shen Jiu asked, once they had made their way down from the clifftop, and failed to encounter any trouble.

Yue Qingyuan swallowed again, and shifted behind him in the saddle. The man cleared his throat.

“Not… especially…” he said.

“So you wouldn’t say you’re an expert, then? Are you new to this kind of work?” Shen Jiu pressed, keeping his tone light and curious.

“I have not been freelancing for very long,” Yue Qingyuan replied.

He almost snorted.

No kidding.

“This kind of job isn’t suitable for amateurs, you know,” he said.

“Ah, well, I have a lot of experience with fighting. Just not… in this fashion,” Yue Qingyuan explained.

“Oh? Where did you gain your experience?” Shen Jiu asked, tilting his head curiously backward for a moment. “I attend most of the major cultivation events. Do you frequent the nighthunts arranged by various clans? I would think I would have remembered seeing you somewhere…”
‘Yue Qi’ hesitated.

“I… that is, are you very familiar with the borderlands yourself, Master Shen?”

Trying to change the subject, hm?

Shen Jiu held back a derisive snort.

“I have traveled through them enough times to claim some familiarity, yes,” he replied. “But you didn’t answer my question. Where have you practiced your skills? Where did you train? Would I know your shifu’s name?”

“…I studied in Gusu,” Yue Qingyuan admitted. It was probably the best tactical truth he’d told so far, if only because a lot of cultivators did.

But there was a problem.

“Your family must be fairly influential, then,” Shen Jiu reasoned. He was tempted to ask if ‘Yue Qi’ had any relation to a certain lord of a similar name, but he figured that would come a little too close to giving away his own realization.

Yue Qingyuan’s hands tightened on his shoulders. Just briefly enough to have betrayed his anxiety at the topic, if it wasn’t already obvious.

“It was. I’m the last of it,” the lord admitted.

“That’s unfortunate,” Shen Jiu offered. “So is that why you’ve taken up this sort of work? Fallen on hard financial times, with no family to support you, and no one to protect you from the machinations of the courtly world?”

Again, Yue Qingyuan’s hands tightened.
“...Yes,” he said. “I… I lost my protector. It’s been very difficult, without him. I never appreciated how much danger he shielded me from before he was gone.”

Shen Jiu frowned a little.

That sounded more sincere than any of his passenger’s other attempts to lie or deflect so far. But what was Yue Qingyuan talking about? Liu Qingge? Shen Qingqiu? With his level of cultivation and renown, the man would hardly need a lot of bodyguards. They’d be more liability than they were worth. So was he in fact talking about the machinations of the court, then? His buffer against schemers and politics?

Maybe it was someone else, Shen Jiu reasoned. Neither Liu Qingge nor Shen Qingqiu were particularly good at politics, though Master Shen was markedly better. Had Yue Qingyuan lost some friend or ally at court?

Hm.

Maybe that was why he’d concocted this farce. Maybe he was shopping for a replacement, and looking to see just how sharp Shen Jiu was.

The possibility was one of the least displeasing so far.

“That's a shame,” he offered.

Yue Qingyuan murmured in acknowledgement.

The conversation petered to an awkward halt for a while then. Shen Jiu focused on the road. It was important to, after all - more than in most places, trouble was liable to spring up with very little warning in the borderlands.

But, it wasn’t always a given, either. No one would be able to live in such a place if it was truly as the rumours said, and just rife with death at all hours of the day. There were still relatively normal animals that managed to live in the region, still enough periods of calm and inactivity that those who weren’t welcome elsewhere still managed to eke out a living there. So even though some of the shadows between the trees had a menacing quality to them, the air remained still and undisturbed, and nothing of note crossed their path as they navigated the copses of trees and
networks of streams. A few of the groves they passed through even seemed pleasant.

They were past the region of the bloody sap trees when they took their first break, to rest the Night Mares and stretch their legs. Demonic mounts had more resilience than regular horses, but it was still better not to tire them out. They were bred to defend themselves, so most mounts could still hold their own if something attacked; but their ability to do so went down considerably if they were already straining themselves to keep moving.

“We should reach our destination before sundown,” Shen Jiu mentioned to Yue Qingyuan, while he poured some water for his Night Mare to drink.

“We are heading directly to Master Shen’s territories?” the lord wondered.

Shen Jiu snorted.

“How of course not,” he said. “There’s no development on that land, if we went straight there we would only be setting up camp in the unknown darkness and hoping to last until dawn. No, the nearest village is four hours’ ride away from where we need to be. We’ll stay there for the night and set out again at dawn.”

As they chatted, the hireling with the straw hat - Xie Lian - made his way over to them again.

“That sounds wise,” the man approved. “The locals at that village might also be able to tell us some things about the troubles in the region.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Shen Jiu reasoned. “A lot of settlements go out of their way to not discover what’s over the next ridge, in these sorts of places. Ignorance is bliss.” Or at least, it was an easier way to sleep at night. Foolish, but easier.

“Usually there are some people who know more than most,” Xie Lian countered, affably. “It’s just a matter of finding out who has been too curious to be sensible. Every community has people like that.”

Shen Jiu scoffed.
“I’ll leave it to you, then,” he reasoned. “Feel free to talk to as many villagers as you please.”

When they set out again, Yue Qingyuan still hesitated and muddled around before getting back into the saddle behind Shen Jiu. But he didn’t voice any protests, and he put his hands back onto Shen Jiu’s shoulders. There was a nervous edge to his body language again, that would have probably betrayed some more of his ‘deception’ if there was any doubt about to begin with.

The first sign of trouble they ran into came a few hours before sunset.

As they journeyed along, the twisting forest was gradually replaced by a stretch of rocky terrain. Stones like spears jutted up from the ground, rusty at the tips. Interspersed between them were tall, narrow plants that might have vaguely resembled bamboo in a past life, but in this one had an eerie similarity to bleached bones instead. There did not seem to be a single living thing in the area apart from themselves. Even in terms of bugs, there was only a lone butterfly that had followed them out of the forest, after mistaking the bright paint of the carriage for a flower. The lack of living things wasn't a good sign and Shen Jiu had never had this region described to him, either in a warning or simply in terms of directions.

But visibility was good, and the gaps between the rocks and the not-bamboo were more than wide enough to let their party pass through. So they kept on, wary but undaunted. If they balked at every strange place they came across, they’d never get anyway before nightfall. And the village they were heading towards wasn’t far off. The entire party went quiet without being commanded to, even so. A sense of unease permeated the space, indefinable but very… present.

The rust-stained stones were troubling. Shen Jiu kept his eyes on the trees.

He was looking, primarily, for threads. Some spider monsters could camouflage themselves to near-invisibility, laying traps that even wary travelers might fall for. The easiest way to spot them was to catch the glint of light off of their trip-wire threads, rather than trying to look for the spiders themselves. He could hear Master Shen’s voice in the back of his mind, listing the hunting techniques and weak-points, and cautioning him to not get too caught up in a theory, lest he close his mind to other threats or possibilities.

Despite his sharp lookout, it was still the Night Mares that began to notice something first.

The demon at the front of their procession halted, as his steed let out a gusty snort and stomped the ground with its heavy, dark hooves. A soft growl of agitation, more like a hound's than a horse's, emerged from the lead Night Mare.
A moment later, every other mare halted in instinctive response to the warning signal. Their ears flattened.

“What’s going on?” Yue Qingyuan asked quietly, as their mount stopped and dug in her hooves.

“They’ve probably sensed or smelled something,” Shen Jiu replied, equally quiet. With demonic mounts, that could mean a demon strong enough to kill them, a poison or toxin powerful enough to dissuade them, or a human cultivator flexing enough spiritual power to spook them.

It wasn’t likely to be the latter, but Shen Jiu motioned at his servant to check the carriage’s occupants almost at the same time that Xie Lian leaned out through the window.

The peasant cultivator seemed sharp enough to immediately pick up on the tension, and rather than speaking, only made a questioning motion at Shen Jiu’s servant.

Looking at the agitated Night Mares, Shen Jiu reached a decision.

“Dismount,” he instructed quietly, signaling to his people at the same time - just in case his whisper wouldn’t carry.

He had mostly intended to address the demonic retainers, so he was a little surprised when Yue Qingyuan swiftly and gracefully slid from the saddle behind him, and then reached up to offer Shen Jiu a hand down. The man’s disguised features were utterly serious. This was a bad time to get distracted, so Shen Jiu simply filed the observation away for later, and then he dismounted on his own.

If the lord felt slighted by his decision, he didn’t show it. Instead he adopted a very alert posture, and settled himself just behind Shen Jiu’s shoulder. He followed very closely as Shen Jiu moved to confer with Lord Luo's retainers.

It would take a lot to make someone of Yue Qingyuan’s cultivation level uneasy. Was the man nervous? Unlikely. If he noticed something truly dangerous, would he say as much? Or would he just watch and wait to see what might happen? Conducting some kind of… covert test of Shen Jiu’s abilities?
“Has anyone picked up on anything?” he asked the group.

One of the demonic retainers, a younger ice clan member who was a distant cousin to Mobei-Jun and a perpetual fight-picking nuisance to Shen Jiu, spoke up.

“The air here is colder than in the forest. It could be the openness, but it doesn’t feel like the right kind of cold,” Mo Hongwen said. “There’s no wind, either. Everything is stagnant.”

“I can’t smell anything,” one of the fire demons, Huo Zhenglang, argued. “It doesn’t feel any more oppressive to me here than it did back at that pokey little village.”

“I will point out, Huo-di does have the atmospheric perceptiveness of a dog that’s been dead for several weeks,” Mo Hongwen countered.

Huo Zhenglang gestured rudely at him, but thankfully didn’t rise to the bait like he probably would have if they were at a more secure location. Shen Jiu fought down his frustration that even now these troublesome demons couldn’t resist the urge to try and pick fights with one another, and gestured at Mo Hongwen.

“Do a head count and check the cart,” he instructed. “It could just be something trying to smuggle itself into our midst.”

If it wasn’t that, then with such ambiguous signs around, there was probably a trap lying in wait for them. Or just something keeping a wary distance. If it was the latter option, then how long that situation might last for was entirely up in the air. Sometimes it was better to force a confrontation early than to risk the threat of ambush later on.

Mo Hongwen moved to do as told, expression serious enough to befit the situation. Most of Mobei-Jun’s cousins shared a lot of the main line’s cold, aristocratic features, and this cousin was no exception. However, the demonic traits from his second parent’s lineage were also more pronounced on him, so he cut a distinctive figure. Blue-tinted iridescent carapace pieces mottled his skin at various points. The carapace settled across his jaw like external bones, and traced over his brows, and gave his shoulders extra bulk. He wasn’t much taller than Shen Jiu, but there was an enviable sense of physical presence to him, and he was probably the most accomplished demonic cultivator in the party.

By contrast, Huo Zhenglang was much more human-looking. The main giveaways to his true
nature were his flame-coloured hair and all the points on him - pointed teeth, pointed ears, and sharpened pointed claws. He was also tall - probably a hair’s breadth taller than Yue Qingyuan, in fact. Additional contrast could be found in the pair’s relative standing. Because Mo Hongwen was a member of the ice demon clan, even though his cultivation level was impressive by most standards, he was considered ‘middle of the pack’ within his own family. He had older siblings with loftier achievements to their names, in addition to his noteworthy cousins, and parents. His mother had been disappointed enough with his prospects that she’d dropped him into the wilderness when he was ten, just to see if it would toughen him up some. After that incident, Mobei-Jun had taken Mo Hongwen on as a personal servant and apprentice. So he’d been running around the demon realm estate and palace for much of the same time that Shen Jiu had been, the both of them snapping and scuffling with one another in their efforts to prove themselves.

Huo Zhenglang, on the other hand, was one of only three children born into his family’s current generation, and the one with the best prospects out of all of them. The fire demon clan used to be more prominent in the past, but they’d done something or other to piss off the Heavenly Demons back when Lord Luo’s father was still alive, and so their numbers had been decimated before the survivors were eventually accepted as retainers to that bloodline. From birth, Huo Zhenglang had been treated preferentially by his family, who hoped he’d win enough favour with Lord Luo to earn back some of their old titles and clout. He was always showing off - whether it was his swordsmanship or his fire manipulation or some gift he’d gotten or thing he’d killed, Shen Jiu never knew a minute’s peace if Huo Zhenglang had something even remotely worthwhile to boast over.

It was annoying, but at least they were pretty reliable people. When they weren’t giving him headaches.

Motioning to Huo Zhenglang, Shen Jiu pointed towards the path still ahead of them.

“Fling some flames down ahead, just to see if there’s a reaction. Throw them in a couple different directions but don’t hit the trees,” he decided.

The fire demon shot a wary look at Yue Qingyuan.

“I should stay by Young Master Shen. My sister can surely fling something down the path.” With a dismissive motion, Huo Zhenglang indicated the second fire demon in their group. Huo Changying was standing back from the discussion, letting her younger brother take the lead in conversing with Shen Jiu - as was her habit, whenever the three of them were together. She didn’t object to his suggestion of passing the job over to her.

Shen Jiu’s mouth twisted with displeasure.
“Don’t be difficult. Just do it. Changying-shimei should watch Ji Man and the servants, in case something happens.”

“Ji Man and the servants approve of this measure,” the resident fox demon agreed, piping up from beside her mare. No surprise on that front; Huo Changying had trained under Lord Luo himself for a couple of years. Only in regards to swordsmanship, but it was still a bright spot on any young demon noble’s resume to have a Heavenly Demon for a teacher.

With an air of great reluctance, Huo Zhenglang shot Yue Qingyuan another narrow look, but still stalked off to go flinging a few flames at the horizon. Shen Jiu didn’t let him go very far anyway, following only at a short distance so he could watch to see the results.

Which were… mostly nothing.

Frustrating. But it knocked a few possibilities off of the list; most monsters usually gave at least some reaction to fire. When Mo Hongwen came back to report that everything seemed normal as well, Shen Jiu had him try flinging out some ice shards for good measure. But the lack of results remained the same.

The worst thing, he decided, was looking for clues and finding none.

A few times he glanced back at Yue Qingyuan, but whatever the man’s aims, he seemed determined to just follow Shen Jiu around like an overgrown shadow. Watching him.

For what? Signs of ineptitude?

To make matters worse, Mo Hongwen and Huo Zhenglang were keeping close, too. It was as if everyone had decided all at once to subject his every move to intense scrutiny. That probably was the case, actually. This was his venture after all. His choices would make or break things; would determine success or leave the whole thing a failure to be mocked and exploited later on. The Huo siblings were always eager to take on anything that might earn their family points with Lord Luo, and Mo Hongwen desperately needed to stand out and earn some power for himself if he was going to avoid being married off to some questionable demon clan in the south. They’d gambled a lot, throwing themselves into this endeavor.

Shen Jiu gritted his teeth, and glared at the disquieting terrain.
What would Master Shen do…?

The Night Mares were continuing to snort and stomp in place in mild agitation.

Glancing down, Shen Jiu examined the ground. It was the one place he hadn’t been able to observe at length while they were riding. While many creatures didn’t really need typical ‘cover’ to hide, and many more would probably find the jagged rocks and pole-like bone trees sufficient for their needs, most of those could be eliminated by the tests already done. Looking up, the sky overhead was only a little cloudy.

Process of elimination, then. Perhaps there was something underground…

If there was, that would be too dangerous to encounter.

“We’re doubling back,” he decided, heading towards his mare again. “Have the driver turn the carriage and don’t cluster together. If the ground begins to shake, halt and signal.”

To his relief, there were no arguments; just immediate agreement, even though the hour was late and the odds of them making it to the village before nightfall went down exponentially with a detour.

Yue Qingyuan didn’t hesitate to get into the saddle behind him this time. Shen Jiu blinked in surprise and then fought down a sudden rush of heat to his cheeks as an arm settled around his waist, and the incognito lord unsheathed his sword with a gesture.

The blade moved to drift alongside them. The more powerful sword remained strapped to its owner’s back.

“What does the Master Shen think is hunting us?” Yue Qingyuan asked him. His voice was low and serious, close to Shen Jiu’s ear.

Shen Jiu cleared his throat.
With a glance to confirm that the rest of the party wouldn’t overhear, he indicated downwards.

“It’s unclear, but eliminating a few possibilities, it may be a Tunneling Blood Centipede or a Migrating Corpse Mound.”

He tried not to wish that his master was with them. Shen Qingqiu seemed to know every monster that had ever lived in the world, and a few that hadn’t. Shen Jiu had gone through his bestiaries in utter fascination, and was perhaps only the second most knowledgeable expert on the topic these days. But that only made it all the more unsettling that he didn’t know for certain.

Mo Hongwen had been correct. Now that he was paying attention to it, the atmosphere felt stagnant.

“I’ve killed both of those creatures before,” Yue Qingyuan assured him, quietly. “Don’t fear, if anything comes, I can at least fight very well.”

Shen Jiu’s face heated further in annoyance.

“Who’s afraid? I can handle myself,” he countered. “Even if I haven’t fought such specific things before, Yue Qi, my master has the most comprehensive library of foul creatures and dangerous beings to ever exist in the world. And I have been on many nighthunts. I know the weaknesses of almost any beast and possess the skills to exploit them, don’t think you can belittle me.”

Yue Qingyuan protested, awkwardly. “That wasn’t my intent…”

“Tsk.”

The atmosphere of the party was tense as they rode along.

Since they were the heaviest and noisiest things, Shen Jiu kept his focus on the carriage and the supply cart while they moved. The more they traveled, the more certain he became that there was something beneath them. Those rocks… jutting upwards like that, none of them looked as though they were placed on top of the ground. As he let his gaze drift towards the base of rust-tipped stones, the displacement of the earth around them put him more in mind of…
Teeth.

Teeth emerging from dry, cracked gums.

“Desert Maw,” Shen Jiu whispered to himself, in a moment of stunned epiphany.

“A what?” Yue Qingyuan asked him, but at once, Shen Jiu gestured at him for quiet, and signaled at the rest of the party to remain silent and proceed more slowly. A cold sweat broke out down the back of his neck. How could he have missed it?

No, he knew how he missed it. The only Desert Maws he knew of were cold climate variants, which lived out in the northern wastelands beyond Mobei-Jun’s palace. That was a region which neither himself nor Shen Qingqiu went to, since it was so deadly and dangerous even for powerful demons. Not even in the sense of being ‘challenging’, but more in the sense of simply being full of things that would cause death in uncomplicated but effective ways. The ice spires which denoted the Maw’s presence in a frozen wasteland must have possessed stone cores that were frosted over by the cold. Shen Jiu had gotten distracted by superficial qualities, and had let their party trundle along atop one of the most dangerous monsters in existence.

For more than an hour.

He’d just disgraced his surname, and they weren’t even out of trouble yet.

Desert Maws were often mistakenly perceived, in demonic folklore, as massive underground creatures that lay in wait for victims, with only their teeth jutting up to the surface above ground. This was because of the tooth-like appearance of their ice-or-stone spires, and the fact that unlucky travelers who ventured into the Maw’s territory tended to be fully consumed. As if swallowed whole, or impaled upon its ‘teeth’.

In reality, Desert Maws were a concentration of resentful energy, not unlike a Waterborne Abyss or Man-Eating Forest. When a certain region caused a lot of travelers to die from exposure, the energy could build up to such a level that it created a malevolent entity of its own, which would then seek out more travelers to consume and feed itself. The Desert Maw wasn’t truly a ‘maw’ and did not have literal teeth, but it would retract and extend its spires to impale unlucky persons on the sharp points, and absorb them entirely. It could also summon up mirages/illusions to confuse and beguile, could split the ground at a traveler's feet to try and bury them alive, or create new pathways to lead them in circles until they simply starved to death. Its illusions were subtle and difficult to recognize until the victims were already too far into the wasteland to save themselves.
The biggest problem than such tricks, though, was that Desert Maws were extremely difficult to actually destroy. Most of the time, it was only possible to escape them.

For one to show up in the Borderlands, so near to his territory… that was annoying.

But the fact that it hadn’t presented them with any illusions or made any effort to attack already at least meant that, probably, it wasn’t as powerful as some of the northern Maws. Monsters like this one didn’t often have much intelligence, so to speak, but anything with enough will to consume generally also had an ounce of self-preservation instinct, too. Desert Maws were difficult to destroy, but, it was possible to do so if one purged enough of their resentful energy with spiritual power.

Shen Jiu glanced back towards Yue Qingyuan.

Unless the cultivators in the carriage were a lot stronger than he thought, it was very likely Yue Qingyuan’s presence alone that had kept them from trouble so far.

Relying on luck was no good. Even as they terrain began to shift back to the tangled forest, Shen Jiu felt too tense to breathe a sigh of relief.

*That was almost a complete disaster,* he thought.

Then the Howling Bone Wolves rushed them.

In what had to be some of the worst luck of the day, the moment the pack appeared from the trees around them was the exact same time that the carriage wheels suddenly hit an unseen tree root, and bumped badly enough to make the vehicle rattle. The mare pulling it, already spooked by the Maw and additionally alarmed at the unearthly howls that filled the air, bolted. This ensured that the carriage was sent *completely* off-balance, careened onto its side, and was dragged into a tree. The door that ended up on top seemed to wedge shut, judging by the banging from inside.

The toppled carriage gave the Bone Wolves a good point to rush over and leap at the other riders from, rather than having to contest with the Night Mares’ hooves.
Shen Jiu cursed as a skeletal face full of teeth came flying straight for him. The skull shattered as Yue Qingyuan’s sword cleaved through the monster, before Shen Jiu could defend himself. Bone chips flew everywhere, and an echoing yelp signaled the first attacking wolf’s end.

It also signaled the beginning of a messy, chaotic fight.

Holding his breath against the bone dust, Shen Jiu leaped down from his Night Mare. Or meant to. Yue Qingyuan’s arm around his middle halted him, but before he could snarl a complaint, the man at his back shifted his grip and dismounted along with him instead.

Freed of her riders, the Night Mare immediately reared, and began pummeling any and all Bone Wolves that came within range.

The individual wolves weren’t strong, but the problem, of course, was that there were a lot of them. Enough to make it seem more like a swarm than a pack. Shen Jiu drew his sword and focused, calling up weapons from the nearby leaf litter and sending a storm of sharpened projectiles into the wolves atop the carriage, in order to knock them back. The weight of their bodies had further wedged the door shut, and trapped the cultivators inside.

The supply cart was also being overrun, but the sound of freezing bone exploding on impact with a heavy club let him know that Mo Hongwen had taken over that matter.

More pressingly, Shen Jiu’s servant had been pinned on the ground by a half dozen monsters.

“A-Ye!” he called, even as several snapping vines sent two Bone Wolves flying. Moving to defend, Shen Jiu sent his sword to strike one, and channeled enough energy into his palms to break the spine of another. The last two wolves were brought down by Yue Qingyuan in a single blow, while he also stopped several others from trying to move in.

Reaching down, Shen Jiu hurriedly dragged his servant back to his feet, and shoved him behind himself.

“Stay there!” he snarled. “Don’t you dare fall down again!”

His servant nearly crashed into Yue Qingyuan, but the two recovered by the time Shen Jiu had whirled around again to deal with another swarm of Bone Wolves.
Part of the problem, of course, was that the wolves recovered from bone-breaking blows unless they were more or less smashed to dust. Breaking their backs or limbs just slowed them down. Smashing their skulls impeded them the most, but even then, many got up again and tried to attack with their claws instead. They had no sense of self-preservation as individuals; they were bloodthirsty drones, undead and undaunted by pain.

With his cultivation level, Shen Jiu still could have kept fighting for hours upon hours. But that wasn’t the problem. The Night Mares had limits, and so did the cart and carriage, and not everyone in their party was so skilled. The Huo siblings had secured Ji Man and the other servants and were scaring off the wolves with fire, but fire demons weren’t known for their stamina. The remaining retainers all had their hands full simply trying to fend off as many wolves as they could.

They needed to find the pack leader.

Bone Wolf packs had only one brain, and it was in the largest wolf. The trouble was, the pack leader would be hanging back, not getting involved in the fight unless absolutely necessary. Shen Jiu called out to the others to tell them to find and kill the biggest wolf.

A bare second later, Yue Qingyuan jumped onto his sword, and took off.

For a moment, Shen Jiu thought that the man was fleeing, and felt his heart turn sour. The sudden spike of betrayal was unexpected, and more unpleasant than he would have guessed. A shock of cold slid down his spine.

Of course, a dark little voice in the back of his mind whispered. You wouldn't be worth this much trouble to him.

But Yue Qingyuan only flew a short distance before stopping. Aloft on his sword, the cultivator lord summoned a vibrant whip of spiritual energy, and sent it spinning out towards the treeline at the edge of the glade. The snap of it felt like lightning. It was almost too fast for Shen Jiu to track, and a breath later, an anguished howl rippled through the entire pack.

“Missed,” Yue Qingyuan hissed at himself, before repeating the attack; aiming further, as if his target was attempting to flee.

Before the second blow could land, the wolves piled atop the fallen carriage suddenly exploded
upwards in a shower of bone. That wasn’t Yue Qingyuan’s doing. Shen Jiu blinked as Xie Lian and Auntie popped out of the fallen carriage. An odd white ribbon - some kind of whip? - snaked around Xie Lian, and tossed the last remaining wolf on top of the carriage through the air.

The wolf slammed into one of the Night Mares.

Half a second later, Yue Qingyuan’s second strike hit the fleeing pack leader, and all of the Bone Wolves exploded into dust.

“Don’t breathe it in!” Shen Jiu called, covering his face with his sleeve. Bone Wolf dust worked much like corpse dust, and could cause terrible sickness.

He turned to check on his servant, only to be met with a face full of spores, and then a horrified expression.

“Master!”

Shen Jiu smacked his hand over his idiot servant’s face and mouth to stop him from inhaling undead wolf dust. It was a good thing he already wasn’t breathing, although whatever spores had just hit him full in the face was making his eyes water and his skin itch.

When he was convinced that his message had been received, he unfurled his fan, and blew the bone dust and whatever else was in the air away from their party, and towards the Desert Maw.

Might as well put all the trash in one place.

When he was satisfied that the bone dust had been sufficiently dispersed, Shen Jiu closed his fan, and smacked his troublesome servant on the head with it.

“Idiot!” he scolded. “What did you just spray at me?”

The young poison demon fell to his knees.
“Begging forgiveness, it was an involuntary reflex! This lowly one’s body released counter-measure spores to try and cancel out the other poison! It wasn’t intended, this lowly one would never!”

Shen Jiu let out a breath, and wiped at his face with his sleeve. When he pulled it back, he found it was covered in small yellow particles.

“It itches,” he complained.

His servant looked impressively miserable, curling into himself and yanking at the ends of his hair.

“It’s not a poison, but there may be some odd reactions for a human exposed-”

The explanation was cut off as, it seemed, the entire party finally converged on them at once. Shen Jiu was jostled by Yue Qingyuan landing and, to his shock, taking his face in his hand and tilting it up to look at him. A moment later, Huo Zhenglang crashed bodily into the disguised lord with enough force to push him back.

“Don’t touch him so boldly, you-!”

Shen Jiu lifted a hand to intervene, but was then pulled in the opposite direction by Mo Hongwen.

_Dammit_, he thought, recognizing a familiar pattern. Everyone’s blood was up, and among demons, that often meant that one fight didn’t end without starting another. He braced himself to see if Mo Hongwen was planning on making some kind of challenge towards him, like when they were younger; but the ice demon just stuck a cold handkerchief onto his face instead.

“The spores are in Da-ge’s eyelashes,” he said.

With an irritated sound, Shen Jiu kept his eyes shut and vigorously rubbed at his face. He was starting to feel very hot.

That was a bad sign.
Possibly a worse one was the way he could hear Huo Zhenglang snarling at Yue Qingyuan, while the human lord gave terse replies that verged on threatening as well.

Truly, he was surrounded by geniuses. Because what they needed right now was for their party to start fighting among themselves, wasting more time and causing more injuries.

“Enough!” he snarled, in his best ‘Lord Luo after someone has pissed him off’ voice.

It worked better than usual. The grove went silent.

Letting out a heavy breath, Shen Jiu tossed aside the spore-riddled handkerchief. Then he rounded on his illustrious travel party.

Inventory:

All retainers, servants, and hirelings intact. One ‘Yue Qi’ looking as though he wasn’t just on the verge of picking a fight with a demon half his age. One Huo Zhenglang sporting a bite wound to his shoulder - likely cause of a shortened temper. One personal servant still trying to let the earth swallow him whole. Several injuries… none serious, by the looks of things. One Xie Lian trying to disguise some coughs into his sleeve.

He had probably accidentally inhaled bone dust, then. That would need to be dealt with.

The carriage was still upturned, and now had the side door blasted clean off. The supply cart had stayed on its wheels - someone must have gotten it untied from the Night Mare pulling it in time.

Their mounts were all still present. Two were bleeding. The Night Mare that had been pulling the carriage had fallen down at some point, and was riddled in bite wounds. Likely not enough to be fatal to her, though. The one that had a bone wolf thrown into her by Xie Lian’s weapon was sporting several gashes. Most likely, all of the mares would need to be treated for bone dust inhalation as well, but given their general resilience and monster-status, they’d probably be fine until a remedy could be mixed in with their meat.

On the whole, not ideal, but better than it could have been.
Shen Jiu nodded to himself.

“Alright, we need to see if that carriage is salvageable and get the mounts back in order. I’ll check over their wounds, none of the rest of you would know what to do well enough. Depending on how big that Maw is, we might have to make camp, but I doubt it’s large enough that we can’t detour and still reach the village. If anyone breathed in bone dust, there are remedies, but we need to deal with it now.”

He gave Xie Lian a pointed glance. Or he meant to. But somehow he was a little wobblier than expected, and just ended up glaring at a random point between two trees.

Shen Jiu blinked.

When he looked back at the people surrounding him, their expressions were uniformly concerned.

“What?” he asked.

Mo Hongwen put a hand on his shoulder. He tried to reflexively shrug it off, but somehow ended up flailing a hand instead.

His servant prostrated himself.

“Stop that,” he demanded.

Not far away, Ji Man cleared her throat.

“Does Young Master Shen realize that he is speaking gibberish?” she asked.

What?

No he wasn’t, he quite clearly said… said…
Shen Jiu turned. The trees spun. The world became a blur of colour, and his chest clenched as he tried furiously to think of what kind of monster would cause that. Something had turned all the scenery into spilled paint, and then flipped it upside-down. Then someone grabbed him. Mo Hongwen, he thought, and then frowned, because that troublesome retainer wasn’t usually the type to touch him so freely. Who did he think he was, putting his arms around him for no reason?

There was shouting.

Shen Jiu reached for his sword, before all the spilled paint turned to inky blackness instead.

~

Inebriation was a funny thing.

On the rare occasions when Master Shen got drunk, he tended to be the affectionate type. He would pat Shen Jiu on the head or link arms with Shang Qinghua or Liu Qingge, or climb into Lord Luo’s lap so he could pet his hair and rest his head against his shoulder. He tended to tell everyone they were good and acted like a sentimental fool - well, more of one than usual, anyway. It wasn’t a frequent occurrence, and Shen Jiu always kept his eyes on his master whenever it happened, because drunk people were easy to take advantage of. But in the end, Lord Luo of course always kept an even closer watch, and the worst thing that had ever happened to Master Shen in the grips of his wine was embarrassment caused by his own over-affectionate behaviour.

Shang Qinghua almost never drank, and demons took a lot to get drunk and usually only bothered on special occasions. Given the rowdiness of such occasions, Shen Jiu was typically barred from attending a lot of them; not that he felt like he missed much, by all accounts it was just a lot of eating disgusting raw things and fighting and falling into bed with the wrong people. He wasn’t even sure if Lord Luo was capable of getting drunk. He’d seen Mobei-Jun manage it, once. It was memorable because it was the first, last, and probably only time that Shen Jiu had ever heard him sing.

He had a very resonant baritone.
Sha Hualing tended to lose her clothes whenever she was drunk, but since that was something that just seemed to come of wearing so much flimsy material, it wasn’t really remarkable. She lost a lot of clothing sober, too. If Liu Qingge drank, Shen Jiu didn’t know about it. Among his peers, the Huo siblings were rowdy drunks, and Mo Hongwen was the confrontational sort. The ice demon had once passed out in Shen Jiu’s room after coming to pick a fight with him, but then just sort of slumping onto his shoulder and verbally insisting he was going to win. No actual fight was had. It took Shen Jiu assuring him that he’d won for the idiot to let go of his collar and pass out on his floor instead.

For his own part, Shen Jiu’s few experiments with inebriation had led him to the grim suspicion that he might imitate his master more than he’d like. In the name of self-preservation, he had learned how to fake drinking at social events very quickly. Wide sleeves and absorbent materials were essential. Especially since, if he did it right, he’d end up reeking of wine well enough that no one would question his lack of sobriety for one minute. Shen Jiu actually had a reputation as a lightweight in the drinking department, but he could count on one hand the number of times he’d even gotten tipsy, and never once had it been while he was in public.

When he opened his eyes again, however, he felt distinctly drunk.

Oh no.

No, that wasn’t good. He was on a mission. He couldn’t be drunk on his important financial venture. A fuzzy note of panic rippled through him, and he sat up in an uncoordinated, flailing mess. No, no, bad, he wasn’t at home, there wasn’t… Master Shen wasn’t here, Lord Luo wasn’t here, he couldn’t be drunk in the middle of the borderlands with just three people he somewhat trusted and the disguised man who he was being courted by and planned to marry for money and power. It wasn’t safe.

No.

It was very dangerous, for many reasons. And he absolutely should not talk.

Shen Jiu clamped a hand over his own mouth and waited for the world to stop spinning.

Someone patted his back. For a moment he almost thought it was Master Shen. Had he come? Had he found out that Shen Jiu got drunk and showed up to look after him? That would be like him. But when did he get drunk at all? The last thing he remembered was giving perfectly fine instructions
and then…

Was the party attacked?

Or… no. He passed out, didn’t he?

Because of his foolish servant’s *reflexive spores*, of all things. It wasn’t anything impressive, like taking down the pack leader. Yue Qingyuan had done that. At range, no less.

Ugh.

As Shen Jiu’s head stopped spinning, he stared blearily at the person patting his back.

“...You’re not Shifu,” he mumbled.

Ji Man smiled at him.

“Nope,” she confirmed. “Ji Man has been watching Young Master Shen for an hour. Before that, Lord Luo’s retainers took turns attending their duties in pairs.”

“They left you alone with me?” Shen Jiu asked, a little surprised.

The fox demon shrugged.

“We’re at the village. The walls aren’t thick; they’d hear if Ji Man did something unlikely and foolish and tried to assault the young master,” she explained, patting a hand against the wall beside herself. It was then that Shen Jiu realized that they were, indeed, inside of some kind of a room. A small, cheap, dirty one, probably in a house reserved for travelers at the village they were heading to.

“Why am I drunk…?” he asked, rubbing at his head.
“Ah. Well,” Ji Man replied, clearing her throat. “The young master’s servant admitted that the spores could have an inebriating effect. Potentially also an aphrodisiac one, but if that’s the case, then the young master may have some ‘alone time’ to sort that out. Or a cold bath. Either could be arranged.”

Ji Man looked like she might be a little tempted to douse him in a tub of ice water, going off of her ‘pleasant’ smile.

Shen Jiu sighed.

“That ambush was very bad luck,” he said.

“En,” Ji Man agreed. “Doubling back might not have been a good idea.”

“No, it was the right choice,” Shen Jiu assured her. “That was a Desert Maw. It would have eaten us.”

The fox demon blinked, and then paled a little.

“...Ah,” she said.

“You didn’t travel back through it, right?” he checked.

“No. There was some debate, but the parties against using that route again were more adamant,” Ji Man explained.

Letting out a gusty sigh of relief, Shen Jiu tilted forward and rested his head against the cool wall.

“We should go home,” he decided. This place was no good. Clearly. At least the few times he’d gotten drunk at home, he’d had his own things around. His own bed. Servants.

Wait, where was his servant?
“Where’s A-Ye?” he checked.

“Your servant? He’s recovering,” Ji Man told him. “Those wolves bit hard, and that was before Young Master Huo kicked him black and blue.”

Shen Jiu frowned.

“Bad Huo-di,” he scolded, muttering.

Ji Man made an odd sound.

“Indeed. Ji Man reminded him that it wasn’t his place to punish someone else’s servants,” she said.

“Snow Bug should have told him off too,” he noted.

“...Snow Bug…?”

“Mm.”

“Does Young Master Shen refer to Mo Hongwen…?”

“Mm,” he confirmed. “I called him that when we were kids. He’s part beetle demon, part ice demon. So Snow Bug. I didn’t want to remember his real name in case he died.” Or got sent away. Back then his mind hadn’t cared to differentiate states of absence very much. There was a pretty high turnover rate among slave children, after all. He’d also been somewhat jealous of the demon children who had actual names that meant something, that held sway, back before Master Shen adopted him.

“...Ah. Well, that’s… interesting,” Ji Man permitted.

Nodding, Shen Jiu reached over and patted her shoulder.
“It’s alright,” he consoled. “Ji Man can stay in the village from here on, if she prefers.”

“For the time being, that might be best,” the fox demon agreed, looking bemusedly at his hand. “Young Master Shen, I should go and get someone else, I suspect, but I’m not sure who. Which person would the young master request? Until he’s sober, we can’t really do much planning.”

Shen Jiu nodded his head, thunking it lightly against the wall, and then smacked his lips. His mouth was dry.

“S’okay. Just lemme go get some water,” he decided. “Then we can go.”

“Uh…”

To her credit, Ji Man attempted to stop him from getting up and heading towards the door. Unfortunately, however, even drunk Shen Jiu was still an accomplished cultivator, and Ji Man, though crafty and skilled in many fields, didn’t have a lot of recourse against him just walking determinedly past her and out through the bedroom door. A hand at his shoulder tried to tug him back, promising to bring him some water and urging him to rest, but then Shen Jiu looked out into the room beyond and saw most of his traveling party gathered into a larger room, staring back towards them.

Including Yue Qingyuan. Who was very near to the doorway, in fact.

Right. Shen Jiu had to present a good image. He had to pull himself together, especially since he’d already made an embarrassment of himself and the name of Shen.

Lifting a hand, he gestured imperiously at Yue Qingyuan.

“You,” he said.

The disguised lord who sent him countless presents and never wrote and was spying on him for some reason actually froze in place, like a startled rabbit.
Shen Jiu had meant to demand to know what he was up to, right then and there. But as Lord Yue startled, he suddenly remembered that he was keeping the truth a secret. For a reason. Presumably. Drunk Shen Jiu likely understood that less than Sober Shen Jiu, and ought not be in charge of deciding that matter. So he paused for a moment, staring at the man with narrowed eyes, while for some reason, Yue Qingyuan looked back at him as if he was holding his breath.

He had to say something.

What could he say?

“Get me a cup of water,” he demanded.

It was all he could think of, since he was thirsty. Almost at once he realized the absurdity of it. Lord Yue was one of the most powerful people in the human cultivation world. No one was even entirely sure of who would win in a fight between him and Lord Luo, mostly because they’d never seriously fought. He was one of the most favoured servants of the emperor, rich enough and blithe enough to shower Shen Jiu in gifts without even deigning to speak to him, or even demanding he put out.

Even in disguise, he probably shouldn’t ask Yue Qingyuan to fetch and carry for him like a servant!

Yue Qingyuan blinked.

And then hurried to pour out a cup of water from a jug on the table.

Shen Jiu watched, tongue-tied and blinking, while half of his retainers glared at the man like he’d stolen their kills.

“Here,” Yue Qingyuan said gently, as he handed Shen Jiu the cup.

For lack of anything else to do, and still feeling profoundly at a loss, Shen Jiu smiled appreciatively, and then drank the water.
Probably he should… not talk.

Right.

No talking.

Moving his hand, he gestured at a nearby chair, and then stumbled over and sat in it.

As if that was some kind of signal, then, he promptly found himself crowded by Lord Luo’s retainers and bombarded with questions. Was he feeling alright? Were they still pressing forward? Did he want food? More water? Should they send someone to go and get Lord Luo?

What?

Why would Lord Luo come over just because he was drunk? Shen Jiu hadn’t even accomplished anything yet!

“No,” he snapped, at the last suggestion. “Just give me… just… Snow Bug,” he called, motioning at Mo Hongwen.

The man made an odd noise, but came immediately to stand beside him.

“Yes, Da-ge?” he asked.

“You’re in charge until I’m sober,” he said. “Because Huo-di punished my servant, he doesn’t get to be in charge as well this time. He’s a subordinate. You’re in charge. Now everybody go to bed and sleep it off or I’ll fight you.”

Satisfied with his proclamation, Shen Jiu folded his arms onto the table, and then dropped his head down on top of them.

Dark.
Much better.

“It’s not night…” someone - probably Xie Lian - pointed out.

At the sound of his voice, Shen Jiu remembered something important. He looked up again, and pointed a finger at the peasant cultivator.

“You,” he said, once more.

Xie Lian didn’t freeze up the way that Yue Qingyuan did, but he looked a little startled.

“Ah, yes, Master Shen?” he asked.

“You breathed in the bone dust,” he recalled. “Go eat sticky rice.”

Dubious glances were exchanged between his so-called ‘loyal’ followers.

…They really weren’t so bad, though. Even if they were always making trouble. Shen Jiu liked them. Not that he would ever tell them that. Except that he probably should. How else would they know? What if they thought he didn’t care about them and resented him and then stabbed him in the back at the first opportunity?

He was kind of an awful person.

It would probably make sense if that happened.

A soft sniff escaped him, and his throat closed up. Probably for the best. Even if he did say something nice, he’d undoubtedly do it wrong. He was terrible at those sorts of things.

Yue Qingyuan’s eyes widened, and he anxiously patted the table next to Shen Jiu.
“I know how to make sticky rice,” he said. “I’ll make it and we can all eat it. Would that work?”

Throat still closed, Shen Jiu stared blearily at the man. He managed an awkward nod, and then put his head back down again.

He absolutely could not look up again. If he started to cry, then it would be the end of all his pretenses at dignity. And he needed those, because he’d never had the genuine kind.

“Really, I’m immune to poisons…” he thought he heard Xie Lian saying, only to be quieted by three or four separate shushes. Dimly, Shen Jiu registered the sounds of movement, and a door opening and closing. Presumably to the kitchen, if this traveler’s house had one. Or maybe it was the front door, because who even knew if there was rice in this place? A chair scraped beside him, and he didn’t have to look to know that Mo Hongwen was sitting at his side. He could feel the dip in temperature.

“It’s been a long time since you called me Snow Bug,” the young man said, with an incongruous warmth to his tone.

Shen Jiu blinked.

“Snow Bug is Snow Bug, I think it all the time,” he mumbled back, defensively.

Mo Hongwen let out a soft snort of amusement.

“Da-ge’s going to be furious when he sobers up,” he anticipated.

“Da-ge will beat your face,” Shen Jiu agreed. “Beat all your faces.”

There was some silence then, which was nice, because his temples were starting to throb and he was no longer entirely sure if this was a ‘drunk’ feeling or edging more into ‘horrible hangover’ territory.

“That human cultivator, the strong one,” Mo Hongwen said quietly, after the silence had passed. “He’s hiding something.”
“Mm,” Shen Jiu confirmed. “He’s Yue Qingyuan. The disguise isn’t good.”

There was more silence for a while.

“Your human suitor?” Mo Hongwen asked, then.

“That’s him. I think he’s probably spying to test me,” he explained.

The ice demon at his side let out a low, offended hiss.

“Testing? What testing?” he demanded. “If anyone should be tested or prove his merit, it’s the Oathbreaker. His ‘reputation’ precedes him.”

Shen Jiu didn’t reply, since that latter point was pretty true - Yue Qingyuan had an interesting reputation among demonic gossiping circles, to say the least - but the former point required more explaining than he had the mental capacity for. Especially since he wasn’t even actually sure what the man was up to, and mostly just had a lot of theories to go off of.

But that reminded him.

Reaching over, he grasped Mo Hongwen’s arm tightly.

“This matter is a secret,” he said. “Don’t tell anyone else.”

The ice demon glanced at his hand, and then at his face. His throat bobbed, but after a moment, he inclined his head.

“I won’t say a word,” he promised.

Shen Jiu patted him.
“Good man,” he praised. “Get me more water.”

For some reason, this earned him a smile as Mo Hongwen reached over and poured him a cup.
Mo Hongwen stared at the vast expanse that made up the main pavilion of the Northern Palace.

He had been here once before, but that was when he was very small. Too small to remember the experience. His mother had brought him to celebrate the anniversary of Mobei-Jun’s ascension, and to offer tributes to the lord. He wished he could remember it. Seeing it for the second time, he felt unprepared.

The flagstones of the floor were made of polished dragon scale. Icy pillars stretched up towards the tumultuous sky, carved and glittering, and thrumming with old power. Even though he was only ten, Mo Hongwen could feel the place calling out to something more ancient and resolute inside of him. The ancestral blood that bound him to the Northern Desert, perhaps. To the North.

He wanted to be respectful, but he wasn’t sure how. No one had told him anything. His cousin, the Ice Lord, had fetched him from the forest wilds where his mother had left him. Mo Hongwen was shamefully glad. He hadn’t been doing well. The bite wounds on his arms itched as they still knit themselves together, and his stomach was a hollow pit of hunger. He felt a little dizzy, too, and no matter how he tried, he couldn’t get his balance entirely right. Moving just made him want to fall down and lie in a heap.
Mobei-Jun was standing nearby though, so Mo Hongwen did his best not to disgrace himself. He kept his back straight, and tried to stand out of the way without looking like he was hiding or cowering too much. His cousin was big. Like a statue. His features were reminiscent of Mo Hongwen’s mother; cold, unyielding, betraying nothing of his thoughts. The ice of his eyes felt all too keen whenever it landed on him. His every instinct screamed at him to keep his head down and do nothing to challenge the powerful demon lord.

They were in the pavilion for only a few minutes before another figure arrived.

Mo Hongwen looked, and then stared.

The Ice Lord’s First Husband was a human. Mo Hongwen knew this because many of the elders had been incensed at the disgrace to afford a human such a rank. His mother had even earned Mobei-Jun’s disfavor by being bold enough to send a letter advising that he demote his human husband to a more suitable rank, and take one of Mo Hongwen’s older brothers to be an appropriate First Husband instead.

Mo Hongwen had never seen a human before, and yet, he somehow felt he knew he was looking at one the minute he saw Shang Qinghua.

It wasn’t what he had expected.

When considering humans, Mo Hongwen had always pictured them looking more like monkeys. Not exactly, but just… closer to that? Smaller, furrier, with big watery eyes but vicious teeth, and mean tricks up their sleeves. Pretty faces and devious hearts.

First Husband Shang was indeed smaller than Mobei-Jun, but not much smaller than the average demon. He looked nothing like a monkey. Clad in richly dyed robes, with sapphires in his hair, and a dragon’s eye pendant around his neck, Mobei-Jun’s First Husband was very pretty. The deep dark of his eyes seemed intelligent, and the unexpected splotches of blue on his hands drew Mo Hongwen’s attention nearly as much as the dragon’s eye pendant. The mottling of ink there made the human seem oddly… normal?

“My king,” Shang Qinghua said. “What’s so urgent…?”

He looked at Mo Hongwen. Mo Hongwen stared back. His fingers itched, wishing he could reach
up and touch the shiny jewels in his hair. They were so pretty!

“This is my cousin, Hongwen,” Mobei-Jun said, motioning at him. “His mother threw him to a trial. He failed, so he’ll be staying here now.”

Mo Hongwen hung his head in shame.

Shang Qinghua made an odd sound and then came over to him.

“A new apprentice?” he asked.

“Yes,” Mobei-Jun said.

Mo Hongwen blinked. Some of his older siblings had fought tooth and nail, he knew, for a chance to apprentice themselves to the Ice Lord. His mother had wanted to install one of her children in the Northern Palace since long before Mo Hongwen joined their ranks, but had always found her efforts rebuffed. Was he misunderstanding? He’d failed his trial. Mobei-Jun just said so! Why would he get a reward for that? Why would his mother?

Maybe they were talking about someone else…?

When he ventured a look up again, he startled as he found that Shang Qinghua was much closer. His body wavered a little before he managed to get it under control again.

The human peered at him curiously before addressing him.

“Hi little guy,” he said. “You like you’ve been through it. Are you feeling okay?”

Mo Hongwen glanced at his cousin. He wasn’t sure he had permission to address Mobei-Jun’s First Husband, but the lord didn’t make any motions to dissuade him.

“F-fine,” he managed.

Shang Qinghua’s brow furrowed. Reaching over, he pressed a hand to Mo Hongwen’s forehead.
“You’re too hot,” he said, and then looked reproachfully at Mobei-Jun. “Did you have a healer look at him?”

The Ice Lord shifted in place, as if somehow faintly embarrassed.

“No,” he said.

Shang Qinghua clucked his tongue.

“My king, ah, he’s just little! Baby demons aren’t as good at bouncing back, you know?”

“...Hmph.”

“Hongwen is ten, not a baby!” Mo Hongwen protested. He had all his adult teeth and a lot of his carapace, too! Even if he’d failed, still, he wasn’t so small!

Shang Qinghua reached a hand toward him and pressed a finger to his nose for some reason. Mo Hongwen held very very still, not daring to be caught making a single threatening move towards Mobei-Jun’s favourite mate. The touch was only brief, and then human smiled at him.

“Right, right, Honghong-er is a big boy,” he said, in a funny tone of voice that was… somehow not unpleasant. Mo Hongwen flushed, wanting to protest the nickname but also not, at the same time. He glanced at Mobei-Jun again. The lord was looking at his husband. Something about his expression seemed softer somehow, too.

There was no disapproval in his countenance, so Mo Hongwen decided it was better not to say anything and risk displeasing him.

Shang Qinghua reached out and took his hand.

“Okay, well, since you’re going to be staying, let’s go have a look at you,” the human said. “You can tell Uncle what sorts of things bit you in that place you were in, and we’ll see if we can’t get you to feel better. Right? You don’t feel good, do you? Aiyah, might need to get Master Shen in on this if you ran into something weird...”
Mo Hongwen wanted to insist he was fine. He was strong! But something about the way he was being asked made him hesitate.

He… didn’t feel good. No. He hadn’t felt good for a few days, really. Not since his mother left him, but it had gotten worse after he ate some of the meat he killed, the strips of stringy flesh pulled from one of those strange scorpion-creatures.

After a moment, he settled for just nodding his head.

Shang Qinghua squeezed his hand.

“Good boy,” he praised. “It took your cousin much longer to learn not to be stubborn. We’ll get along great, I can already tell!”

Mo Hongwen stared at the strange, pretty human, with gems in his hair and a shine to his eyes, and found himself hoping that was true.

~

The Underground Palace wasn’t really what Mo Hongwen imagined.

Mostly he had pictured something entirely underground. Like a big cavern with a building in it. But a lot of the palace was still visible from the surface, it just had a lot of basement living areas and subterranean courtyards. The main gates were still on the surface, and the Human Palace was a sight to behold; with high, protective walls that only permitted glimpses of the artfully curved rooftops, and tips of tall, swaying green plants.

The air tasted different around there, too. Uncle Shang took deep breaths when they arrived, and
seemed to be very refreshed by it.

Mobei-Jun had to go hunting in the Deep North, alongside Junshang. They weren’t taking any apprentices with them since their prey was too strong. Mo Hongwen had tried to prove he was tough enough, but Mobei-Jun had just snorted and then tossed him to Uncle Shang.

“If anything happens to this Mobei-Jun’s husband, no servant will survive,” the Ice Lord commanded.

Mo Hongwen took his assignment very seriously. Being trusted to guard his cousin’s spouse wasn’t a small matter either. So Mo Hongwen let Uncle Shang hold his hand while they went through the portal, and kept beside him as they proceeded to the palace, even while Mobei-Jun was still escorting him too. And after his cousin left, he dutifully shadowed Uncle Shang’s steps, and tried his best to memorize the halls and passageways that they went through.

Uncle Shang seemed to know where he was going. Snowflake, his personal servant, left them before long to go and arrange a courtyard to his liking, but Mo Hongwen found himself led off in another direction. Back towards the strange-smelling air that had surrounded the walls of the Human Palace.

At a pair of large double doors with guards standing at either side, Uncle Shang stopped them for a moment. He looked at Mo Hongwen, and then pulled a handkerchief out from the inner pocket of his sleeve.

Then Mo Hongwen found himself subjected to an impromptu and quick grooming session.

His cheeks burned as Uncle Shang swiped the smooth fabric over his face before fixing several loose strands of his hair, and then lifting up his hands to check his nails. It had been a long time since Mo Hongwen’s parents groomed him, not since he was almost too tiny to remember, and an unbidden warmth stirred in his tummy at the sudden onslaught of paternal attention. He glanced self-consciously at the guards, but they weren’t even bothering to pay attention.

Uncle Shang straightened the front of his clothes, then concluded things by pressing his thumbs to the soft parts of Mo Hongwen’s cheeks and squishing them.

“My king’s disciple is the cutest!” he declared.
Mo Hongwen felt like he ought to be offended. He frowned, hoping it would make his expression more seriously.

Uncle Shang cooed and patted his cheeks.

"Okay, Honghong-er! Do Uncle proud and just keep being adorable! Oh and don’t hurt any small fluffy animals you see, Bro’s got a pet dog and I don’t know if you know what a dog is, but even if it attacks me you gotta not hurt it. It’s harmless. Despite its evil needle teeth. Harmless. Got it?"

Mo Hongwen’s frown deepened.

"This disciple is here to protect First Husband Uncle Shang," he protested.

Shang Qinghua nodded his head.

"Yup, yup, you’re doing great, Mobei-Jun picked a good job for you! But if you kill Shen Qingqiu’s dog, Lord Luo’s gonna roast us both alive, so let’s not. Yeah?"

Mo Hongwen hesitated. Shen Qingqiu? They were going to go meet Shen Qingqiu? Junshang’s husband? His heart sped up. The man from all the stories! Even his mother didn’t dare say a word about Shen Qingqiu’s humanity in a bad light, lest Junshang hear of it and cut out her tongue! He found himself worried all of a sudden. What if he made a bad impression…?

Uncle Shang was waiting for his response. Mo Hongwen hastily nodded.

He wouldn’t kill Shen Qingqiu’s small attack animal!

His cousin’s husband nodded back in approval, and then finally led him through the big double doors.

The Human Palace was both more ordinary and more strange than Mo Hongwen imagined. It felt different. A little bit like walking into another world, he thought, even though he’d never been to the human realms. The place was very clean and warm, just shy of being uncomfortable for an ice demon like him, with lots of green things. The path from the doors led out to a hall, which
opened into a garden space. Mo Hongwen heard running water and the faint sound of chimes from somewhere.

Near to one of the garden ponds, a man sat with a boy at his side.

The man was Shen Qingqiu.

Mo Hongwen knew it had to be, despite the fact that never would have imagined anything like this person on his own. The human was taller than Uncle Shang, even sitting down he could tell that much. Unlike his uncle, who wore jewels and furs and the many tokens of Mobei-Jun’s favour, Shen Qingqiu had very few adornments. But the pale green robes he was in were very fine, and the movement of his hands as he played a strange instrument felt like a kind of poetry. His skin was smooth and pale as white jade, and the arrangement of his features was lovely without being soft. Yet, when he looked up at them, Mo Hongwen got the strong impression that he was every inch as soft inside as Uncle Shang.

It made him forget how to breathe for a minute.

Quickly, he looked away. His gaze landed on the boy sitting beside Junshang’s fabled husband instead.

The boy who was glaring at him with challenge in his eyes.

Mo Hongwen stiffened a little bit.

Having met Uncle Shang and now seen Shen Qingqiu, he could tell that this boy was human. But he wasn’t sure if he’d been able to figure it out if he didn’t know what to look for already. He seemed to be around Mo Hongwen’s own age, maybe a little younger, with sharp features and sharper eyes. He was dressed very nicely too, in a style that was deliberately reminiscent of the man beside him, and he also had an instrument in his lap. He held it more clumsily than Shen Qingqiu, but considering that Shen Qingqiu was so graceful, that wasn’t much of an insult.

“Who’s this?” the boy demanded, glowering. The works broke the stillness and interrupted the soft music coming from Shen Qingqiu’s instrument.

“Qingqiu-bro! A-Jiu! This is Mo Hongwen, he’s Mobei-Jun’s cousin and newest apprentice. My
king asked him to look after me while we’re visiting,” Uncle Shang explained. “Isn’t he cute?”

Mo Hongwen startled, and felt his face heat in mortification.

Uncle!

Saying that in front of Junshang’s husband?!

“Not cute!” he blurted in what wanted to be a reproachful bark. Too his horror, it squeaked.

Uncle Shang gestured at him as if he had just proven a point.

Mo Hongwen’s blush deepened when Shen Qingqiu chuckled.

“Is he the one you were telling me about, then?” Junshang’s husband asked. His voice sounded elegant, too! Gentle but also refined somehow. Mo Hongwen wasn’t sure how to qualify it all. It seemed very different from what he had been taught to expect of high-ranking people and their conduct, but then, that was fitting because humans weren’t demons. He had always known that Shen Qingqiu was an exceptional human. He just… never known how to imagine something like this.

Someone so lovely but alien. Even after meeting Uncle Shang, he would have gotten it wrong. Uncle Shang at least acted very much like an influential demon lord’s spouse, albeit a physically weak one. Shen Qingqiu… was something else.

But they were definitely the same sort of being, too.

With two such introductions Mo Hongwen might have been tricked into thinking that all humans were such mystical, graceful creatures if it weren’t for the boy.

“Send him away, demons don’t come in here without special permission!” the human child insisted in a resentful, almost sullen tone.

Shen Qingqiu clucked at him.
“A-Jiu, it’s fine. Why don’t you take him to go ask the servants for tea, and fetch a few of the snacks Lord Luo left. This master would like to exchange some words with Mobei-Jun’s husband. We can resume lessons later, alright? Consider it an opportunity to make a friend!”

The boy’s expression was extremely reluctant, but he nevertheless set his instrument aside. He shot Mo Hongwen a black look and made no further effort to acknowledge him as he stalked off in the direction of the double doors again.

It was almost a relief. Mo Hongwen knew how to act around snotty cousins and apprentices, how to respond to challenges and dismissals, better than he knew how to take the weird behaviour of his uncle, or now, probably, Shen Qingqiu. He genuflected briefly to the two adult humans in the garden before hurrying to follow the other boy.

“A-Jiu?” he asked.

The littler human whirled as soon as they were out of sight of the adults, and punched him on the nose.

Mo Hongwen bared his teeth.

“Don’t use that name! This Esteemed One is your senior, the most senior apprentice Bai Jiu!”

“Not likely!” he snapped back. “You’re puny! What’s your age?”

Bai Jiu sneered.

“Twelve,” he said.

Mo Hongwen was ten. He frowned, looking the other boy over in confusion.

“You’re lying,” he accused.
“I’m not! I’ll prove it by knocking out your teeth if you test me again!”

Frown persisting, Mo Hongwen took another look at the furious human boy. They were the same height. But Bai Jiu was skinnier, and had more delicate features. That didn’t seem uncommon for humans, though? He looked sort of like a Fox demon, actually. Fox demons often looked younger than they were as well. It was the big eyes…

Huffing, Mo Hongwen decided to let it pass. He could ask around later, and if it turned out the other boy was lying, he could rub it in his face then.

“Okay, okay, Little Da-ge,” he mocked. “Don’t break your fist on my teeth, your master might blame me.”

“I’d break your teeth!” Bai Jiu insisted, lifting a curled fist again.

“Children?” Shen Qingqiu called. “Is everything alright?”

The two of them stiffened and shared a glance.

“We’re fine!” Bai Jiu called back, before grabbing Mo Hongwen by the collar and dragging him along instead.

“Don’t make trouble for me,” the human hissed when he finally let go. “I got here first, that means I’m senior. Even if you were older I’d still be senior. You keep out of my way, and I won’t make trouble for you. But if you cross me, I’ll destroy you!”

Mo Hongwen shrugged off the boy’s grip, and scoffed.

“You don’t scare me, Little Da-ge.”

The scrappy human child gave him a challenging look.

Before he could reply, however, a small furry creature rushed up towards them.
It crossed the path in front of them, and began making weird little not-growling noises. Mo Hongwen jumped in surprise. Bai Jiu, on the other hand, rushed forwards and grabbed the weird little ball of fluff, stuffing it into his arms so quick that Mo Hongwen half expected him to start eating the thing. His eyes widened, impressed that the little human had reacted so fast.

Bai Jiu held the weird animal gently, but glowered at it as if there was nothing he hated more in all the world.

“Stupid mutt,” he said. “Don’t go running at strange demons! They’ll eat you!”

The furry ball wriggled around in his arms and began desperately licking at his chin. It seemed it was trying to eat Bai Jiu instead, or…? No, that seemed more like… grooming…?

Mo Hongwen blinked, bemused by the sight of a fluffy animal trying to treat the much larger human much the same way that Uncle Shang had treated him before they passed through the big double doors.

Bai Jiu’s glare moved from the captured creature to Mo Hongwen. He pointed accusingly.

“This is Master Shen’s pet, you’re not allowed to touch it,” he said. “If you do I’ll hit you with rocks until you die.”

Oh that was a ‘dog’.

…It was really weird.

Mo Hongwen shrugged.

“Okay,” he agreed. “But you’d need a lot of rocks. I’m tough.”

Bai Jiu narrowed his eyes.
“I’d use as many as it took,” he insisted.

“Even a thousand?”

“It wouldn’t take a thousand!”

“It would too! Look, see, I’ve got a lot of carapace!” Mo Hongwen bragged, tapping the smooth shell pieces that were still emerging on his face. Bai Jiu’s lip curled.

“Carapace? Is that what’s wrong with your face?” he asked.

Mo Hongwen frowned.

“It’s not wrong! It’s normal because I’m part bug demon,” he explained.

Bai Jiu’s expression turned wary and uncertain for some reason.

“I thought you were an ice demon,” he said.

Mo Hongwen nodded.

“I’m that too of course!” he confirmed. “Sometimes one bloodline takes over another, sometimes it doesn’t. I’m a mix! Isn’t it like that with humans?”

“No,” Bai Jiu said. The dog was still trying to lick him, so he made a face and put it down. It scampered over to Mo Hongwen. “Humans are just humans, the only difference is if you’re rich or not. Anything else is a scam. So you’re like a kind of… snow bug?”

Mo Hongwen was distracted by the dog sniffing at him, so he only absently nodded. When the dog came too close, he moved so it wouldn’t touch him. It made a weird sound and tried to bite his shoes.
“Is it attacking me?” he asked.

Bai Jiu scoffed. Something about him seemed a little less tense.

“Just ignore it,” he said. “Come on, we have to get tea and snacks or else.”

Nodding, Mo Hongwen did his best not to trip over the animal at his feet and followed the other boy again.

~

If Mo Hongwen had to pick based on buildings, he would say that he liked the Northern Palace best out of all Junshang’s domains. The climate suited him, and the ice pillars were the most beautiful, and when the sun was out and high in the sky the dragon scale flagstones of the main pavilion glittered in rainbow hues that made him itch to pull them out and steal them away.

But on the whole, he liked the Underground Palace best. Even though it wasn’t as pretty, it had the Human Palace attached to it; a strange, beautiful piece of another world, where Shen Qingqiu and Bai Jiu were sequestered away, practicing the arts of human cultivation. The atmosphere there also suited Uncle Shang better than the far north. While he didn’t seem miserable at all when he was at the Northern Palace, Mo Hongwen noticed that he spent less time sleeping when they were further south, and didn’t send Snowflake to fetch as many furs, or light as many heating arrays, or bring as much food. His laughter came a little more easily too, and he took less time at his desk.

Perhaps Mobei-Jun knew this as well, because even when his hunt with Junshang concluded the lord declined to return north right away. Instead they stayed in the chambers that were naturally
afforded to the household of one of Junshang’s most lauded retainers, while the ice lord worked on a project in one of the attached rooms.

Mo Hongwen watched with interest as Mobei-Jun took the prepared pelt of his largest kill. What it was, he couldn’t say, but it had been luxuriously furry and armed with sharp, onyx claws. He ran and fetched and listened when Mobei-Jun deigned to explain some of what he was doing, enraptured by the shine of the claws and the softness of the pelt, the way the fur changed colours when it was brushed back and forth.

It was, of course, meant to be a gift for Uncle Shang. Mo Hongwen observed the care with which Mobei-Jun stitched the pelt into cloak of perfect size, and fitted the black claws onto delicate hair ornaments and then a matching set of bracelets. The ornaments looked heavy, but when Mo Hongwen carefully picked them up to move them into boxes, they were light as feathers.

His heart ached.

He loved such beautiful things. He wanted to have them. Not these specific ones, of course; he wouldn’t steal from Uncle Shang! But something like them. He wanted to have treasures, to make them, to gift them, to receive them. Mo Hongwen really liked such finery. He didn’t have to feign any interest at all as he watched Mobei-Jun bend precious metals between his fingers, working the adornments into the right shape and letting Mo Hongwen memorize the techniques he could glean by assisting.

When the project was finished, Mo Hongwen even got to watch his cousin present the gifts to Uncle Shang.

“My king!” Shang Qinghua protested, opening the box containing the cloak and then closing it again. His cheeks went pink. “Oh no my king didn’t! Not again!”

Mo Hongwen couldn’t make sense of the reaction, but Mobei-Jun’s eyes were crinkled with pleasure strong enough to be visible.

“Does my husband not like it?” he asked.

Uncle Shang’s hands fluttered.
“Of course I do! It’s beautiful!”

“You barely looked in the box.”

“My king made it, I can already tell! It’s going to be gorgeous!”

“Then you will wear it.”

“It’s too valuable, I’ll ruin it!”

“Ruining it is fine.”

“It’s not fine! I don’t want to ruin it! My king, you can’t keep doing this to me, it’s too much!”

“If you still think that, then it’s not enough.”

Uncle Shang made an inarticulate noise of protest, but after the strange back-and-forth finally concluded he opened the box again. And he looked… very pleased, despite his words. Pleased and flustered as he pulled out the cloak, and petted the fur, and murmured something that Mo Hongwen didn’t entirely hear.

Mo Hongwen was trying not to bounce from foot to foot, because he was waiting for Uncle Shang to see the jewelry! The cloak was beautiful but the jewelry was the best part! He glanced at his cousin, but Mobei-Jun seemed disinclined to hurry things along. So all he could do was bite his lip and wait until Uncle Shang finally noticed the smaller boxes tucked in along with the cloak, and opened them up.

Once again, he snapped them shut and then gave Mobei-Jun a plaintive look.

“My king!”

“If you don’t like them, throw them away.”
“They can’t be thrown away!”

“If you don’t like them-”

“I like them! I like them! I’m keeping them!”

Mo Hongwen had to smack his hands across his mouth to fight back a giggle. Humans really were funny! He didn’t know what else to make of these reactions. They sounded like they might be bad, but they really weren’t? Humans really did seem to enjoy saying one thing and meaning another. Even more than some tricky demon types did!

After a few minutes, Shang Qinghua opened the boxes of jewelry and examined all the pieces. Once the weird human ritual part of the exchange was done, he exclaimed over them in open delight; admiring the workmanship until Mobei-Jun was preening, and even Mo Hongwen felt proud despite only having helped fetch things during the process.

When Uncle Shang had examined everything to his satisfaction, he packed the gifts back away and had Mo Hongwen put them into the wardrobe. Then Mo Hongwen was banished from the chambers, and the door was locked; from past experience, he knew he would need to find something else to do for at least an hour. Probably more.

He decided to go head over to the Human section and see if Bai Jiu was doing anything interesting.

Reliably, it turned out he was, although he wasn’t in the Human section. Mo Hongwen had to reverse course to find the other boy in one of the Upper Yards, practicing balancing himself on a thin strip of metal that had been suspended between two blocks. As Mo Hongwen watched, Bai Jiu walked steadily across the short length a few times, before he started trying to jump up and down. He was clearly aiming to keep his balance and also still land on the same spot, but he only succeeded a few times, and fell off more than a dozen.

After the thirteenth failure, Bai Jiu cursed and then picked up a manual that had been left on one of the blocks. He started reading it, scowling fiercely before he flipped it shut in frustration and put it back down carefully. Then he picked up a nearby rock and tossed it at one of the stone walls. Seething with visible frustration.

The wall wasn’t far from Mo Hongwen. Bai Jiu finally noticed him then.
“What are you looking at?!” the older boy demanded.

“I don’t know,” Mo Hongwen replied. “What are you doing?”

Bai Jiu sneered. He snatched the manual back up, and shoved it into one of his inner pockets.

“Cultivating! You can’t know anything about it, it’s not for demon brats like you!”

Mo Hongwen rolled his eyes.

“I’m not going to take your stupid manual,” he said, even though he desperately wanted to see what was in it. Humans were so strange, he was curious about everything to do with them, in fact. But Bai Jiu would probably bite him if he even suggested it.

“It’s not stupid! It’s Master Shen’s special teachings! You wouldn’t even understand it even if you did look, ‘cause you’re a demon!” Bai Jiu snapped, getting angrily to his feet. He glared more at the narrow strip of metal he’d been practicing with than at Mo Hongwen, though.

Annoyed, Mo Hongwen decided to snap back.

“It’s fine if I don’t understand it, I’m good at learning all my family’s techniques,” he said. “But I think you don’t understand it! You’re not any good at it, are you? That must be embarrassing! The human can’t even learn the special human cultivation from his own human master!”

Bai Jiu’s expression twisted with fury.

“Shut up!”

“Am I right? I’m right, aren’t I? You’re bad at it!”

“I am not!”
“Weakling!”

“Shut up!”

With a cry of rage, Bai Jiu flew at him. Mo Hongwen barely had time to brace himself before the other boy crashed into him, that surprising speed showing through again. He snarled back, excitement racing up his spine at having his challenge accepted, and then launched eagerly into the brawl. There were no adults around, so it was a good time for it!

Bai Jiu hit harder than expected, too, although he didn’t seem as strong as Mo Hongwen. He hissed and spit like a snake demon, clawed like a fox, and tried to knee Mo Hongwen in the groin three times before he gave up and headbutted him instead. He didn’t stop attacking, either, not until Mo Hongwen got him pinned, and even then he grabbed up a handful of dirt and threw it in his eyes before rearing up and biting his nose.

Mo Hongwen reeled back, more shocked than hurt - Bai Jiu’s teeth were too blunt to break his skin - before something flashed, bright and white-hot, and his shoulder burned.

He let go, gaping in astonishment at where his tunic sizzled and the flesh beneath it felt almost branded.

“Whoa,” he breathed. It hurt, but the dazzling brightness of fading energy was pretty enough that he didn’t mind.

“There!” Bai Jiu said. There was blood on his chin and bruises starting to bloom on his pale skin. His eyes were wet. Angry tears ran down his cheeks, but didn’t even seem aware of them as he pointed fiercely at Mo Hongwen. “Take it back or I’ll kill you!”

Mo Hongwen thought he could have kept fighting, but he also felt very strongly like it would be a bad idea to try.

“I take it back,” he said. “Da-ge’s strong.”

Bai Jiu opened his mouth. Then he blinked, and closed it again, as if surprised by the capitulation. A confused expression crossed his face. It made his tears look more pronounced, and Mo Hongwen felt an unexpected twinge of guilt for challenging him. Like he’d maybe been too mean.
about it, even though he couldn’t think of what he’d done wrong.

After an awkward moment of silence Bai Jiu huffed and stomped a foot.

“I am!” he said.

Mo Hongwen nodded.

The human boy narrowed his eyes. Then he sniffed and raced away as he angrily swiped at the tear tracks on his cheeks.

A few hours later, when Mo Hongwen was having dinner, one of Shen Qingqiu’s servants came and told him he’d been summoned to the Human palace. Feeling a little confused, Mo Hongwen nevertheless went and found himself led to a tea room where Shen Qingqiu himself was waiting for him.

Bai Jiu wasn’t there, and the servant who had brought him moved a discreet distance away, off to go stand with some others as Junshang’s revered husband beckoned him over.

The human’s expression wasn’t smiling. He looked a little displeased.

Mo Hongwen gulped.

Though Shen Qingqiu himself seemed very unlike a demon lord, there was no doubt that humans could be powerful. Even if he hadn’t known about it, the burn on his shoulder still smarted and the memory of the energy that Shen Jiu had summoned remained at the forefront of his thoughts. Beautiful and deadly. But more importantly, Shen Qingqiu was Junshang’s beloved husband. If he was displeased with Mo Hongwen, he was in a lot of trouble!

Despite not knowing what might be the problem, as soon as Mo Hongwen reached the table, he prostrated himself instead of sitting down and promptly begged forgiveness.

Shen Qingqiu directed him to get up.
“Does Apprentice Mo know what he did wrong?” the human asked him. His tone was light, and sounded genuinely curious.

Mo Hongwen thought very hard, but in the end, he had to shake his head.

Shen Qingqiu nodded as if this was expected. Then he sighed.

“A-Jiu’s cultivation training is still in its early stages,” the man said, motioning for him to sit. A servant came over to pour their tea, and then retreated again. “Humans and demons develop differently. Apprentice Mo should know that a human child, when bruised, takes a much longer time to recover from it. Injuries are not small things that can be shrugged off in a day.”

Understanding dawned. Mo Hongwen dropped his head.

“Understand now?” Shen Qingqiu asked him.

He nodded, and tried not to panic. Bai Jiu belonged to Shen Qingqiu, who belonged to Junshang. Mo Hongwen had overstepped and done more harm than a normal brawl ought to have done. He felt worried for Bai Jiu - it wasn’t as if he actually wanted to injure him! And he also felt worried for himself. This was too much trouble! What if Mobei-Jun cast him out in disgrace?

“This one should not have challenged Master Shen’s servant,” he determined, clenching his hands so they wouldn’t shake.

“Precisely,” Shen Qingqiu agreed. His voice gentled. “Apprentice Mo should drink his tea. It’s a nice blend. This master has no intention of making trouble for him, or bringing this matter to anyone else. Apprentice Mo was unaware of the expectations for his interactions with a human boy. A-Jiu also did not protest the incident. But some things need to be clarified so that this sort of thing doesn’t happen again.”

Tentatively, Mo Hongwen ventured a look up.

Shen Qingqiu’s expression seemed sincere. He didn’t look angry anymore.
Letting out a breath, he reached out, and sipped his tea. It… wasn’t actually good? At least, he wasn’t sure what pleasant qualities the flavour was supposed to have. It seemed bland to him, and uncomfortably warm. But of course, he didn’t dare say so. It probably tasted better to humans.

“Master Shen is too merciful,” he said. “If Master Shen wishes to punish this servant, this servant will accept it.”

“It’s not this master’s place to punish one of Mobei-Jun’s apprentices,” Shen Qingqiu replied, evenly. “If punishment was needed, this master would bring the matter to the attention of Mobei-Jun. Fortunately such things aren’t required. This time.”

The implication was pretty clear. However kind Shen Qingqiu was, if Mo Hongwen beat up Bai Jiu again, he wouldn’t get a second warning.

Gulping down the hot tea, he nodded.

“This servant understands.”

“Good!” Shen Qingqiu praised him, before changing subjects entirely and launching into a conversation about some seemingly inconsequential things.

Mo Hongwen nodded along, and answered when prompted, but internally he still felt shaken.

Humans were fragile and strange and contradictory.

But even more dangerous than he’d thought.
When Bai Jiu became Shen Jiu and he and Shen Qingqiu began spending more time in the human realms, Shang Qinghua took over management of the Underground Palace for Junshang’s absences. Mo Hongwen liked it less when Shen Qingqiu and his surly apprentice weren’t there. He had less to focus on outside of his training, so it wasn’t as interesting as before. And with Shen Qingqiu no longer in residence, the Human palace was entirely off-limits except for the servants who helped maintain it. Even Uncle Shang only went there from time to time, and otherwise lived mostly in the underground chambers designated for Mobei-Jun’s household.

Mo Hongwen liked his training, though. Mobei-Jun gave him challenges and rewarded him when he accomplished various goals, like hunting a certain kind of beast, or accomplishing a particular task with his abilities. But Uncle Shang taught him things, too. Mo Hongwen’s favourite lessons with him were the ones at the Strategy Scenario Table.

Uncle Shang had a special table that was painted with maps just for these training exercises. There were many different top pieces that could be fitted onto the table, each one marked with a different map to suit various scenarios; be it a large-scale conquest of all the demon realms, specific territories in the human realms, or even just a single city or region of wilderness. The table and its accessories took up nearly an entire small room. There were hundreds of painted, carved little figurines that were available for use as well, representing singular rulers, different sizes of armies, monsters, treasures, and so on. Shang Qinghua devised various scenarios and ‘campaigns’ that required involvement from whoever he deemed worthy of participation and tutelage. Mo Hongwen had filled out a special sheet of paper depicting an envisioned demon warrior, whom he had to successfully guide through most of Uncle Shang’s scenarios. Dice were even used to modify various events in accordance with luck! It was very complicated.

The scenarios themselves weren’t simple, either. Mo Hongwen often found himself thinking about the events that transpired when the lessons were finished, worrying about what Uncle Shang had planned next and how to strategize with or against the other students.

Sometimes Mobei-Jun even participated as well! Uncle Shang always let him break the rules, though. But that made a kind of sense - the same rules weren’t always applicable for people as powerful as Mo Hongwen’s cousin, in real life or in tactical scenarios.

Mobei-Jun knew precisely what he was getting away with as well, even though he feigned like he didn’t understand the rules sometimes. It seemed to please him that Uncle Shang would reason out things like why he could, in fact, use his Special Ability for another turn in one of the scenario day-cycles, even though no one else was allowed to.
Probably because Uncle Shang talked a lot about how exceptional and tremendous and talented he was while he did it. And showed such blatant favouritism that it was borderline indiscreet, even for a married couple.

Mo Hongwen watched their interactions with stars in his eyes. It must be so nice, he thought. So nice to be married to someone who you liked that much. His own parents never acted that way towards one another. Junshang and Shen Qingqiu’s romance was the stuff of songs and ballads, so it made sense that it was exceptional. But his cousin’s marriage also seemed to be special in a way that made Mo Hongwen yearn for something like it, in the same way he yearned for shiny treasures.

His cousin was like the treasure of Uncle Shang’s heart.

But Mobei-Jun didn’t often join in the strategy lessons. Most of the time, Mo Hongwen was the only permanent student. If they were at the Underground Palace, then Shen Qingqiu and Shen Jiu would join in regularly too. They both did very well at it. But usually, the other participants were all apprentices and students whose families vied for them to receive Uncle Shang’s expert tutelage.

When Mo Hongwen was fourteen, Uncle Shang agreed to take Huo Zhenglang on as a strategy student.

Huo Zhenglang’s sister, Huo Changying, was one of a few select pupils chosen by Junshang to learn swordsmanship from him that year. The Huo clan was naturally exuberant, but Chang-mei wasn’t their favoured scion, and hadn’t shown as much aptitude for the fire clan’s coveted elemental abilities as her brother. So the Huo matriarch and her wives had been ‘hinting’ left and right that it would be good for Huo Zhenglang to be taken on for special lessons too.

Of course, it would be much too presumptuous for them to just come out and say that they wanted Junshang to teach the son as well as the daughter. That sort of thing was liable to get Chang-mei dropped as a student and none of the Huo disciples picked up ever again. And it was definitely too presumptuous for the clan to imply that the lord ought to take Huo Zhenglang on as an official, fully-blown apprentice. So they didn’t do that either. But their desires were pretty apparent from the way they acted when they visited the palace, and how much time Huo Zhenglang and his mother, First Wife Huo, spent hanging around the other retainers and courtiers.

Uncle Shang was doing Junshang a service by taking Huo Zhenglang on as a student. Mo Hongwen knew it. Even though he was a human, learning strategy from Mobei-Jun’s First Husband was still very prestigious, and something worth bragging and showing off about. Mo Hongwen’s own prospects had gone up considerably ever since some of his peers began whispering about him as a prodigy disciple of the strategy tables, always there alongside the master himself. Giving Huo Zhenglang that kind of opportunity couldn’t be dismissed, and it finally got the fire demon clan to
shut up for a little while.

But Mo Hongwen wished Uncle Shang hadn’t taken Huo Zhenglang on anyway.

The thirteen-year-old was annoying.

“I light them all on fire!” he insisted, to nearly every scenario that Uncle Shang presented.

“You can’t use that ability again!” Mo Hongwen would usually find himself hissing, just so that Shang Qinghua wouldn’t have to repeat himself for the tenth time in a session.

Invariably, Huo Zhenglang would pout. He was a gangly young teen, and even more annoyingly, taller than Mo Hongwen. And he was so spoiled! Every time someone denied him anything he pouted and whined and acted badly wronged.

“Shixiong is so mean,” he protested. “I’m a prodigy! Prodigies do exceptional things!”

“You’re not a prodigy if I can still beat you in a fight!” Mo Hongwen argued, when he was at the end of his temper. “And I’m not your shixiong!”

“Yes you are! We’re both students of Master Shang!”

“No, you’re just a guest learner! You can’t call me shixiong and Uncle Shang isn’t your master!”

“Alright, fine then, Hongwen.”

“That’s not allowed either! Don’t address your senior so familiarly!”

Usually around that point, Mo Hongwen would throw something, or Huo Zhenglang would get offended enough to try and kick him, and then they’d end up fighting unless Master Shang managed to get them to stop. He often didn’t manage, though, so Mo Hongwen would have to drag Huo Zhenglang out of the strategy room in order to make sure they didn’t damage the sacred table. Especially since, in real life, Huo Zhenglang still didn’t know when not to use his fire abilities.
Which were very fancy, but not as tough as Mo Hongwen’s ice. He could snuff most of the younger demon’s flames out without breaking a sweat, and won all their fights. Not always easily, but, well enough.

Despite this, and despite the fact that Huo Zhenglang couldn’t really concede to him without losing too much face for his status and pride to bear, the younger was annoyingly persistent in seeking Mo Hongwen out to ask questions and pester for advice on how to ‘win’ Uncle Shang’s scenarios. He was hopeless. Every scenario required its own thinking and planning, there was no surefire way to ‘win’ all the time, and yet he refused to just give up and go home.

Nobody even liked him! He was too impulsive, and annoying!

“But I keep dying,” Huo Zhenglang whined through a meal he’d invited himself along to. Interrupting one of Mo Hongwen’s actual chances to eat with Little Da-ge. He looked forlornly over the top of the dishes they’d been served, which were to Shen Jiu’s tastes, and therefore not to his.

“You’re pathetic,” Mo Hongwen agreed, mercilessly. He dodged to small puff of flame thrown at his head, and whipped a hand out to smack Huo Zhenglang face-first into his bowl of rice. The satisfaction of the gesture swiftly spoiled into annoyance instead. He really needed to stop giving in and acknowledging this person! His mother, he knew, had started looking into making matches for him. Huo clan was probably still too minor to draw her attention, and Huo Zhenglang himself too young, but even so, he was wary of forging any ties among any of the major bloodlines that might spark her interest.

He didn’t want a match made for him. He didn’t want something like what his parents had. He wanted something like his cousin and uncle had! Like Junshang and Shen Qingqiu! None of them had been matched by their parents. His eyes darted towards Shen Jiu, who was ignoring them, before moving back to his plate again.

His mother wouldn’t care what he wanted. She hadn’t even spoken to him for years, so it was doubtful she put much stock in his opinions on any matter, let alone this one. Even though he had managed to become Mobei-Jun’s apprentice, still, it didn’t seem to make any difference in her eyes. Mo Hongwen remained unremarkable and expendable.

Huo Zhenglang picked up his head and started pulling stuck rice grains off of his face. He was pouting again.
“Hongwen, don’t be merciless! Help me get better, and I’ll do something for you too!” he offered, not letting up in the least.

“Don’t be so familiar! Look, you can’t do anything right!” Mo Hongwen argued. “You’re not even suitable to be my sparring partner, I’d mop the floor with you. What do you even have that I’d want?”

Huo Zhenglang made a face, but seemed to give the matter some thought as well.

“Money?” he suggested.

Mo Hongwen sneered.

“I don’t need money,” he said.

Shen Jiu glanced over towards them.

“How much money?” the human asked. At the recognition, Huo Zhenglang perked up in obvious delight, while Mo Hongwen froze in irritation.

“Five silvers a lesson!” the fire demon said. “Of course, if Da-ge is interested in bestowing some wisdom-”

“I don’t need money either,” Shen Jiu said, but then his expression tightened, and he looked right at Huo Zhenglang. “But I suppose it might compensate if I helped you. Strictly out of pity. Since I’m the best at strategy, I’d charge more than Snow Bug.”

Mo Hongwen looked between the two in distress.

“I can teach the Huo brat!” he insisted, anxious for some reason he couldn’t name.

“Both! Both teach me!” the younger teen insisted. “I’ll pay five silvers to Hongwen and seven to Da-ge, per lesson! All three of us together, we can master the strategies. We can even work with one another to beat all of Master Shang’s challenges!”

“Why would you need both of us?” Mo Hongwen asked. What was happening? How had the situation come to this?

He glanced at Shen Jiu again. Still, if he was interested… even if Huo Zhenglang was around, it would be an excuse to spend more time together… and with a little more pocket money, maybe he could buy some better treasures. He knew Shen Jiu liked such things as well. Perhaps that was what he wanted too?

The human boy considered the matter for a moment, eyeing Mo Hongwen, and then Huo Zhenglang.

Then he shrugged.

“Fine,” he said. “But you still owe me a favour just for agreeing. Hongwen too, since he’ll also benefit from my experience.”

“Anything Da-ge wants!” Huo Zhenglang agreed.

“What do I owe you? You’ll learn from me too. I beat you at the last table,” Mo Hongwen argued, scowling. Shen Jiu scowled right back, and then leaned over and took the last piece of braised pork from the serving dish, too. The move brought them physically closer for a moment.

“That was a fluke,” he insisted.

Mo Hongwen’s face heated up. Huo Zhenglang was leaning forward and watching them with an eager look on his face. What was he staring at?!

“It wasn’t a fluke. I’ll beat Little Da-ge again if he needs to verify.”
“You-! Mo Hongwen, I’d like to see you try!”

“Won’t that be hard if I’m helping you win next round?” Mo Hongwen argued.

Shen Jiu ripped into his piece of meat. Like this, it was easy to forget that he wasn’t another demon. It made Mo Hongwen want to growl and… and… do… something. He wasn’t sure what. Maybe fight, but also maybe lose? For some reason? Like he really wanted Shen Jiu to beat him, actually, even though he couldn’t say that without completely losing face and making no sense?

It was strange and he wasn’t sure he liked it. Also his face was too hot, especially for an ice demon. He knew he was turning embarrassingly blue.

“We’ll just have to compete to see who can teach Huo Zhenglang better, then,” the human decided.

“Fine,” Mo Hongwen snapped.

Huo Zhenglang’s smile got somehow wider. His own cheeks were bright pink, and his eyes were practically sparkling. That was literal, in his case.

It was almost endearing. Possibly even… cute. Except that he was probably going to light something on fire at this rate, so Mo Hongwen just moved his chair further away - and subsequently closer to Shen Jiu - and then proceeded to ignore him for the rest of the meal.

Hopefully, the lessons wouldn’t take too long, and they’d be able to kick Huo Zhenglang out of their social circle again soon. Back to the other annoying social-climbers and second rate retainers’ circles.

The last thing anyone needed was some sticky fire demon gumming up the works and bothering the humans. Wasting all their time. Stealing Shen Jiu's attention.

Mo Hongwen wasn't entirely sure why the idea bothered him so much.
But he'd definitely figure it out in time.
Chapter Notes

Someone said they wanted to know how long it took Shang Qinghua to figure out Mobei-Jun is into him! So let's delve into that a bit more, since I'm on a moshang kick! ^-^

Also, also, the lovely AviatrixCadenza drew art of one of Shang Qinghua's 'strategy lessons'!!!:

https://twitter.com/AviatrixCadenza/status/1137959180059303936

Shang Qinghua’s plan to divorce Qi Qingqi by hiding out at Mobei-Jun’s underground palace for a year obviously hadn’t gone as planned.

For one thing, he’d spent most of his year at Mobei-Jun’s northern palace in the end, which definitely wasn’t something he could have accounted for. But then again, Shang Qinghua also hadn’t planned on getting caught visiting Shen Qingqiu’s courtyard, or having to flee in order to avoid getting flogged to death for cheating or ‘accidentally’ stabbed seventy-two times by a pissed off Liu Qingge while in transit to his execution, so… yeah. The whole debacle had gotten Luo Binghe furious at him and had also reminded his OP protagonist of the reason why he used to routinely try and kill Mobei-Jun. It wasn’t really a surprise that both of them ended up banished.

More of a mystery was why Mobei-Jun seemed intent on keeping Shang Qinghua with him at nearly all times. But. Well. The north was really cold, and Shang Qinghua liked to think that despite his most recent fuck-up, he’d actually maybe been kind of useful to his king over the years? They’d known each other a pretty long while now, anyways. And being around Mobei-Jun at least meant that he didn’t have to worry so much about the cold.

It seemed too optimistic to term the situation an act of mercy. Maybe more an act of convenience? An act of not wanting to lose someone who was a pretty decent adviser sometimes?

Or maybe Mobei-Jun’s mood was improving because of his plans to get married soon…

Shang Qinghua ignored the pang in his chest at his thought.
Mobei-Jun getting married was a very good surprise development, actually! Matters had turned out really fortunate on that front! He was really glad that Shen Qingqiu had transmigrated in and stopped Luo Binghe’s progression along his original path to infamy and glory. Really. His bro could kick his ass any time he liked, Shang Qinghua didn’t think he’d ever stop being thankful that the guy had mucked up his original plotline beyond repair.

Fucking up the whole outline and making rude gestures at narrative destiny meant a lot of things were different. The vast majority of these things were improvements, and one of them was that his king was mostly out of danger. Mobei-Jun getting married would help to further cement that - it would be a lot harder for anyone, even really powerful demons, to take him on as a spouse if he already established certain aspects of his status by taking a spouse of his own. It wasn’t unheard of but it was pretty rare for married demon lords to get swept up as other people’s spouses, even in pretty intense overthrows or shifts in power dynamics.

Shang Qinghua had no idea who the lucky person who’d managed to win his king’s eye was. In his original, first-draft plans for the story, Mobei-Jun’s plotline had been completely different from the final-draft one. Shang Qinghua had included the betrothal contracts in both drafts, mostly as background world-building, but in the final version none of them had come to fruition because Luo Binghe had bound Mobei-Jun into submission and… and… yeah. He didn’t like to think about it. His original intention had been to give Mobei-Jun a few spouses who wouldn’t really influence anything, and maybe throw in a subplot later on down the line about two of his wives being into one another. That was for the arranged marriages anyway. He’d briefly entertained the idea of fleshing out the original Shang Qinghua’s role as one of Mobei-Jun’s spouses before killing him off, but he’d never gone far with the notion and it hadn’t seemed likely anyway. Why would Mobei-Jun, who barely tolerated humans most of the time, marry his weaselly informant? Working out the particulars of blackmail or whatnot had seemed too fussy before he’d needed a good death beat and just killed the original to get on with things. And that was hardly relevant now, was it?

Shang Qinghua knew that his king wasn’t eager to take on his betrothal contracts so that threw most of the obvious choices out of the window. No, Mobei-Jun wanted to marry someone else. Frankly, as long as that someone wasn’t Luo Binghe, Shang Qinghua thought it was a great idea! Really! Truly! For all the reasons mentioned above. And his king was very smart. Keeping the identity of his future partner a hush-hush thing was good strategy. It wasn’t Shang Qinghua’s place to dip deeply into what was obviously a discreet affair. Even if he was involved in preparing a lot of things for the impending nuptials.

Mobei-Jun had practically appointed him the chief servant in charge of his wedding, in fact. Shang Qinghua did his best, and it seemed like he was doing a passable job because his king regularly rewarded him with jewels and new clothes and - ever since they’d visited Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe at the Underground Palace again - foodstuffs. It was a better task than trying to prepare Mobei-Jun’s trophies, Shang Qinghua could say! If he never had another dead monster carcass or severed head flung at his feet he’d be a happy man!
Probably it was just more overall convenient for everyone that he got transferred to the ‘wedding prep’ department.

Whoever Mobei-Jun was marrying sadly didn’t seem to have the opportunity to get much say in the proceedings, but that was pretty normal for the setting. Romances like Luo Binghe’s and Shen Qingqiu’s weren’t the norm, even among demons. Shang Qinghua did his best anyway to ensure that the proceedings would be set up nicely, that things wouldn’t just be all ice and doom and gloom (maybe Mobei-Jun’s future spouse was into that too though… well if they were, there was still plenty of it to go around! The northern palace was intimidating!)

When he fretted on not being sure of what to do, his king always just told him he should ask Snowflake.

Snowflake was pretty much the deputy in charge of marriage prep, so that made sense!

So Shang Qinghua spent his days wondering how Shen Qingqiu could have failed to notice that Luo Binghe intended to marry him, while he ran around getting things ready for Mobei-Jun’s mystery spouse. He planned out the ceremonies (it was a big deal, his king wanted things to be Official official with nearly all the traditional steps; whoever he was marrying, he clearly respected them a lot! Although not as a combatant, the traditional duels were all to be forgone…) and he worked out the schedules for them, guest lists to ensure that the political balance between demon clans was properly observed and no unwanted upsets would happen, decorations and feast supplies and so on.

But then there came an issue in the fact that Luo Binghe was also marrying Shen Qingqiu. One evening his king had come to Shang Qinghua with his brows furrowed in concern, and laid the issue out for him.

“This Mobei-Jun is not strong enough to challenge Luo Binghe, and would give offense by marrying in grand status so close to his superior’s own statement wedding,” the ice demon noted.

Shang Qinghua nodded in understanding. Yes, that was true. If they upstaged that ceremony, the universe itself would probably come after them a little bit! While Shang Qinghua’s original story had been a subversion, the new main couple of the universe was definitely more of a soulmate-type romance. Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu’s wedding was going to be the event of the century. Mobei-Jun’s wedding, should it prove even a little more lavish, or seem to be competing for attention, or make even one thing look worse by comparison, would make it even more difficult for his king to get back into his superior’s good graces.

“Well, my king, there are two options there. Either the ceremony should be toned down considerably, so as to keep things peaceable and deferential, or matters will have to be postponed
“This…” Mobei-Jun said. Then he let out a long, unhappy sigh. “Insufficient ceremony is out of the question.”

Shang Qinghua nodded in understanding. He had a feeling that would be the case. A more moderate ceremony would keep things on schedule and prevent his king from offending the higher-ranking sovereign, but would also imply less significance for his own union. It might put his future spouse in a bad position. Mobei-Jun seemed very serious about not discrediting whoever he was marrying, so postponing was the logical choice.

But his king looked extremely unhappy about it.

Shang Qinghua wracked his brain for another option. He came up frustratingly empty.

“I am sorry, my king. I know postponing isn’t ideal, but…”

Mobei-Jun frowned.

“This king is willing to wait,” he said. “His feelings will not change.”

Shang Qinghua’s heart clenched.

Oh. Oh, that… that was good. Whoever had drawn Mobei-Jun’s eye, they were so lucky.

So lucky.

His king looked picturesque at that moment. There was a certain determination to him in all of this that was undoubtedly appealing. Shang Qinghua had to look away in order to keep from embarrassing himself, from acknowledging the inexplicable sinking in his chest and wetness threatening to distort his vision. Man, there were a lot of downsides to ending up in the company of his ideal guy! Like constantly wanting to do or say inappropriate things and having to fight back the urge so that he didn’t get his head ripped off, haha. Ah, it made things stressful, small wonder
he was on edge. Why did he have to make demons such a violent culture?

Well. Because it was cool, probably. But still!

He sneaked another glance at his king. Mobei-Jun was looking at him. A fresh round of conflicting emotion raced through him and he looked away again, only to be surprised when a hand reached out and brushed a strand of his hair away from the side of his face.

Shang Qinghua blinked.

The hand swiftly withdrew.

“It is as it is. Your hair is a mess,” Mobei-Jun informed him. His voice was low with what had to be displeasure, and he was unhappy enough that an angry blue flush and coloured the tops of his cheeks. The unexpected touch and the sudden change in topics threw Shang Qinghua for a moment. He had to think to realize a response was required.

“Ah, apologies my king! I was running around a lot this morning and I think it came out of the fastenings a little, but I haven’t had time yet to stop-”

“Unacceptable.”

Shang Qinghua flinched, ready to offer a round of apologies for his inferior appearance. But then his king turned and barked at Snowflake instead.

“Who else is assisting Shang Qinghua with his duties?” he demanded.

Snowflake gestured deferentially.

“Begging the lord’s pardon, finding trustworthy persons is a slow process. Most servants are still undergoing vetting and several recently failed. This old servant shall be more diligent in assisting in the meanwhile. This old servant is at fault.”

“Hmph. Delegate more insensitive tasks on Shang Qinghua’s behalf, don’t let him overwork
himself,” his king demanded.

Mobei-Jun looked him over one more time. There was a dusting of colour still on his king’s cheeks. Shang Qinghua braced himself for a similar dressing-down, but it never came. No rebukes, no snaps, no criticism. His king just mumbled something about him taking more care and then stalked off; apparently still in a bad mood about having to redo so many things about the wedding.

Shang Qinghua wasn’t exactly thrilled about it either, though! Pushing everything back would give him more time to prepare, but it also meant that most of the scheduling he’d done was for naught, and the guest lists would have to be reviewed and set up against in light of all the power shifts and deaths and suchlike that could happen in a year’s time! These were demon clans, after all, and the current social climate was one of great upheaval considering how often Luo Binghe just ended up killing anyone who pissed him off! There’d already been two succession crises in the other clans!

But what else could be done?

If only Luo Binghe had a little more patience. Sheesh. Sure, it was true, not marrying Shen Qingqiu right away might provoke a bevy of new capture attempts - it was an especially risky move - but who in their right mind would pull that on a demon as strong as Luo Binghe? Wasn’t that just like walking up and asking for death at this point?

At least Mobei-Jun wasn’t marrying a kidnapping victim. Or a human. That would make this whole thing a hundred times more stressful…

And anyway, even though matters between Luo Binghe and his king had improved significantly since the whole ‘Shen Qingqiu’s not actually dead’ thing came to light, they were still far and away from having the kind of relationship where Mobei-Jun could ask Luo Binghe to put back his wedding. Even if they weren’t, Shang Qinghua could just see that request going over like a lead balloon. Sure, ask Luo ‘Only Loves One Man and Never Shuts Up About it’ Binghe to postpone his marriage to the guy he’s been over-protectively pining for since his teens. Yeah. Bound to go over well!

Shang Qinghua sighed.

“Allap, Snowflake,” he said. The tiny, ancient ice imp had a proper name, but it was really long and the nickname was just easier and hadn’t provoked a single objection so far. “I didn’t mean to make trouble for you.”
Snowflake bowed.

“The fault is this servant’s. Master Shang, please come and rest and let this servant attend to the matter of Master Shang’s appearance.”

Shang Qinghua agreed, even though he had a million things to do. Mobei-Jun was a real stickler for appearances. It seemed like everyone in his employ had to look good and smell nice and dress fancy - even Shang Qinghua, who was just some random human servant! In fact it seemed like Shang Qinghua especially had to look good, or else his king would say something about it. Probably to compensate for him being the distasteful human and all. Luckily, Snowflake had been very agreeable to helping him keep all his new clothes and perfumes and jewelry and hairdos straight. Shang Qinghua had struggled to manage the plain concubine style he needed to wear everyday at Qi Qingqi’s estate. He kind of thought going on the run would at least mean he could go back to a simple ponytail, but no such luck.

Oh well. It was only for a year, anyway. When that time was up then he’d be officially divorced, and able to go more places. His original plan had been to set out for the borderlands once his marriage was annulled. Then from there he had enough emergency cash saved up to try and find some outlying village where he might be able to ply some trade or other and avoid the notice of any human authorities who might still be looking for the ‘traitor’ that consorted with demons. He wasn’t sure if Lord Yue still had it out for him or not. Better to avoid taking chances, really. Qi Qingqi may or may not still want his head on a spike too.

Of course, he’d still serve his king as needed, still be on call or just a short portal trip away, but it wasn’t like he could spend the rest of his life living in the demon realms. Sooner or later he’d attract the wrong kind of attention. He wasn’t a real beauty, but some demon might get it into their heads to add him to a harem or something anyhow. Maybe even just to try and insult Mobei-Jun by taking a servant away. Or, conversely, Mobei-Jun himself might one day ‘gift’ him as a concubine to some rival or other in order to install him as a spy again.

Shang Qinghua really did not want to go back to the concubine life. Really, really. Just. No.

Honestly, he’d been a little lucky with Qi Qingqi herself. At least she mostly left him be. Her second wife and the other concubines not so much, but still. There were worse outcomes. (He didn’t like to think about how much worse that situation could have been, it was honestly bad enough, thanks!)

At least it wasn’t like Luo Binghe’s canonical harem.
He shuddered. Then he thought of his king, and shuddered again.

Snowflake mistook his shuddering and fretted that he was getting cold in Mobei-Jun’s absence, and wrapped him up in several of the pelts he’d been gifted before making him sit on a bed of cushions to have his hair combed out and redone. The imp’s hands were deft and assured, and the pass of the comb helped soothe some of the anxiety that was racing through Shang Qinghua’s system.

“Is Master Shang experiencing his worries?” Snowflake asked, knowingly.

“Aha, no, no, I’m fine,” Shang Qinghua replied.

“This servant will make tea.”

“We don’t really have time-”

“This servant will make tea.”

“Okay, okay! Jeez, we’ll have tea!”

Snowflake nodded in satisfaction, back to acting deferential again. Wasn’t that just the way with demons? Even when he was ostensibly someone’s manager, he was still getting bossed around!

At least the tea did help make him less anxious sometimes… ah, Snowflake was a pretty nice imp…

But. Thoughts didn’t just stop, especially not his. In order to stick to his general timeline he would have to help with as many wedding preparations as possible before the year was up, and then if Mobei-Jun needed more assistance, he could come and get him and do things just the way they used to when he lived with Qi Qingqi. Though probably by then Snowflake would have found more help, and more matters could be handled without relying on Shang Qinghua in the first place.

Who knew good servants were so hard to find?
By the time Snowflake finished fixing his hair and Shang Qinghua had sipped a cup of tea and stopped freaking out again, it was lunch. As usual, Shang Qinghua ate with Mobei-Jun. His king remained largely silent while Shang Qinghua babbled about whatever flew into his head until he worried that he was being annoying and shut himself up to try and regain a little dignity. Mobei-Jun glanced over and prompted him, though, and soon enough he was off again, forgetting himself until the next time the stream of talk ran dry and his king saw fit to interject and start the whole thing over.

In his fondest dreams, Shang Qinghua dared to imagine that Mobei-Jun might even like his rambling. Might even be trying to encourage it.

But that was silly.

Who would ever like his rambling? He was well aware that it was annoying, even if that didn’t always mean he could stop himself. Despite everything, he felt like his king listened to him. He was weak for that feeling.

It surely must have annoyed Mobei-Jun on some level, considering how much time they ended up spending together. After the solution to the Luo wedding matter was settled on, his king seemed to decide that the additional time they had ought to be used to ensure that the ceremony was even more of a statement than before. There was an opportunity to commission more things from what demonic artisans there were, and fashion elaborate gifts and new furnishings and redo a very large section of the Northern Palace to suit his king’s soon-to-be-spouse.

This gave Shang Qinghua some more insight on that front. Whoever this person was, he didn’t think they were an ice demon. Mobei-Jun made it clear to the workers that the courtyard should be somewhat like Lord Luo’s infamous spousal project, that it needed to be hospitable to someone who preferred warmth, but without compromising the Northern Palace’s integrity. Shang Qinghua wondered, in a sudden rush of epiphany, if that wasn’t one of the reasons why his input was being solicited so often - after all, humans liked warmer places too!

Satisfied with this conclusion, he set about assisting to the best of his abilities. The space had to be lavish and appropriate for the status of the new ‘madam’, but balanced with the need to make it comfortable and the inherent challenges of pulling such a thing off. Decorating helped. Shang Qinghua had screens and segments brought in to reduce the space of the chambers, to make it easier for them to hold heat. Normal hearths just died ignominiously in this palace, the air stifling them like they were an offense to the ancient ancestral home of the ice demons, but heating arrays still worked. Lady Huo of the fire demons even sent a few experts to assist with the task of setting them up; she’d been trying to curry favour with all of Lord Luo’s supporters ever since he established himself.
In the back of Shang Qinghua’s mind there was a certain degree of anxiousness about the preparations, despite his best efforts not to dwell on it. Day by day it got worse. Mobei-Jun was getting married. Mobei-Jun would have a spouse. If there was something wrong with their chambers, their courtyard, their wedding, then wouldn’t they blame Shang Qinghua? What if they hated him? His king clearly favoured them so much - he was trying to get out of his other betrothal contracts for them, he was going to all this trouble to make a statement with their wedding, to make certain they’d be comfortable in his palace…

If they hated Shang Qinghua, what would his king do to him in order to appease them?

He shuddered to think!

What if he was flogged again, or whipped, or frozen into an icicle?

(What if Mobei-Jun just sent him away for good, just dismissed him from his services, never sought him out again…)

No, everything had to be perfect! Even if the some of the servants grumbled and others gave him black looks for being too exacting, they weren’t the people whose opinions he had to concern himself with most. He was doing them a favour too! Keep up, his king’s new spouse needed to be pleased or else heads might roll! And anyway, Mobei-Jun clearly agreed because any time he caught someone looking askance over the particulars of setting up the new spousal chambers, he sent them scurrying with threats or glowers or a sharp rebuke. Even a flare of qi, once or twice. Shang Qinghua tried to make up for the stress of it all by ensuring that the estate rewarded everyone generously for their hard work.

Of course, the new spouse would also have to reward everyone once they moved in, and that would probably make it all water under the bridge. When the work was done and the servants realized how well they’d ingratiated themselves to Mobei-Jun’s primary spouse, the inconvenience of working hard would be forgotten in favour of the benefits!

Even Shang Qinghua tried to bolster himself with such a thought. It didn’t work as well as he liked. While he tried to tell himself that it would be great if Mobei-Jun’s new spouse liked him - that it would take a load off of his shoulders and potentially even give him someone new to make an ally out of - he couldn’t help but feel more pessimistic about the whole thing. What were the odds that Mobei-Jun’s spouse would like Shang Qinghua? Most people didn’t. And the thought of… of his king marrying…
Internally, part of Shang Qinghua couldn’t help but object. He hadn’t written Mobei-Jun falling in love! Not even with Luo Binghe! He hadn’t written him a love interest because… well… because that sort of killed the fantasy, didn’t it? Nobody like Mobei-Jun would ever really fall for someone like Shang Qinghua, it was too implausible, so the next best thing was to just leave him unromanced and every now and again entertain a daydream or two. Right?

But that was selfish. He knew it was selfish. This world was bigger than his writing and a lot of it had changed. And didn’t Mobei-Jun deserve to find love? He definitely did! His king had always been a lonely figure. On paper it worked towards his appeal, towards creating those daydreams of the reader being the person who came in and thawed his heart (figuratively, not literally - literally doing that would be very bad!). But in real life, a person was far more than just the fodder for someone else’s fantasies. Treating even the written version as nothing more than fuel for those kinds of things was what had warped so much of Shang Qinghua’s writing away from his original intentions in the first place. Thank goodness things had changed! Thank goodness Luo Binghe fell in love with his transmigrator-bro! Thank goodness Mobei-Jun found someone else to devote his heart to!

…Provided that person deserved it, anyway.

That worry gave Shang Qinghua pause even more often than the others. More than once he was in the middle of working and had to stop, and seriously consider the possibility. Few demons compared to Luo Binghe in strength, but what if… what if his king fell in with someone like that again anyway? What if the person he’d chosen was conniving, and ruthless, and sought to subjugate Mobei-Jun? What if they bound his blood and stripped him of his will and hurt him, because of some lingering narrative thread which connected his king to such a fate? What if the universe still wanted to push things in that direction, the way it had still pushed Yue Qingyuan and Shen Qingqiu into parting ways, or the way it had pushed Luo Binghe into unlocked his demonic heritage?

No.

Shang Qinghua wouldn’t let that happen!

If his king married such a person… he didn’t know what he would do. But he knew that he would do something.

The notion refused to leave him alone. Shang Qinghua found that he could put the fear aside every now and again, and yet inevitably it would come back. Haunting him, taunting him with the sheer chance of it. He tried listening in on some gossip to see if he could glean anything new about Mobei-Jun’s prospective spouse, but the servants never discussed it when he was around. Probably because he spent so much time around their king and was known to have been a spy - honestly
Shang Qinghua wouldn’t have wanted to gossip around such a person either. He tried being discreet enough as to draw no notice, but even when that worked, the most he managed to overhear was that everyone thought Mobei-Jun had caught the same strain of madness which Luo Binghe had over Shen Qingqiu.

Which wasn’t really useful. He wasn’t even sure if it was a fair assessment or not. Luo Binghe, after all, was a lot noisier about his personal affairs than Mobei-Jun. Mobei-Jun was just trying to do things properly, not declaring his undying love in front of armies of demons and then kicking all their asses! Seriously, making sure the rooms were absolutely perfect wasn’t that unreasonable for a lord who was marrying for the first time, and marrying someone he obviously really liked and respected! What did these demons expect? It was a point of pride to take good care of one’s spouses, and his king was a demon of prominence.

Of course, ‘taking good care’ of one’s spouses could be kind of relative, he supposed… lots of demons just figured that meant keeping them fed and presentable…

But maybe that was where the comparisons were coming from. Maybe Luo Binghe’s marriage was raising the bar, as it were, and so this generation of demon nobles were all trying to figure out how to meet the new standard?

Regardless, thinking about that didn’t help him figure out if Mobei-Jun was marrying someone who would take advantage of him or not.

After all, sooner rather than later his king’s father would die. And when that happened, Mobei-Jun would need to go through the rites of inheritance. He’d be vulnerable. If his spouse had ill-intentions, it would be the perfect time to strike. Shang Qinghua almost wanted to advise his king to postpone everything until after he was officially Mobei-Jun, but he couldn’t. It wasn’t his place, and besides, how would he explain knowing when his king’s father was destined to die? The current ice lord (technically) had withdrawn from active affairs ever since Mobei-Jun came of age and was rarely seen by anyone. His health seemed to be fine; only Shang Qinghua knew he was deteriorating from an injury he’d sustained a decade ago, a poisoned wound that had never completely healed. And only Shang Qinghua knew that the clock was finally running down, and soon Mobei-Jun would inherit his power and title in the fullness of it all.

He couldn’t explain that knowledge. And he doubted his king would listen to his counsel on this topic without a very good reason to.

Shang Qinghua’s only recourse against the possibility of Mobei-Jun marrying some lite version of Luo Binghe was to ensure that his king was protected from such things. To ensure that nobody could bind him the way that Luo Binghe had in the original story.
Sometimes Shang Qinghua had nightmares about the things he had written. Lately, most were about that part.

It had been a controversial scenario even among his supportive readership. The original Luo Binghe wasn’t a rapist in the traditional sense - he didn’t attack people, and he always ‘took responsibility’ and married those he slept with, unless they were professional courtesans he hired when the situation demanded - but by more modern sensibilities, he committed marital rape, rape by fraud, intoxication, and coercion. If Luo Binghe wanted someone and they refused him, rather than using his physical strength to force the matter, he would just find whatever tactic was required to change their minds. When Liu Qingge was reluctant, Luo Binghe pulled a page from his old master’s card and used guilt to soften him up. Or appealed to his sense of duty. When Mu Qingfang tried to refuse his offer of marriage after Luo Binghe drugged him into bed, the great stallion dug up dirt on his family background. When the latest hot young thing didn’t want to give in, Luo Binghe would go around them to arrange matters with their family, or leverage rescue from a dangerous situation in exchange for compliance, or even reveal a dalliance and leave them no alternative but to fall in line once their reputation was ruined.

But Mobei-Jun was the worst. Because Mobei-Jun had been an enemy once, and because the character which Shang Qinghua had so vividly imagined would have resisted most efforts to control him to the point of breaking. Like Liu Qingge and… oddly enough, kind of like the new Shen Qingqiu, Mobei-Jun gave his loyalty fully when he felt it was deserved. But trying to force it just produced the opposite effect, and he’d fight back against most forms of pressure until he either won or died. ‘Breaking’ him without killing him was nearly impossible.

So. Something had to be done about Mobei-Jun’s will, the same way it had to be done about Liu Qingge’s. But where Liu Qingge’s was eroded slowly over time, Shang Qinghua couldn’t really spend so many words dedicated to Mobei-Jun’s defeat. Which meant something fast and terrible, something dirty, something nearly beyond the scope of his protagonist’s warped moral compass.

Luo Binghe found a way to bind his blood to the entire line of ice demon sovereigns. Using Xin Mo and a sacred ice demon shrine he tapped into the ancestral lineage, the bloodline going back to the first primordial ice demon to ever live, and with his blood parasites infused some of his own essence into the demonic energy native to the sovereignty. In order for Mobei-Jun to be Mobei-Jun, he could never escape Luo Binghe’s thrall.

And it was a thrall. If Luo Binghe gave an order, Mobei-Jun couldn’t disobey. Even if it killed him. Shang Qinghua’s king could never refuse anything asked of him. It was even more binding than the red coral chokers, because while those punished and deterred, the binding ritual simply made it an impossibility to even try to contradict a command or fight back against the master. Moreover, that was true for the entire bloodline. The moment Mobei-Jun’s child inherited the line of succession from him, it would pass down to his heir as well, and would ensure that no Mobei-Jun would ever be able to challenge Luo Binghe.
It was only after he’d posted the chapters that it occurred to Shang Qinghua that he’d gone even darker than he’d intended with all of that; that one day Luo Binghe’s own child with Mobei-Jun would inherit Mobei-Jun’s powers and immediately become the thrall of his own sire, that far beyond the immediacy of a dark sexual encounter, Mobei-Jun’s situation was bleak. Every day he lived, his life wouldn’t be his own. But if he killed himself without passing anything on to his successor, then something he had always been told was the most important aspect of his existence - the birthright his family had protected for countless generations - would be destroyed. And then, once Luo Binghe got a child off of him, dying would mean either destroying the line of inheritance or consigning his heir to total enslavement. Either he doomed his child, shamed his ancestry, or endured under the slim hope of some day finding a way to reverse what had been done.

But even just within the bounds of the sexual encounter, that had gotten pretty dark as well. In order to ensure his alterations ‘took’, Luo Binghe and Xin Mo had been violent with Mobei-Jun. Well, that had been the point - something dark and kinky and titillating to satisfy the readers who wanted an extreme dominance scene. Shang Qinghua had felt kind of detached from the whole matter while he wrote it, mostly borrowing concepts from similar things he’d read and dredging shit up from his own darkest fantasies; the ones he’d run screaming from in real life, but that seemed like another matter in some kinky erotic fiction. Bloodplay, of course, and brutality, beatings, severe asphyxiation, temperature ‘play’ that qualified as torture when enacted on an ice demon…

He shuddered in a bad way.

No, no, no. It wasn’t going to happen! Ever!

At least there was some reassurance in the fact that there were few heavenly demons, and Luo Binghe was probably the only one who could personally do things the way they’d happened in the original story. But it still nagged at Shang Qinghua. He’d put a weakness into his king’s system. Even if Luo Binghe was the only one who could exploit it thoroughly, still, there were other Heavenly Demons out there. And there might be other ways to fuck up with his king’s blood, to bind him because the unique nature of inheritance in his bloodline left the door open for other kinds of powers to sink in and take root in his body.

In many ways Mobei-Jun was designed to be a vessel. Of course, it was just supposed to be for his birthright, and his innate power meant that it was still really difficult for him to be possessed… but not difficult enough to suit Shang Qinghua, who knew just how many even-more-powerful things were really out there. And that there could be even more that were beyond his knowledge, lying in wait thanks to some passing line or implication or other aspect of this world that existed on its own.

Hadn’t his king always possessed a propensity for running into inordinate amounts of trouble?
Wasn’t he always getting stabbed and poisoned and hit with weird spiritual weapons, turning up on Shang Qinghua’s doorstep with some new and horrific injury or curse or something that needed attending to? Wasn’t that how they’d met?

Oh fuck. Oh shit. His king was in so much trouble. He needed better protection! So much! How could he get married like this? What if it was a trick? What if something happened? What if - what if this mystery person hurt him?

But what the heck was Shang Qinghua supposed to do about it? He wasn’t strong enough to watch Mobei-Jun’s back… not even by half…

Wracking his brain left him empty-handed for a few days, until he had a revelation.

The thing about changing up the plot - both in terms of Shang Qinghua’s alterations to his original intent, and also in terms of transmigration scattering what he actually wrote to the winds - was that there was a lot of unused stuff. There was unused stuff from Shang Qinghua’s first draft (which often seemed to still apply in unexpected ways), and there was unused stuff from Luo Binghe’s original adventures (because the current Luo Binghe wasn’t as interested in the pursuit of power and was not at all interested in the pursuit of a harem of beautiful men to sate Xin Mo’s lusts with). And it was all just… out there. Power upgrades, artifacts, rare herbs, stones, tomes of knowledge and long-forgotten techniques…

Shang Qinghua lacked the means to go after about 99.9% of it himself, and previously wouldn’t have dared to touch a lot of it for fear of bringing some kind of narrative comeuppance down on his head or on Mobei-Jun’s. Those that coveted what the protagonist sought were destined to meet a bad end, after all. His original plan to destroy Xin Mo had been one thing; and it had gone up in smoke the minute he realized just how much the new Shen Qingqiu had changed things anyway. But that had always been a desperate ‘maybe if I just do this one thing it will solve a whole lot of problems’ type measure. Going after anything Luo Binghe had sought otherwise just seemed like it would invite the wrong kind of attention.

But…

It was pretty clear at this point that Luo Binghe wouldn’t be seeking many upgrades out anyhow. He was a lot stronger than the original model at this stage, having managed to avoid being starved and traumatized and having actually been taught things and given proper resources. The original Luo Binghe had to learn as he went, since the original Shen Qingqiu certainly never taught him anything except bitterness, and after the murder, Luo Binghe had mostly fended for himself. He’d suffered numerous setbacks, had taken a lot longer to master his demonic energy, and had constantly gotten into fights that meant he had to spend more energy recovering than actively building his strength. The original Luo Binghe was malnourished, ill-taught, haunted, hunted, and
driven by an inescapable hunger for things that he couldn’t have which pushed him to attain other things that he didn’t truly want. That all made cultivating extremely difficult, even for a prodigy.

The current Luo Binghe had certainly suffered too, but it wasn’t comparable. He’d spent years being properly fed and taught, officially going to night hunts and conferences and tournaments, and actually lived pretty well before Mobei-Jun released his demon blood and dragged him to the Underground Palace. And then he’d been nearly feral for quite a while, before news of Shen Qingqiu’s survival finally got through his murder haze, and he’d calmed the fuck down (thankfully) and then buckled the fuck down and somehow mastered his demonic abilities in record time. Well, ‘somehow’. Being a prodigy with a very clear goal and no further hesitation was definitely ‘how’.

A lot of things that the original Luo Binghe had sought out weren’t even needed by the current one. Items to help push through bottlenocks in his cultivation, shore up weaknesses, soothe or prevent deviations, and other such treasures would just be superfluous to him. He didn’t have the same problems. He also didn’t have any husbands with those problems, and didn’t seem at all likely to traumatize Shen Qingqiu into acquiring the same sort of issues Liu Qingge had dealt with.

So.

Shang Qinghua thought, and thought, and wracked his brains, and worried about what he was maybe recollecting wrong, before finally landing on several items that he could use to help defend his king from malicious bindings or exploitation of his inheritance quirks. Acquiring them actually ended up being easier than he thought; in all the hub and bub of preparations going around, no one even batted an eye at Shang Qinghua sending some people to run and fetch weird things from even weirder places. Seriously! Almost no one even asked! Even Snowflake didn’t notice anything odd when Shang Qinghua took a bunch of seemingly-random immortal grass and the bones of an ancient dragon and a weird glow-y thing that was actually a super ancient spirit stone and more crap besides and disappeared into one of the trophy rooms to lock the door and freak out a little.

The freaking out was mostly because holy shit he had acquired a fortune’s worth of demonic goods!

But also because now that he had the stuff, he had to test and see if his theories would work out and he could actually parlay it all into protections for his king.

The grass was easy, at least. This particular strain was really uncommon, but didn’t look it. It was specifically very good for demonic cultivators, as it helped build them up to their next level, so to speak. It aided in resilience, but it wasn’t good for weaker demons - their meridians couldn’t take it, and so the overall effect was detrimental instead. That obviously would not be a problem for Mobei-Jun though. Shang Qinghua could prepare it himself, like a lot of the stuff he came up with
it was just a matter of steeping it in boiling water until the ‘essence dispersed’ and made it consumable.

The other things he had to send to other demonic experts in order to refine. But nobody turned him down, again nobody even questioned it when he did it all under the umbrella of ‘Mobei-Jun’s wedding preparations’. It even sort of counted as such since Shang Qinghua was definitely preparing his king for some possible results of getting married!

The dragon bones were made into a medicine which would fortify anyone’s resistance to possession or (less widely known) the parasites in a Heavenly Demon’s blood. The ancient spirit stone was set into a token that his king could wear on his belt, it would heal his wounds more quickly and make it harder for anything to take advantage of his injuries. Mobei-Jun painted his claws, it was one of his few acts of ‘vanity’, so Shang Qinghua had a certain rare herb added to a vial of claw paints that would make them sharper and harder to break. If all else failed him, he’d hopefully still have his hands to defend himself with! He also commissioned trinkets to help protect his king from sharp temperature changes, to make him more difficult to attack with heat, with fire, or acid, or poison. More difficult to intoxicate as well.

Most of the gifts looked pretty modest when they were done, but that was fine! As long as Mobei-Jun recognized their use then he would use him, it was one of his virtues.

Shang Qinghua gifted everything to his king as soon as it was ready.

Luckily, the wedding gave him a good excuse for offering presents as well! He thought of it handily in advance (not that it wasn’t obvious).

“My king,” he announced when the first gift - the tonic to strengthen his cultivation - was ready. “This servant has a wedding gift to offer.”

Mobei-Jun had been attending something at his desk, but at this declaration he suddenly gave Shang Qinghua his full attention. It could have been his imagination, but even he seemed to perk up in actual interest.

“Shang Qinghua need offer no gifts” he said, but he didn’t sound angry or offended.

“My king has been so generous, he has given this servant so many things, how can I not reciprocate?” Shang Qinghua cheerfully argued. He approached Mobei-Jun’s desk. His king
looked at the covered bowl he was carrying with enough interest that Shang Qinghua wondered if he’d already figured out what was in it. Somehow.

“It is this Mobei-Jun’s place to provide,” Mobei-Jun nevertheless kept arguing.

Shang Qinghua couldn’t help but smile at him.

“My king, how long have we known each other?” he asked.

“...Since youth.”

“Exactly! We’ve been together so long, so if I want to give my king some wedding presents, will he really deny me?”

Mobei-Jun hesitated just a moment more, but Shang Qinghua could already tell he was too curious. It was very subtle but the way his eyes kept sticking to the covered bowl gave him away. So it wasn’t a surprise at all when he finally relented.

With a flourish, Shang Qinghua took the top off of the bowl.

“Ta-da!” he declared.

Mobei-Jun stared skeptically at the unappetizing, watery mess in front of himself.

He looked at Shang Qinghua, then at the bowl, then at Shang Qinghua again.

“Shang Qinghua has made… food…?” he ventured.

“My king has tasted my cooking, it’s not excellent I can admit but it’s definitely better than that,” Shang Qinghua replied, vaguely offended. So Mobei-Jun hadn’t figured it out, huh? Well that was fine! That meant he got the pleasure of explaining. With a flourish he gestured with the bowl lid he was still holding. “This is a special tonic derived from an ancient type of spirit grass, it will help my king’s cultivation reach even new heights when consumed! It-”
Shang Qinghua had a whole set of explanations and justifications ready to go for this scenario, but
he barely got through any of it before Mobei-Jun lifted the bowl up and started drinking.

Ah!

What the heck?!

Wasn’t his king even going to wait for the full picture? Was he that unworried about drinking
strange substances? Despite the stress of the venture, Shang Qinghua felt his stress levels rocket.

What if his king’s new spouse gave him poison? Would he drink it even faster?

He needed more defense measures against poison, ASAP!!!

Dumbfounded, Shang Qinghua could only watch as Mobei-Jun drained the whole bowl and didn’t
even leave the dregs behind. He was too shocked to immediately break the silence which followed.
Instead he just watched Mobei-Jun keenly for any signs of problems, suddenly wondering if he
shouldn’t have done more research before preparing the grass. What if he prepared it wrong?!
What if wasn’t supposed to be consumed that quickly? It probably hadn’t tasted good!

Mobei-Jun closed his eyes, then let out a long exhale. He examined his own hands, flexing his
fingers and stretching his claws.

“M-my king, erm… does it, does it seem to be working…?” Shang Qinghua asked.

“...Yes,” Mobei-Jun confirmed. His lips upturned just a little, and he seemed genuinely pleased.

Shang Qinghua sighed in relief.

“Next time don’t drink so fast! What if this servant had made some kind of mistake? These things
should probably be sipped, not chugged! My king, ah, at least let me finish explaining what
something is before just going for it!” he couldn’t help but blurt.

Mobei-Jun smiled at him.
“What Shang Qinghua gives, this Mobei-Jun will accept,” he said.

His eyes were so bright…

Shang Qinghua’s hands jittered in place, like they wanted to touch something but didn’t dare. He had to look away, he couldn’t keep staring!

“Ah, haha, well that’s - that’s good! That’s good!” he babbled.

Mobei-Jun still looked really unexpectedly satisfied with his present when Shang Qinghua gave up, hastily made some excuses, and fled the room.

And his king must have really appreciated the little boost to his cultivation, because the next day there was a box of frozen sweets waiting in Shang Qinghua’s room when he retired for the evening. It was set out on his little work desk, and he didn’t have to wonder who it was from. Such treats were a rare delicacy in the north. Not the sort of thing anyone but Mobei-Jun would ever be able or inclined to gift him. Shang Qinghua’s mouth watered just looking at them, he missed good food, it was hard to come by at the northern palace. Most dishes were just meat or roasted meat or some rare fruits or vegetables here or there. Frost pomegranates and the like. The frozen sweets were made from the juices of southern fruits and sugar, both of which had to be bartered for and weren’t entirely common even among the southern demonic realms. Shang Qinghua placed one on his tongue. It melted, and so did he.

Mobei-Jun really ought to be saving such delicacies for his future spouse, but… well… maybe pushing the wedding back made that some treats such as these wouldn’t still be good enough by the time the wedding happened. The scheduling shift meant a loss to the future ‘madam’, but a bonus to the harried lifelong servant!

Shang Qinghua decided he should make the treats last and keep them as rewards for himself, since it was doubtful he’d get anything that good again any time soon.

…He ate the whole box in one go.

Unfortunately that meant there was still sugar on his mouth when Mobei-Jun showed up to boss him around somewhat not too much later. He glared at Shang Qinghua’s mouth like it had personally offended him, and Shang Qinghua diverted disaster for being a slovenly glutton by
distracting his king with his next gift offering.

The dragon bone medicine didn’t go over quite so well.

“This Mobei-Jun is strong enough to defend his own,” his king bristled, once Shang Qinghua had explained.

“I meant no insult!” Shang Qinghua insisted. He hesitated, then moved closer and confided. “My faith in my king is immovable! It is just… this remedy can help, erm, mitigate some things if my king ever… if ever there is a time when my king incurs Lord Luo’s wrath again. Just, some things… that might trouble him… if such an event ever, ah, came to pass. Which it might not! But it also might. So…”

Mobei-Jun’s affront eased.

Luckily, he didn’t seem to get offended at the implication that such disagreements might occur in the future either. It probably would have been a different matter if Luo Binghe and Mobei-Jun had gotten along better at the outset, or if they hadn’t currently been semi-exiled. As it stood, though, his king’s faith in Luo Binghe was far from absolute - even if his service, once promised, was sincere - and the concept didn’t seem to strike him as dishonorable.

He accepted the gift.

Some of Shang Qinghua’s anxiousness abated a little bit more.

Phew.

The subsequent gifts seemed to go over better. As the days passed and the preparations carried on, Shang Qinghua found himself thinking of more things. Things to protect his king, to advance his cultivation, to fortify his defenses, to give him advantages that his enemies or even untrustworthy allies wouldn’t expect. His initial list expanded, and while Shang Qinghua was careful not to go for anything he thought Luo Binghe himself might still seek out, he remembered more things and even discovered things he hadn’t known about before in the course of investigating those matters.

Mobei-Jun consumed the tonics he was gifted, and kept the trinkets, and wore the accessories that were added by Shang Qinghua to his wardrobe. Sometimes he even had Shang Qinghua put them
on him! That was a rare treat. Shang Qinghua still had eyes, after all, he was practical not dead and there was something about fastening a discreet pendant around his king’s neck, or settling a new cloak onto his broad shoulders, that made his insides twist with longing. A longing less simple than the usual surge of admiration for Mobei-Jun’s masculine beauty.

His king really was… really was…

Shang Qinghua didn’t have words for it.

Ha! Wasn’t that new? Probably a good thing, too, given his track record!

…How could… how was Shang Qinghua supposed to watch his king… at the wedding, how was he going to… going to handle…

He shook the thought away. Stupid! Mobei-Jun wasn’t a fantasy. Shang Qinghua felt almost vicious with himself when he finished out that day, and finally returned to his rooms. Snowflake took one look at him and then went to go make tea. Shang Qinghua barely noticed, too busy lambasting himself. Mobei-Jun! Was! Not! A! Fantasy! His king was a person in this world! He deserved happiness, he deserved to be in love, he deserved better than Shang Qinghua had ever given him or ever could. It was ridiculous to think that his king would one day look at him more than he already did. Who was Shang Qinghua? Not a god. Or not the sort that merited respect if he somehow really was one. But no, not a god, not a lord, not a king or saint or powerful demon warrior. (Wasn’t it unfair, though? His king wasn’t even marrying a warrior, he wasn’t even-)

Shang Qinghua was just a clumsy, awkward human who had traded some favours for favours, who had lucked into being able to spend years interacting with a character he didn’t even treat right in his own novel!

He had known Mobei-Jun for years. He really had. That face that had once amazed him in its beauty… well it still amazed him, honestly, but it was also a face he saw almost every day. It was a face that belonged to a person who was complete. Not a character.

Not something that just existed for him to daydream about.

Snowflake came back with tea.

“Does Master Shang want his stories?” the courteous little imp asked.

“No thanks Snowflake,” Shang Qinghua sighed. The last thing he needed was to stick his head
back into the clouds. “I don’t think I could take it right now. Although a distraction probably wouldn’t be bad. Maybe. Or maybe I’ve had too many distractions lately. My king liked the new cloak! He even let me put it on him. Ah, my king’s shoulders are so broad, his muscles are so strong, it was kind of like dressing a stone wall but in a good way but I probably shouldn’t think about it like that. I need to stop objectifying him! I mean not that it’s necessarily objectifying if it’s just facts but I guess focusing on it so much isn’t really doing either of us any favours. Am I too vain? Is that it? Would I have even looked twice at my king if he wasn’t a stone cold hottie?”

Snowflake raised an eyebrow.

Shang Qinghua blinked.

“...I said all of that out loud again, didn’t I?”

The question earned him a tolerant look.

“Master Shang should drink his tea.”

“Right, right…”

He just had to get over it.

That was all there was to it.

He just had to… to live in the same world as his dream man, as his dream man made real, as the same Mobei-Jun who had come to him time and again and needed his wounds patched up and his questions answered and his mysteries solved, the same Mobei-Jun who listened to Shang Qinghua, stood with Shang Qinghua, had even saved Shang Qinghua from a savage Luo Binghe (not that he hadn’t returned the favour - he hoped like fuck that Shen Qingqiu never found out just how long he’d hung onto that jade guanyin of Luo Binghe’s in case he needed a quick ‘stop being murderously angry and look at this’ charm; which he had, thanks) and… and… he had to accept it.

Mobei-Jun had fallen in love. Mobei-Jun was getting married. Mobei-Jun was probably going to be happy.
And none of it had anything to do with him.

When he’d calmed down Snowflake hassled him until he went to sit in his comfy chair next to one of the heating arrays that Mobei-Jun had let him set up in his room (perks! See this wedding thing had a ton of perks! Why he couldn’t just enjoy them like a normal person?) and then arranged the rare luxury of a hot bath for him. ‘To help his mood’, the little imp said, which meant that Shang Qinghua was so bad at all this that he was visibly upset enough to make demons worry.

Oops?

The bath was nice anyway. The next day Shang Qinghua shook his head at himself and forced himself to perk back up. Look on the bright side! Stop dwelling on stupid dreams that were impossible anyway! Wasn’t that what his brother always used to say? Well, the last part anyway.

…Shit he really was a mess if he was actually thinking about his brother again. Normally his brain skittered away from that topic like a lab mouse fleeing electrical shocks.

A few days later, wedding planning had to put on hold to accommodate other, different wedding planning. Mainly, Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu’s wedding, which was drawing closer and which meant that Mobei-Jun needed to bring a contingent and make an appearance as befitted one of Lord Luo’s most powerful and influential backers. Shang Qinghua had to come along as well, his king decreed, which was nice - he wanted to see this event super bad! It was almost kinda like a happily ever after, and despite what he’d written he’d always enjoyed those! Although it wouldn’t actually be an ending, of course, real life didn’t end on weddings if anything weddings were beginnings (although that was the case in many stories too). But either way! He wanted to see it!

Of course Mobei-Jun was extra particular about everything. Their presence at this wedding made statements. Shang Qinghua had to make sure he was dressed appropriately and didn’t look like a train wreck, and Mobei-Jun was apparently so keen on that that he gave him a whole new fancy outfit to wear!

There were… a lot of pieces.

Lots of layers.

Shang Qinghua was smart enough to know that he had better wear all of them and properly, but it
was heavy. And hot. Not up in the far north, no, but once they got to the Underground Palace he had to consciously circulate his spiritual energy to avoid sweating. Meanwhile Mobei-Jun was walking around with his robe open to his waist, tits out and arms bare and apparently that was fine! Sure! Let Shang Qinghua swelter in silver embroidery and heavy sapphire head pieces and a cloak that looked like liquid moonlight and okay that was pretty neat but he was hot.

The Underground Palace wasn’t even actually south! It was still cold! Although inside it definitely wasn’t, since Luo Binghe had worked overtime to make sure it was as close to a ‘pleasant summer day’ as could be had in order to spoil Shen Qingqiu.

Some people’s luck, right? Imagine having a besotted demon lord just dead set on spoiling you rotten! Ah! His bro really lucked out, and to think he didn’t even realize for the longest time…

Shang Qinghua decided he ought to be nice though. It was his best transmigrator friend’s wedding day! And demon weddings had a lot of ceremonies, and Luo Binghe went through all of them because, much like Mobei-Jun, he had a point to make. Doubly so, since he was marrying a human cultivator as his First Husband. Almost definitely only husband too, and most everyone present knew that was the intent.

For most of the ceremonies Shang Qinghua just stayed in the spectator section next to his king and tried not to look out-of-place. Shen Qingqiu looked kinda dazed as he went through everything, eyes fixing on Luo Binghe like he was an anchor in a storm of lingering disbelief and - though Shang Qinghua would never say it to his face - awe.

It was pretty obvious that Shen Qingqiu couldn’t believe his luck.

Maybe that was why it had taken him so long to clue-in to Luo Binghe’s affections?

If someone that hot ever fell in love with Shang Qinghua he might have troubles believing it too. Of course, Shen Qingqiu was also unreasonably attractive. Especially in his red wedding attire, which was such a striking change from his usual whites and greens that it made all his beauty that much more noticeable. Even Luo Binghe seemed a bit outshone at some points, even with a veil on - but then, the gauzy red material didn’t do a lot to hide Shen Qingqiu’s features. It accented them more than anything.

As Luo Binghe and his new husband finally got to the part where they exchanged bows, Mobei-Jun leaned over to him.
“Red or blue?” his king asked.

“Ah?” Shang Qinghua replied.

“Blue is traditional of northern weddings. But seeing this… does Shang Qinghua think red would be better?”

Oh? Was Mobei-Jun’s future spouse from the *south*?

That… didn’t make him worry less.

Shit. It wasn’t Sha Hualing, was it?

His king’s tone had been quiet, barely carrying further than the two of them. Shang Qinghua swallowed as he became aware of how close they were standing. He forced his heart to stop beating so fast. Why had he been getting worse about this stuff lately?! He was trying to get better!

And why was Mobei-Jun asking *him*? He still couldn’t ask whoever he was marrying?

Well it probably wasn’t Sha Hualing then at least, because she was standing not too far away from them right now! Or was it just that talking would be too conspicuous? No, it wouldn’t be *that* suspect, considering they were both influential supporters of Luo Binghe’s…

Shang Qinghua shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Heh,” Mobei-Jun replied. At least he didn’t look displeased with the non-answer.

Probably he was just looking for an opinion, right? Shang Qinghua forced himself to calm down and really think about it.
“Blue,” he eventually suggested, eyes fixed on Lord Luo and Shen Qingqiu. Blue was less likely to compete with the image his bro was cutting. Less likely to invite comparisons between Mobei-Jun’s demon spouse and Lord Luo’s human one. Although anyone would probably have troubles actually looking better than Shen Qingqiu even in the exact same outfit, not just because he was fine, but because of how he himself at nothing other than Luo Binghe.

Mobei-Jun nodded in agreement, eyes still on Shang Qinghua.

He’d probably thought of the same thing himself, because he didn’t ask for any further elaboration than that.

When the rituals for the wedding were finished, the feasting and celebrating began. Shen Qingqiu’s focus finally drifted a bit from Luo Binghe to the special banquet feast that had been laid out. The spread on the head table was obviously different from all the others - Shang Qinghua would bet all his stashed secret money that Luo Binghe had cooked the dishes his husband was eating himself. Ah, to taste the protagonist’s magical cooking! Although the rest of the banquet was nothing to sneeze at, Mobei-Jun’s contingent had their own table. Mobei-Jun himself got to sit up with Luo Binge (lucky, my king! So lucky to taste the legendary food!), which was good for his prospects of getting back into all of Lord Luo’s good graces too. That seat was within Shen Qingqiu’s sight; which mean Mobei-Jun probably wasn’t still banished from it! Entirely!

Shang Qinghua somehow ended up at the head of their contingent’s table. He kind of hoped his transmigrator-bro would invite him up to chat, but luck wasn’t with him. Shen Qingqiu was clearly still stupefied with adoration and didn’t seem interested in talking with anyone who wasn’t bold enough to seek him out themselves.

After some thought he decided not to be that bold. He waited until the feasting was done instead, overseeing their contingent in his king’s absence, and then finally delivered his own well-wishes when the tributes were being offered. He’d made sure his king brought plenty of impressive things, but maybe he hadn’t gone over the list well enough because Mobei-Jun made him present it all on his behalf. Shunting off the work of explaining onto him. Aha, awkward! Wasn’t he just a servant? That was a kind of faux pas…

Oh well! At least it wasn’t a big huge one, and it gave him a chance to sincerely wish Shen Qingqiu well, and he even mustered up the nerve to congratulate Luo Binghe too!

Luo Binghe’s mood was good enough that he didn’t even glare or look annoyed! His face didn’t seem able to do anything other than smile. Mostly at Shen Qingqiu, but also at other things sometimes when he managed to wrench his eyes away.
By the time all of that had happened, though, Shang Qinghua was really starting to feel stuffy. Having so many demons in the palace - even in the wide ceremony chambers - was stifling not just in terms of temperature but also in terms of energy. There was a lot of subtle posturing going on between the various guests. Not enough to disrupt things (no one would dare, fuck, imagine being the idiot who wrecked even part of Luo Binghe’s wedding day) but enough to give Shang Qinghua a low-level headache whenever he ventured back into the throngs of wedding-goers.

Luckily, the tribute offerings were the last layer of ‘formal’ demon ceremonies to go through. Which meant that when they were finished, things turned into more of a party. There were contests of skill and casual challenges, dances, more food set out and general revelry settled into. And fireworks. Shang Qinghua eagerly headed for one of the surface courtyards to watch the fireworks - they were cool enough but also he really wanted to cool down. Maybe living in the north had finally broken his internal thermometer?

He lost track of his king somewhere along the way, but there was a lot of socializing to do and Shang Qinghua couldn’t rescue Mobei-Jun from all of it. He wasn’t a demon lord, he didn’t really have the credentials!

The outside air felt heavenly. Or… um. Demonly. Well, the weather was a bit dry, and the sky was crackling nearly as much as the fireworks. But honestly that was pretty cool too. Shang Qinghua found a quiet spot in the pavilion. Some of Sha Hualing’s cousins were mock-fighting under the glow of the fireworks. They were barely wearing anything, just some scraps of silk and jewelry.

In a fit of envy, Shang Qinghua took off his cloak.

It was the relaxed after-wedding-party! Surely that was okay, right?

After sitting a bit longer he still felt too hot, though, so he loosened his collar some. Minutes passed, no one really important seemed liable to show up, and the sky shifted towards the tumultuous hues of evening. Shang Qinghua felt tired.

His friend had a good wedding. It was really good. He ought to find out who Luo Binghe had coordinated the whole thing with, to see if he could poach anyone for Mobei-Jun’s ceremony. This was a huge success!

This was great!
Shang Qinghua felt tired.

Ah, lugging around all this formal wear wasn’t any good. So what if he was a cultivator? He was self-taught, barely competent. Thank fuck he’d written cultivation in such an easy and bullshit way for this setting, or he probably would have messed it up and died in the attempt to figure it out alone. A long sigh escaped him and he took off a few pieces of his jewelry, just some of the heavier bracelets and the big pendant. He tucked them safely into his qiankun pouch. He really wanted to take out some of his hair pieces, but he didn’t dare touch them. Snowflake had done it all and if he messed it up there was no way Shang Qinghua would be able to fix it!

He unfastened his collar more, though, exposing his clavicle and letting the open air in down the front of his robes. Oh, that was better!

Shang Qinghua carefully leaned back - still mindful of his hair - and wished he had one of Shen Qingqiu’s hand fans to borrow as he watched the fireworks through half-lidded eyes.

Eventually he became aware of a familiar, cool shadow blocking some of the glow.

Mobei-Jun looked at him with an odd expression on his face.

Hastily, Shang Qinghua straightened back up.

“My king!” he said. “Ah, was - did this servant stay away too long? I just wanted to get some air, and watch the fireworks…”

Mobei-Jun’s brow furrowed. Shit. Shang Qinghua braced himself for a rebuke. But after a long, almost awkward moment, his king just sat down next to him.

“Shang Qinghua likes fireworks?” he asked.

“Yes, of course! Who doesn’t?” he confirmed, laughing in relief. The padded seat they were on had clearly been brought out for guests, but perhaps wasn’t actually meant for two. There was no way not to sit hip-to-hip with Mobei-Jun. Shang Qinghua wondered if he should move, but… well. His king sat where he wanted! If he didn’t want to sit next to him, there were other places! Unless he really wanted this spot? Should Shang Qinghua move? Mobei-Jun didn’t look annoyed, though, he just looked a little bit flushed. Ah! If he thought inside was warm, then definitely Mobei-Jun did
too! Although it was certainly not anything his king’s cultivation couldn’t handle… in fact, the seat felt quite pleasantly cool now…

Shang Qinghua was not immune to temptation. By no means. Sit him next to a living air conditioning unit when he still felt pretty hot and stuffy, and he was only gonna move if he had a reason to! With that thought settling into place, he relaxed and even leaned a bit more into his king’s space.

Mobei-Jun still didn’t seem annoyed.

“We will have fireworks,” he just abruptly announced after a moment. “At the wedding.”

Shang Qinghua knew he shouldn’t, but he couldn’t help but snort.

“My king, that wedding will be indoors. Fireworks and indoors are not a good combination,” he mentioned. The climate outside the northern palace wasn't anything anyone other than an ice demon would find comfortable for more than a short time.

Mobei-Jun frowned.

“...Hm,” he grumbled. “True.”

He sounded so reluctant and put-out about it! Shang Qinghua almost backpedaled and promised to figure it out, but he stopped himself in time. Look, he hated to disappoint Mobei-Jun as much as was reasonable for someone in his situation - which was ‘a lot’ - but he also had to handle this wedding. If his king set his heart on fireworks, who had to make it happen? Him! And who was going to suffer the consequences if a bunch of colourful explosions in the ice palace full of ice demons didn’t somehow miraculously combine well in confined, indoor spaces? Also him!

“Fireworks are nice but there will be many other beautiful things at the wedding,” he assured Mobei-Jun. “Lord Luo and Shen Qingqiu can have the nice fireworks display, no competition.”

His king glanced at him.
“Does Shang Qinghua want fireworks?” he asked.

Shang Qinghua blinked.

“Ha?”

“At the wedding,” Mobei-Jun said.

Oh!

…What? What… why would that matter? Was his king trying to get his opinion on what would make for a good wedding?

Well, never let it be said that he contradicted his own self-interests too much! Shang Qinghua shook his head.

“It’ll be better without them,” he declared. “My king will see.”

Shit, he’d have to make good on that. At least he hadn’t been lying, there were definitely going to be some cool things at Mobei-Jun’s wedding!

Heh. ‘Cool’.

“This Mobei-Jun never asked,” his king said thoughtfully. “What was Shang Qinghua’s ceremony with Qi Qingqi like?”

Mobei-Jun looked like the question left a bad taste in his mouth. Shang Qinghua couldn’t help his confusion.

“Why would my king ask about that?” he wondered. The topic made him feel uneasy. It reminded him abruptly of his status - his time was technically up, wasn’t it? Somehow he hadn’t thought of that, but… Shen Qingqiu had been with Luo Binghe for the requisite time to demolish his unwanted marriage to Yue Qingyuan. Shang Qinghua had run away well before Lord Luo
‘kidnapped’ his beloved. Somewhere in all the hustle and bustle, his divorce had happened.

He was no longer a concubine of the Qi household…

Damn. What a relief that felt like! He suddenly wished it had occurred to him sooner, he could have been enjoying this feeling for a while now!

He roused himself from his thoughts when he realized that Mobei-Jun looked like he was trying to figure out something to say. What? Oh, he’d asked Shang Qinghua a question hadn’t he? About *his* wedding.

Well, if it could even be called that…

“Ceremonies for taking concubines are pretty simple among humans,” he said. “Sometimes you just take a sedan and ride to your new home and that’s it. My brother wanted to put on a good show, though, so I got a little ceremony. No celebration. Just a simple dress and some bows.”

Maybe one day he’d actually get married for real.

He glanced at Mobei-Jun.

His chest ached.

…Probably not. Probably wouldn’t be a good idea, all things considered. He’d already sworn his life away to someone, after all; he couldn’t really imagine sharing it with anyone else at this point, and anything less than that wouldn’t really be fair to the other person, would it?

Mobei-Jun was frowning again.

“Your brother?” he prodded. “Shang Qinghua did not… desire a ceremony?”

Shang Qinghua snorted.
“I didn’t even want to marry her, why would I have wanted a ceremony?” he countered. Then he sighed. “I’m divorced now. My king… thank you.”

Mobei-Jun’s frown deepened.

“What is Shang Qinghua thanking me for?” he asked.

“For helping, of course.” Wasn’t that obvious? “Without my king I never would have been able to pull off getting divorced. I would have been trapped there forever… or until I somehow died in some contrived accident. Second Wife was not fond of me.”

The look of displeasure on his king’s face managed to worsen. Shang Qinghua hesitated, suddenly wondering if he’d said something wrong. Shit? What did he say? Had he blabbed something? He didn’t think so, though, in fact he thought he was keeping track of the conversation pretty well…

“Thanks are unnecessary. Why did Shang Qinghua not leave that place sooner?” Mobei-Jun asked him.

He blinked.

“Uh,” he stammered awkwardly. “Well… how?” If anything he’d managed to get away even sooner than he planned…

Mobei-Jun’s brow furrowed very slightly. It really was amazing how little he emoted, and yet, at some point Shang Qinghua had started to figure out what even the tiniest shifts in his features could denote. Well, generally speaking anyway. He understood in broad terms stuff like ‘displeasure’ or ‘amusement’, but he seemed to get the particulars wrong from time to time too. Like guessing why his king was displeased or what he was amused at.

“This… did Shang Qinghua not have a substantial dowry?” Mobei-Jun asked. “If he… did not have the option of coming here before his plans were satisfied, could he not have left by himself even without this Mobei-Jun’s assistance?”

It took him a minute to parse his king’s meaning. He had to detour briefly through his surprise that
Mobei-Jun knew he’d had any kind of dowry at all, and then remember why that might confuse him.

“Ah. My king is thinking of the demon way of handling dowries,” he said. “Humans used to handle it similarly in the past as well, but for some time now it’s been different for us. The dowry is given over to the household one marries into, not kept in trust as a spouse’s individual wealth.” Fuck his past self, honestly. Did that even make any sense? Well, yes, but only in a dark and needlessly restrictive way! Gah!

When he could bring himself to glance up again, Mobei-Jun actually looked shocked. Like someone had just knocked him clean off a mountain peak or something. The expression didn’t abate in a hurry.

Nervous and honestly kind of bewildered, Shang Qinghua ventured a pat to his shoulder.

“My king…?”

Mobei-Jun stared at him. The shock finally abated, but he looked at Shang Qinghua like he was searching for something.

“That was why…” he finally murmured.

Shang Qinghua felt inexplicably vulnerable. Like something about him had just been exposed, unawares, to daylight.

He wasn’t sure if that was a good feeling or a bad one.

“Why what?” he prompted.

Mobei-Jun was still staring at him way too intensely. And then one of his arms came and settled around Shang Qinghua. The breath stuck in his throat as a large, cool hand moved to the side of his face as well. His heart started hammering, thumping like a scared rabbit, as a thumb brushed over his cheek. His king’s eyes looked too sharp.
“Why did Shang Qinghua not say sooner?” he asked with frankly baffling intensity. “Why did he stay there, why did he not come to me?”

Shang Qinghua gulped.

Was he… was he in trouble, or…?

Why did this feel so worked up all of a sudden?! Why was Mobei-Jun looking at him like however he answered this question was going to be super important? How should he even answer it? Because… well, okay. He supposed that he could have, in fact, left sooner. Maybe Mobei-Jun would have helped him if he’d asked. Thinking about it, it actually didn’t seem totally implausible. It was clear his king thought of him as… as, um. A good servant. Valued, good enough to trust with his wedding, good enough to… gently caress… under the dwindling light of several fireworks…

…He was getting distracted again. Fuck! No! The point was, okay, the point was it was that thinking about it in hindsight maybe he didn’t even have a good answer to that question. But it was probably actually a good thing he hadn’t left sooner, because then who would have delivered messages between Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe? Huh? Who would have stopped Luo Binghe from becoming a savage pile of misery, or saved Shen Qingqiu from wasting away in grief?

No one! Because Shang Qinghua did that!

“I… I had, had to do some things from where I was… still…” he awkwardly spat out.

Which sounded like utter bullshit.

But for some reason, Mobei-Jun seemed to accept it. He didn’t even look surprised or doubtful.

The thumb on his cheek moved. The hand cradling his face shifted perilously closer to the side of his mouth. Shang Qinghua swallowed. Haha, his king and his big, big hands… he needed to be careful or he’d accidentally be making a move on him, haha…

The arm around him tightened. Even with all the layers he still had on he could feel Mobei-Jun’s hand pressing against his back. It was moving a little. Gently. Almost like it was tracing over his old flogging scars, but Shang Qinghua knew those weren’t raised enough to be felt through the material, and his king had no way of knowing they were there.
It made him shiver anyway.

“Whatever Shang Qinghua has to do, from this point forward he will tell his king,” Mobei-Jun demanded. Except his tone wasn’t really demanding. In fact it almost seemed like he was… beseeching, but… nah, that wasn’t right.

“Of course,” Shang Qinghua agreed anyway, not even really thinking about it. His king wanted something? Then of course.

Mobei-Jun’s eyes drifted down, like he was looking at Shang Qinghua’s mouth. He leaned in. His cheeks were still flushed. Was he still hot? No, that wouldn’t be possible. Maybe he’d had some of the good demon wine to drink while he was socializing? There had definitely plenty to go around at the banquet… Shang Qinghua hadn’t drunk much himself, but he was starting to feel out-of sorts and dizzy too as his king’s face seemed to draw closer and closer… closer… was he falling?

Falling… onto… Shang Qinghua’s lips…?

His brain turned off.

Mobei-Jun’s mouth was on his mouth. Cold. Cool. Smooth. He felt the familiar tingle of a spiritual energy transfer, but not in a place where he was used to receiving it. Kisses were good for that, though, he’d kept that trope for his world-building. It was a good excuse for people to kiss after all. Writers needed things like that in order to justify unlikely fanservice-type romantic interactions. Did he need a spiritual energy transfer? He could feel his own mouth trembling as Mobei-Jun’s lips slid across his. So close, Shang Qinghua couldn’t handle looking - his eyes shut as his thoughts remained jumbled and distant. Kiss. Mouth. Kissing. His king was - he was - they were -!

As the spiritual energy transfer finished, Mobei-Jun’s mouth stopped being so cold. It still didn’t become warm, but it didn’t feel cold either. And it didn’t pull away. His lips were surprisingly gentle, not pressing too hard or demanding too much. It was different from what Shang Qinghua had imagined on the many occasions when he had imagined kissing Mobei-Jun. His fantasies had always felt more domineering. Assertive, even verging on angry or punishing. But this… this was unexpected.

Not bad. Not bad. He couldn’t think to really assess, but the tingling feeling was sliding down his throat like warm honey, and when Mobei-Jun’s lips moved a certain way he parted his own, and welcomed the not-quite-cool but definitely-not-warm slide of a tongue slipping into his mouth.
The sensation was electric. It jolted him back to awareness.

Shit!

What was he doing?!?

Why was Mobei-Jun kissing him? Was he drunk? Drunk enough to confuse Shang Qinghua for someone else and try to make out with him?

Shang Qinghua had to put a stop to it. He couldn’t just - he ought to - they needed to stop! Definitely! Definitely needed to… oh, oh that… hand…

His thoughts abandoned him again as Mobei-Jun’s palm pressed his back more firmly, and his tongue curiously probed his mouth. It was a little awkward, in fact - had his king ever kissed anyone before? Shang Qinghua had, a lifetime ago, but it had been way worse. Just mashed lips and liquor-scented breath and too much teeth. Mobei-Jun’s teeth were sharp. Shang Qinghua found himself pressing his own tongue into his king’s mouth, not really intending to be bold but just following the line of thought. He felt the tips of his king’s fangs, let them make slight indents against his tongue.

Mobei-Jun hummed approvingly.

Shang Qinghua’s brain restarted once again, and with an embarrassing squeak he flailed back, broke off the kiss, and clamped his hands over his mouth.

“My king!” he squawked.

Mobei-Jun’s hands stayed where they were on him. Keeping him in place. The blue blush on his king's cheeks had spread down towards his neck, and a smug little smile began to quirk up the corners of his mouth.

“Hm? Yes?” he asked. His voice was low and… and… was Shang Qinghua allowed to describe Mobei-Jun as ‘sultry’…?
Fuck! Why was he being looked at like this?! They really did serve strong wine at these kinds of events, didn’t they? Oh man. Here he’d been trying to avoid fantasizing about his king, and now it had just gotten nine million times harder! He needed to move away. Mobei-Jun was getting married. Maybe he’d gotten it into his head to use Shang Qinghua as a test drive, to try some things out before his wedding night. Lord Luo had been taught by succubi and sex demons, by Madam Meiyin herself. Maybe he’d recommended that Mobei-Jun get some experience before jumping into bed with his future spouse?

Fuck, that seemed… likely. Didn’t it? Shang Qinghua couldn’t imagine his king actually being interested in him, but if ever there was a person who Mobei-Jun experimented weird stuff with, it was almost certainly him!

His heart was still hammering.

He ought to put a stop to it. He really ought to. Ought to tell his king it was good and then dissuade him from anything more. He probably didn’t need the practice, that… that had been really good, and - and Shang Qinghua had made this to be a world where it would be! This was a sexy world! His king was a mighty demon lord! He’d be able to make the first time good for his new spouse… and the subsequent times, certainly… the doubtless many, many times when Mobei-Jun would sleep with someone else, who would have unlimited numbers of times to do it with him while Shang Qinghua would probably only ever have this one shot…

“M-my king, that was… that f-felt very good…” Shang Qinghua haltingly tried to begin.

Mobei-Jun’s general aura of satisfaction intensified. Before Shang Qinghua could get out anything more, then, his king’s hand shifted. A painted black thumb claw pressed against his bottom lip. Almost teasing; almost testing. His eyes widened. His face felt so hot, everything felt so hot even though the press of Mobei-Jun’s palm against him was still not-quite-cool.

“My king-”

“Is Mobei-Jun going to ravish his little human right there on the seat?”

The unfamiliar voice put a jolt straight through him. Shang Qinghua shifted his head and stared over to where Sha Hualing’s cousins were still mingling. Apparently they’d finished their own sport, and were watching the proceedings between himself and Mobei-Jun with interest.
His heart plummeted.

Oh no. Oh shit! Witnesses meant rumours, and rumours meant there was a chance - a very very good chance - that Mobei-Jun’s future spouse would know he’d - that he and Shang Qinghua had, erm… well…

And, a-and, there was a chance said future spouse would be fine with it, but what if they weren’t? What if Shang Qinghua really went through with this, what would happen? The most he could hope was the Mobei-Jun would feel some sense of obligation and take him on as a concubine. He didn’t want to go back to being a concubine! Not even for his king - well, maybe for his king, if he thought it would be alright. But what if it wasn’t? Didn’t he know the consequences of such situations? Qi Qingqi had never hated Shang Qinghua. She, herself, had mainly just ignored him - kept him fed and housed and clothed and otherwise not fussed. He imagined Mobei-Jun would be at least that courteous, but Shang Qinghua didn’t need to worry about his king. He needed to worry about this unknown demon he was marrying.

They would probably hate him. Wouldn’t they? Yup, he thought, they probably would. On paper it didn’t look good. He’d known Mobei-Jun since they were teenagers. He was one of his most prominent servants, had been around a lot. His king liked to keep him by his side (well he needed to in many ways due to the, uh, the temperature issues). If he even just fucked Shang Qinghua a year before his postponed wedding, let alone if he took him as a concubine before that day happened, then - then, wouldn’t his new spouse see Shang Qinghua as a threat? An insult? A grubby little human stealing away Mobei-Jun’s attention?

For half a moment, something inside of him twisted a little bit. So what if they do? It whispered. I know my king’s secrets. I know his servants. I have information this person couldn’t even dream of acquiring, and they’ll probably just look at me and see some dumb human. Let them try something. They’ll marry into my king’s household thinking they can throw around their authority as the First Spouse, but I am Mobei-Jun’s oldest friend. If they cross me, couldn’t I make life just as difficult for them even as a concubine…?

Shang Qinghua shook the thought away like a dog shaking water from his ears.

He really needed to stop thinking like a writer. He sucked at harem intrigues. Never had the guts for it, in the end. Never could bring himself to sabotage some innocent bystander or knock down some stranger just to climb up on their back.

How could he hurt someone who made his king happy?
Mobei-Jun shot Sha Hualing’s giggling cousins an annoyed look and then stood. With a gesture he opened a portal.

Shang Qinghua blinked.

“Ah, m-my king,” he stammered, still unable to fight his blush. “The retinue-”

“You will head back first,” Mobei-Jun said, lowly. “I will stay and see our people safely home before retiring for the evening.”

Shang Qinghua stood up and flailed a little in protests.

“If my king is tired, then this servant-”

“Shang Qinghua’s appearance has become disheveled.”

With a similar gesture as the one he had used before, his king reached over and brushed a thumb across his lips. Shang Qinghua fought the urge to freeze or dissolve into a puddle and instead made himself mirror the touch, confirming that some of the light paint he’d put on his lips was smudged. That… that was hardly anything, though, he could just wipe all of it off!

Mobei-Jun didn’t look like he was inviting a disagreement, however.

The last few fireworks went off over their heads. Hues of red light shifted over them.

Shang Qinghua hastily gathered up his silver moonlight cloak and walked through the portal which Mobei-Jun had summoned.

He didn’t know whether to laugh or scream or cry when he realized it had taken him to his king’s private chambers.

That Mobei-Jun! Jeez! Did he expect him to - to wait, and then let his king just do whatever to him when he got back? Or had he simply not paid enough attention and opened the portal to his rooms
Instead of Shang Qinghua’s? Fat chance of the second one, probably. Shang Qinghua’s breath puffed as the cold of the rooms sank around him. His king’s energy still kept it mostly at bay, but it was definitely colder. Mobei-Jun’s chambers were deep in the heart of the northern palace, and unlike Shang Qinghua’s room or the future spouse’s rooms, they couldn’t be warmed. Heating arrays sparked and died in the place. Shang Qinghua had tried… he lost track of the times, actually, to get something to work, but the heart of the chambers was ‘cold’ and they refused to accept anything else.

Refused to accept… any warmth.

In the end, that was how it had to be for his king. Didn’t it? Only someone strong enough to stand toe-to-toe with that great inheritance of his could ever hope to survive living by Mobei-Jun’s side.

Shang Qinghua looked at his reflection in one of the room’s silver mirrors.

Cloak bunched in his arms, paint smeared on his lips, collar undone and robe front open…. he still didn’t look half bad. He’d kept his hair safe. The blue gems he was wearing gleamed even more beautifully in the cold light of these rooms.

…Fuck. Why couldn’t he have transmigrated into a demon? A real beauty? Someone who would actually draw Mobei-Jun’s eye, someone who might stand half a chance of keeping it? Instead of this stupid cannon fodder side character who didn’t matter, who couldn’t disguise all the faults and quirks of Shang Qinghua’s personality.

If he’d been someone worthwhile, maybe Mobei-Jun would be marrying him instead.

Maybe he wouldn’t have to stand in these rooms and decide if he was going to indulge in this one chance to be with a man he’d fallen madly in love with, or if he was going to go and dig up all the stashes he’d left and get out now, while the getting was still good. There were more preparations to see to but probably it would be better if he started helping from a distance now. He was divorced. He could… he could…

No one else knew he was back yet, after all. His king would still need time to gather up their retinue and escort all of them back, and this palace was quiet. Those left behind enjoying some leisure time. No one would notice his absence until he was well and truly gone.

Shang Qinghua reached up to start carefully pulling out his hair ornaments. He shivered and stared
at his reflection. Watched each bit of finery come loose. He took off all the jewels first, then pulled out the pins. His hair came down in awkward bunches. Not like in movies, where some lady would just pull out a single bobby pin and her bun would cascade elegantly around her shoulders. Nope. Not for him, he got frumpy rats nest hair that he had to floof out with his fingers until it came loose.

When the jewelry was gone and his hair was down, he kept going. He stripped off the heavy outfit and laid all the pieces over the changing screen near the mirror until he was bare. Bare and cold and staring at his small, unremarkable reflection; his messy hair and blunt nails, round face, faint scars, smudged paint, and blemishes.

He stared for too long probably.

Nothing for it.

Shang Qinghua loved his king. He really, really loved his king.

It didn’t take him long to find a cloth to wipe his face with. Mobei-Jun’s rooms had been made ready for his return. There were servants that could be called, but of course he avoided that. Shang Qinghua tied his hair up into a simple ponytail, ignoring the wisps that wouldn’t oblige him. He took one of Mobei-Jun’s spare robes and with internal apologies, wore it as he slipped down quiet corridors and servant passages down to his own room.

Then he changed into his travel clothes. He left his king’s robe set out on his own dressing screen; Snowflake would certainly find it and wash it before properly returning it to his king. Mobei-Jun might not even notice.

Shang Qinghua left behind the things he’d been gifted in order to make him presentable around the northern palace. If he wasn’t going to be around as much, it felt somehow dishonest to take them. And he didn’t think he could stand to barter or sell them. He only packed what was really his, then slipped back out again.

It took a little longer than he thought to get to all of his stashes at the northern palace, and recover everything he needed. By the time he activated the teleportation talisman he had prepared especially for this, his king’s retinue had returned.

“Shang Qinghua?” he thought he heard a beloved voice call.
He didn’t answer.

He ran away instead.
Moshang - Words

Chapter Notes

I want y'all to know I had zero words of this done when I posted the last chapter. I wrote this whole thing just 'cause you all got so worked up it got ME worked up and I love each and every one of you. <3333

Shang Qinghua had left.

Mobei-Jun did not understand.

Why had Shang Qinghua left…?

Had he not just promised to share his hidden plans with Mobei-Jun henceforward? If the situation had been different, Mobei-Jun would not have thought Shang Qinghua liable to leave of his own volition. But that was exactly what had happened. He had returned to the northern palace in time to witness his betrothed leaving the place, unheeding of his call.

The sight made something hard and unpleasant settle in his gut.

*He will be back,* Mobei-Jun decided. Something must have happened. Something must have occurred to him, a matter requiring his Knowledge, perhaps. Shang Qinghua would do what he needed to and then he would return, and then Mobei-Jun would tell him off for neglecting to confer with him before leaving. Because it was not safe. Because if any of Mobei-Jun’s enemies found Shang Qinghua unguarded, even his Knowledge might not be enough to protect him. He would wait for Shang Qinghua’s return and then explain these things to him and then Shang Qinghua would tell him why he had left and apologize.

Then matters would be well again.
Mobei-Jun waited a day.

He waited two days.

He waited three days.

The silence of the northern palace was oppressive. No one spoke much to Mobei-Jun. He took his meals alone. He handled his affairs in an otherwise still and empty study. He cultivated alone. No one brought many issues towards him, for there was nothing of particular not to handle. Lord Luo’s wedding had concluded with very few attempted attacks or skirmishes during the ‘distraction’ of it. Matters for his own wedding preparations slowed as some things were pushed back to await Shang Qinghua’s input and approval, and his family’s most senior ancestral servant handled the rest. Worry nagged at Mobei-Jun, even though he could tell by the talisman that he had long ago given to Shang Qinghua that the human had not been attacked by anything.

Part of Mobei-Jun wished to be angry about it. Shang Qinghua was his servant. By what right did he leave without so much as a word of explanation? And yet, Shang Qinghua was his betrothed. Mobei-Jun felt as though this was a situation where his actions might carry implications that were not immediately obvious to him.

He had misjudged some matters already. That much was clear. It had never once occurred to him to think that human dowries functioned so absurdly. It had never entered his head that Shang Qinghua had been trapped... just as it had never occurred to him in the past that his physical overtures would be taken as abuse and punishment.

After a week without Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun decided that he needed to know more. Should he go after the human? Should he wait? Was this some form of betrothal tradition, to disappear for such a stretch of time? If so, it would have to be compromised. Nothing had attacked Shang Qinghua so far but Mobei-Jun could tell little else about his state beyond that, and he had many enemies who would delight in getting their hands on his betrothed.

It was not safe.

And it was... too lonely.

There were not many humans in the demonic realms whom Mobei-Jun might be able to consult. Luo Binghe was still in seclusion with his new husband to indulge in the carnal arts. Shen Qingqiu,
of course, was human, but Mobei-Jun was certainly in no position to interrupt that person and his lord in their activities in order to ask for relationship advice. It wouldn’t be surprising if he was never permitted to lay eyes on Shen Qingqiu ever again, now that the man had married Luo Binghe and had expressed his desire to be kept away from Mobei-Jun.

Mobei-Jun did not blame him. If he had known at the time that the half-demon who drew his interest viewed Shen Qingqiu in much the same way that he himself viewed Shang Qinghua, or that Luo Binghe would prove to be so powerful, he would have approached that situation much differently.

However, despite this, it occurred to him that perhaps Shen Qingqiu had brought along some human servants to attend to him in his new station. Lord Luo indulged his beloved endlessly, so this did not seem unlikely to Mobei-Jun. Thus, at the end of the week Mobei-Jun opened a portal and returned to the Underground Palace, to investigate that notion and see if there were any older or more experienced human servants who could advise him on whether or not to pursue Shang Qinghua.

He trusted none of his actual advisers to provide such information. Partly because he knew many of them did not approve of his choice to marry Shang Qinghua, but mainly because he knew none of them were well-versed in human culture anyway.

When he arrived at the palace, however, his inquiries bore no fruit. Shen Qingqiu had brought along no human servants. Luo Binghe had conscripted none to consult for his husband’s care either, since his upbringing in the human realm meant he was well-versed in their customs anyway. However, Mobei-Jun did gather that Luo Binghe had - to his surprise - pulled himself from his husband’s courtyard long enough to deal with a dispute involving Lord Sha’s people.

There was a chance Mobei-Jun might be able to speak with him before he returned to Shen Qingqiu. He opted to wait for Luo Binghe’s return at the main gates.

To his surprise, he was not the only person with such a notion.

At the sight of Shen Qingqiu sitting in the front pavilion, Mobei-Jun’s first impulse was to turn and leave. He most likely would have if the human had not spotted him at the same time.

The front pavilion of the underground palace was located just behind the broad gates. Technically, it was one of the few parts of the palace which was visible above ground; the exterior of the structure was covered by tall spires, feeling somewhat like a cavern, with polished floors and bold decorations that spoke of the wealth of Mobei-Jun’s ancestors, and the ruling demon clans who had
preceded and interspersed their reigns. Though it was Mobei-Jun’s forebears who first built this palace, many of them had pledged their allegiances to Heavenly Demons and other, more powerful lords at one time or another in history. He was far from the first to do so. While the northern palace was largely too inhospitable to other demons to hold much appeal as a residence, the Underground Palace was one of the most beautiful strongholds in all the realms. The front pavilion showed the most evidence of this long history of ownership. Many lords sought to make their statement to those who ventured through the gates upon swearing fealty. Ancient lanterns danced like stars across the high rooftops. Ostentatious pillars split the pavilion into separate sections. A massive passageway led to the indoor stables, and statues, fountains, and trophies were dotted throughout the space. Lord Luo had yet to make his mark on this pavilion, having devoted most of his own energies to the Bamboo Courtyard instead, so it looked virtually unchanged from its days in Mobei-Jun’s possession.

Shen Qingqiu had settled onto a bench near one of the fountains, beneath the trophy of a Crimson Lake Raptor. A small easel had been set up in front of him, and it seemed he was in the process of painting the Crimson Lake Raptor.

Mobei-Jun would have guessed the fountain as a likelier subject for a human making art, but he seemed to recall Shang Qinghua mentioning that Shen Qingqiu was ‘nuts for monsters, my king, like you’d never guess it by looking at the man and I guess he could just be really bad at making small talk but even if that was the case I still think he knows too much random nonsense about every single thing with teeth for it to be totally incidental, like he knows the names of things that I can’t even keep track of…’

Perhaps that was true.

Shen Qingqiu regarded him silently for a moment. His gaze was sharp, and his hand remained frozen in place with the brush still barely touching his canvas.

Mobei-Jun could not turn and leave without it likely being seen as rudeness on his own part, so he waited.

He was surprised again when Shen Qingqiu put the brush down, tilted his head, and then motioned him over.

“Mobei-Jun,” he greeted. He plucked up a fan from beside himself. His voice sounded cool and collected, but there was an undeniable degree of tension to him as well.

Mobei-Jun considered his options.
He knew that Shen Qingqiu had beaten Shang Qinghua. There was little he could do about it, and he understood - Mobei-Jun had transgressed against him. Particularly so by human standards. Shang Qinghua was Mobei-Jun’s beloved, and so, he had received the punishment for these transgressions. It had not been a severe beating but that was undoubtedly owed to either Shang Qinghua’s negotiations or Shen Qingqiu having a merciful nature.

Mobei-Jun would have rather taken the punishment himself. This was not possible without being in Shen Qingqiu’s presence, however, and thus far, he had only barely been allowed to eat at the far end of the same table at the wedding banquet.

All this in mind, Mobei-Jun took the opportunity for what it was and rigidly dropped to his knees.

“This Mobei-Jun offers his formal apology to Master Shen Qingqiu. He will pay any price to make amends for past transgressions.”

With his head lowered he could not see Shen Qingqiu’s reaction.

He was left kneeling for several long moments before an extended fan motioned for him to get back up again.

“Master Shen Qingqiu?” the human asked him. He was less expressive than Shang Qinghua, and not easy to gauge the emotions of. “Not ‘Lord Luo’s First Husband’?”

“This Mobei-Jun will modify his forms of address,” he immediately acquiesced. He had thought it might go over better to approach Shen Qingqiu as a warrior, but perhaps it seemed more as if he had slighted his new social standing instead. The human shook his head, however, cutting off that line of thought.

“No. It’s fine,” he decided. “Because it’s between the two of us at this moment, yes? After all, Mobei-Jun won that fight. And took something most precious from his opponent in the process as well.”

There was a hard edge to Shen Qingqiu’s voice.
He was not at all like Shang Qinghua, Mobei-Jun thought. And yet…

Yet, he still could not escape the sense that they were very similar either. Most opponents Mobei-Jun had faced would have spoken such words with an edge of injured pride. The fixation on their humiliation in defeat, their ire at having being bested, having endured the insult of losing a prize. But in Shen Qingqiu’s mouth, the focus seemed to be on the precious nature of the subject.

That Mobei-Jun had taken Luo Binghe away, rather than that Shen Qingqiu had lost their match.

It made him think of Shang Qinghua solemnly gifting him a protective talisman. ‘This way, my king, if anyone tries to… well, if anyone tries anything bad, they won’t have an easy time!’

“I don’t know if I can forgive you,” Shen Qingqiu said.

Yes. That made sense. If someone had taken Shang Qinghua away, if Mobei-Jun had believed him dead by their hand, he would not have found much tolerance for the person responsible either. If any.

With a nod of acknowledgement he took a step back.

“This Mobei-Jun will keep himself far from Master Shen Qingqiu’s sight,” he offered. That might be the only way for this to go in the end.

Shen Qingqiu regarded him in silence for another moment.

When he turned to leave, a call stopped him short.

“The ice lord serves Luo Binghe now,” the human said. It sounded only partly like a question.

Mobei-Jun nodded in confirmation anyway.

“Binghe says you’re fond of Shang Qinghua as well. The evidence would certainly support this so far, it seems that Mobei-Jun has been treating his human servant with great preference.”
“Shang Qinghua is important.”

“Is he?” Shen Qingqiu asked, quirking an eyebrow. “How so?”

Mobai-Jun fought the urge to bristle.

“He is… too many significant things to list.”

With a skeptical hum, Lord Luo’s husband began to idly fan himself. It was an affectation; but what true intent it disguised, Mobai-Jun could not say. Anger? Amusement? Disdain? Perhaps even fear?

“Oh? Mobai-Jun really should clarify. What precisely makes Shang Qinghua a person of any importance? Would it be his exemplary cringing? His constant and yet inane babbling? His cowardly mien? Does Mobai-Jun greatly value servants who flee at the first sign of trouble, throw all dignity to the winds at the least provocation, have no money, no prospects, and no ‘virtue’ left to speak of?”

The temperature plummeted. Mobai-Jun caught himself as frost began to spread across the floor at his feet. It was a force of effort to reign in his ire, to remember that he could not, ever, under any circumstances, say so much as a word against Shen Qingqiu.

Something flitted across the human’s eyes as he nevertheless noted this reaction.

“Shang Qinghua… offers… good counsel…” he managed to say in measured and deliberate tones.

Shen Qingqiu closed his fan and stood. He settled a hand on the hilt of his sword. Luo Binghe’s sword. Mobai-Jun recognized Xiu Ya. It had nearly cleaved the flesh from his bones on more than one occasion.

Perhaps there would be one more yet to come.
After a long and tense moment where the air itself seemed to tense against Mobei-Jun’s restraint, Shen Qingqiu nodded.

“He does.”

Mobei-Jun had been so braced for a strike or another insult that he could not immediately put the words into context. Perhaps that was apparent, because Shen Qingqiu clarified.

“He does offer good counsel. And also terrible counsel sometimes, too, but since he’s not here we don’t have to dwell on that. In fact he is my friend,” the human said. His gaze remained sharp. “Even if he’s also an idiot. When he came to me to tell me about Luo Binghe, I hope Mobei-Jun knows whose sake it was really for. Even I didn’t realize it at the time but it seems so obvious now. Shang Qinghua has been protecting Mobei-Jun quite a lot. If not for his words and actions, it seems likely that Mobei-Jun would be a very dead demon by now.”

Mobei-Jun did not need to be told that he owed Shang Qinghua his life. He knew it, several times over. But in that moment he suddenly understood that if not for Shang Qinghua and his good opinion, Shen Qingqiu would have likely demanded Mobei-Jun’s death.

“...Shang Qinghua is important,” he could only reiterate.

Shen Qingqiu’s hand moved away from Xiu Ya’s hilt.

“Just so long as we understand one another,” he said.

With a motion, a servant was called forth to pack up the painter’s easel and supplies. Shen Qingqiu did not seem keen to leave the pavilion, however - doubtless waiting for Luo Binghe’s return - and Mobei-Jun found himself uncertain if he should go or stay either. He disliked the uncertainty. On the one hand a tactical retreat at this point was likely wise.

On the other, Shang Qinghua was still gone. Given his experiences, Shen Qingqiu was surely a human expert on matters of courtship. It seemed likely that he would know what Mobei-Jun ought to do.

Uncertainty gave way to decisiveness. As Shen Qingqiu began to walk leisurely around the pavilion, Mobei-Jun dared to fall into step alongside him.
“Lord Luo’s husband is awaiting his return,” he observed.

Shen Qingqiu pulled his fan out again. The air was quite clear, well-filtered; Mobei-Jun suspected he used it to disguise his reactions to the subject of Luo Binghe. It would not be surprising if they were intense.

“And Mobei-Jun? Does he also await my lord’s return?”

“Mn.”

“Something has come up?”

Mobei-Jun considered his phrasing. He had never been good at speaking around matters. Perhaps directness was his only recourse.

“Shang Qinghua has left,” he admitted.

Shen Qingqiu raised an eyebrow.

“Ran off?” he asked. He did not seem terribly surprised.

“He left of his own volition… but without word of his purpose or intentions, or how long he would be gone for.”

“Ah.”

“Shang Qinghua’s affiliations with that woman have ended. This Mobei-Jun had wondered if there was some purpose to his departure which would be self-evident to humans…”

Shen Qingqiu studied him for a moment, clearly contemplating the matter. He tapped his fan against his mouth. It was the least dignified gesture Mobei-Jun had seen from him yet, and the
most Shang Qinghua-like mannerism; unconscious and somewhat immature.

“Did anything happen right before he left?” the human asked, at length.

Mobei-Jun hesitated.

Shen Qingqiu glanced at him sidelong.

“There have been rumours that Mobei-Jun was seen kissing someone under the fireworks,” he said.

Sha clan had big mouths. Even beating their heads did little to dissuade their tongues from wagging.

“This happened,” he confirmed.

“You kissed. The first time?”

“...Yes.”

Was this significant?

“And then he ran away.”

“Then he left, yes.”

Shen Qingqiu made a sound of understanding. He closed his fan and gently tapped the inside of his palm with it.

“The idiot panicked,” he declared.
Mobei-Jun restrained his affront.

“Shang Qinghua knows many things,” he couldn’t stop himself from saying.

Shen Qingqiu took no offense, merely waved the assertion off.

“Certainly, of course, but that hardly matters. He’s still an idiot and he still panicked.”

Panic?

“Why would he panic?” Mobei-Jun asked. What was wrong with kissing? It was not painful. Shang Qinghua even said it felt good! And his marriage to Qi Qingqi was ended. Mobei-Jun had thought they might even consummate their new relationship that night, since his little human broached the subject. Their wedding was officially delayed but their intentions had obviously not changed. Though now that he was thinking on it, he suddenly recalled Lord Luo speaking about the importance of showing respect by not…

Not doing such things before the wedding.

Was that it? Had he frightened Shang Qinghua by sending him to his chambers?

But he could have easily declined… if he had only said ‘my king, it is traditional to wait until after the wedding as a sign of respect’ then Mobei-Jun would not have made any issue of the matter. He had respected all of Shang Qinghua’s decisions with regards to the wedding so far, why would this have seemed any different?

Shen Qingqiu sighed like a man who was attempting to figure out how to explain a very complex subject to a very slow-witted child.

Mobei-Jun did not have the liberty to take offense, though inwardly he did.

“Shang Qinghua knows many things,” he finally said at length. “Does Mobei-Jun ever think about the things Shang Qinghua might not know?”
“No.”

Obviously there were such things. Shang Qinghua was not omniscient. But he certainly knew more than any other person Mobei-Jun had ever met.

“Holy shit,” Shen Qingqiu muttered under his breath. Then he composed himself back into order again as if the utterance had never happened. This was also like Shang Qinghua.

“All things have its beauty, but not everyone sees it. People like Shang Qinghua have a beauty that is... well. Ah. Not the sort that is obvious, but rather the sort that takes time to recognize and appreciate. An acquired taste of sorts.”

This held true with Mobei-Jun’s experience. He had not seen Shang Qinghua’s beauty at first. It had taken time to unfold for him, though perhaps he had noticed more than he consciously realized at the beginning too. Once he realized that he was in the presence of beauty that was profound rather than obvious, however, he had not been able to stop seeing it. It was like enlightenment.

“Yes,” he acknowledged.

Shen Qingqiu nodded.

“Shang Qinghua cannot see his own kind of beauty. So when he tries to understand the various circumstances he finds himself in, he omits this information from his assessment of the world. If Mobei-Jun has not made it explicit that he finds Shang Qinghua attractive, or that he wants his company for its own sake, or that he values him greatly, then these will all be things that Shang Qinghua does not know. So. When Mobei-Jun kisses him, what does he think? That he is being shown love? Lust? Disrespect? Perhaps he is even being threatened or devalued, perhaps Mobei-Jun expects him to let himself be used for convenience, or debased for amusement…”

Hot fingers of horror crept up Mobei-Jun’s spine.

Shen Qingqiu shrugged.

“As established, he’s an idiot. We haven’t talked for a while so who knows exactly why he
panicked. But he definitely did.”

“Then, should this Mobei-Jun pursue him?” he asked.

“Absolutely.” Shen Qingqiu replied. He looked amused by then, but Mobei-Jun had no time to dwell on it. He nodded, offered his thanks for the counsel, and then hurried to the opposite end of the pavilion with as much haste as he could without potentially giving offense.

Swiftly, Mobei-Jun opened a portal. Being able to teleport to specific locations was one thing. Being able to reach a person wherever they were was another matter. That, he could not manage unless Shang Qinghua called for him. This ensured that Shang Qinghua would always be able to rely on Mobei-Jun for aid if needed, but also that Mobei-Jun could not abuse his power. It was a system laid in place by the first Mobei-Jun to cherish his spouse.

In this particular instance it did make finding his wayward human more difficult.

Mobei-Jun considered where Shang Qinghua might go if he was running away, and so opened his first portal to some of the deeper chambers of the Underground Palace. He knew Shang Qinghua had hidden things in said chambers for safe-keeping before Lord Luo banished them north.

But it had already been several days. Mobei-Jun was disappointed, and yet not surprised, to find that the caches he knew of had been emptied. Had Shang Qinghua done this recently, or had he done it before they left for the northern palace? He couldn’t say.

Where else might Shang Qinghua run to in fear of Mobei-Jun…?

He surely would not go to Qi Qingqi. Would he? No. Qi Qingqi was a prominent cultivator but Shang Qinghua had seemed firm in his conviction that Mobei-Jun would prove stronger in a fight, and besides which, her sentiments towards Shang Qinghua were not good. Her treatment of him had been very poor. Shang Qinghua had assured Mobei-Jun that he could not go back and was unlikely to be lying.

Mobei-Jun frowned as he realized that most other places he could think of were in his own territory. He knew there were some ancestral boltholes which Shang Qinghua liked. ‘They’re like vacation houses, my king! You could come here to get away from it all and de-stress, I mean it’s very cold but it’s also really pretty, do you think these rainbow icicles would stay frozen if we brought them any further south…?’ And there were several temples he had admired. ‘How old is
this place, does my king know? How old is this world? Does my king know what began it?’
(Sometimes Shang Qinghua asked questions which seemed so far beyond the normal needs of
knowledge; fortunately, even when he asked Mobei-Jun directly he rarely seemed to expect an
answer.) But would he go to such places if he was fearful of Mobei-Jun?

Perhaps he would go to somewhere he knew Mobei-Jun was unlikely to visit, such as the Ghost
City?

Or… would he go back to his original home? His brother had married him off to Qi Qingqi, and
Shang Qinghua did not speak of him often. His parents had died; Mobei-Jun did not think he had
any other family. However, was his relationship to his brother bad enough that he would not go to
him even in a time of need? Or was it the product of some form of misunderstanding?

Considering the matter, Mobei-Jun determined that he could only begin searching and hope to find
Shang Qinghua sooner or later.

He opened another portal and started with the boltholes.

There was no sign of Shang Qinghua at any of them.

Day turned to night, and night passed as Mobei-Jun investigated every temple and settlement he
could recall taking Shang Qinghua to. When the next dawn came, he mustered himself and left to
make some inquiries in the Ghost City.

Mobei-Jun had not set foot in that place ever since his unfriendly meeting with Crimson Rain That
Seeks the Flower. It was strange to think that if he had never destroyed that shrine, had never been
cursed, then he most likely would have never met Shang Qinghua. As he walked the warping
streets and felt many eyes upon his back, it seemed to him that the hand of destiny had been in that.
Destroy a god’s shrine. Kneel before the ghost of a forgotten god’s devotee. Find mercy in the
hands of a man who looked at the walls of Mobei-Jun’s ancestors and asked where time began.

He did not intend to seek out the ghost king himself, but somehow he found his feet leading him to
sheer red curtains and a half-hidden figure instead. It was no private audience. The gambling den
was full of fools, the dice dancing and the ghosts jeering as a single eye watched from behind a veil
of crimson and smoke.

Had he known?
Mobei-Jun couldn’t help but wonder. This being had sent him to that squalid human village. He had always thought the ghost king had sent him to die. How could he have known Shang Qinghua would ever find him, or save him? Had he been surprised when Mobei-Jun did not die?

Shang Qinghua was no servant of the Ghost City’s leader.

*Perhaps the hand of a forgotten god, however…*

He shook the thought away. Pointless.

“The Mobei-Jun wishes to place a bet,” the ghost king observed. He did not speak loudly, but his voice nevertheless managed to carry distinctly across all the din of rattling dice and cards and jeering and betting.

The sound dimmed somewhat as the denizens of the gambling den looked to see what had drawn their sovereign’s attention.

Mobei-Jun kept his eyes on the king.

“I have no such wish,” he denied.

An elegant hand gestured dismissively. Silver rings caught in the ambient ghost light.

“Whatever the Mobei-Jun seeks in a gambling den, he must gamble to obtain.”

Mobei-Jun hesitated. He was not looking for prize or power. He was looking for Shang Qinghua. If Shang Qinghua was not here, then he had no reason to remain either. But ghosts gathered information from all over the world. Shang Qinghua had been gone for a week; more than enough time to draw some notice no matter where he went. If information on his whereabouts existed, then it was likely that the ghost king, of all people, would be able to procure it for him.

To bet, however…
“This Mobei-Jun wishes to know where he can find Shang Qinghua.”

The quiet felt full of anticipation. The ghost king contemplated his question, then nodded.

“And for this information, what would he wager?”

Far too many things, most likely.

“Two hundred silver,” he offered.

The ghost king laughed.

“What Mobei-Jun asks for is worth more to him than that.”

He gritted his teeth.

“Name it,” he demanded. He had no interest in being toyed with. If this chaotic specter was after something then it was better to simply know and have done with it. Bargaining had not availed him the last time they spoke either.

“A swift progression,” the ghost king noted. “From counted silver to ‘name your price’?”

Mobei-Jun did not rise to the bait.

A few silver butterflies drifted, like a taunt, from behind the red curtains. A flash of anger stole over him, cold and unyielding. Mobei-Jun turned to leave.

But then he felt something else.
Something that changed the sort of ice running through his veins.

The protection array placed upon Shang Qinghua’s talisman had activated. He felt the relevant token send out a trill of energy from his belt. The air around him froze, his claws extending as he held his breath and waited for the call.

‘My king’.

Shang Qinghua was in trouble.

He would call.

He could surely call for Mobei-Jun’s help.

Seconds dragged on. The token remained bright.

Whirling in reverse, he turned back to the ghost king’s dais.

“What is needed as a wager?” he demanded.

“In light of the urgency, it has gone up,” the notorious Crimson Rain informed him. “For Mobei-Jun to regain something so vital, he must wager something so vital. But it is amateur night, and we’re a jovial mood. Since the ice demon’s heart is already on the table, let it be that.”

His heart?

What did this fool ghost mean? His heart was in his chest, nowhere to be seen. There were plenty of other body parts arrayed across the tables.

“Of course, if we wait long enough there is a chance that the Mobei-Jun’s person will find his way here as a matter of course.”
“The wager. I’ll make it,” he snapped.

A ghostly woman with red-painted lips brought him the dice.

Mobei-Jun called his choice and viewed the rolls with detachment. So much rode upon them, and yet, he could not even contemplate failure. If his heart was torn from his chest, it would be the end of things anyway. If not, then he needed his focus and energy to protect Shang Qinghua. The click of the dice resounded through the crowded den. Eyes watched with keen interest, riveted by the situation. Some moments in life had the feeling of being part of a story. The sort that would doubtless play into larger tales; a leg on the hero’s journey, a stepping stone to the warrior’s ascension. A single verse of an epic told out of order and without context, and yet, still noteworthy as part of a larger song.

To those in the gambling den, such moments were not uncommon; but still worthy of regard.

Click, clack, click.

Mobei-Jun won.

"Care to make another wager?" the painted ghostly maiden asked.

“Pay out.”

He gathered that the ghost king’s irritation with him had not yet run its course when, instead of simply providing coordinates, he felt the world tilt and shift and spin itself around him again. Without the disorientation of being cursed and dying, he could more easily tell that he was being flung through the various layers of demonic, ghostly, and human realms. It was a less pleasant mode of transport than his portals, and left him reeling when it spat him back out onto a miserable dirt road.

He did not have much time to dwell on the ordeal. His boots kicked up a cloud of grit, but not enough to obscure the sight in front of him; three demons wrestled with a small, familiar figure.

Shang Qinghua’s sword had been knocked to the ground. One heavy-framed demon was sitting on it like a boulder. The other two were manhandling Shang Qinghua himself. One had hold of his arms and was evading the strikes of his legs. The other had a fist closed around Shang Qinghua’s
neck, throttling him with one hand while attempting to fit a gag over his mouth with the other.

Mobei-Jun understood why Shang Qinghua had not called for him.

With a gesture he sent a spear of ice straight through the demon who had dared to put his hand around his beloved’s throat.

Or at least, he meant to. He should have. But before the ice could skewer that filth into the dust it crashed against an unseen barrier and shattered like thin glass.

The demons startled.

The large one pinning Shang Qinghua’s sword cursed. So did the one gripping his hands, as his distracted glance over gave Shang Qinghua the opening to kick one of his legs out from beneath him. He fell, but kept hold of his captive’s arms and twisted them in retribution.

Shang Qinghua wrenched one wrist free and scrabbled at the fist on his throat.


He did not need ice to handle these demons. His qi flared and he could see the recognition in their eyes, the fear of those who knew they were facing something far beyond their league. A few tricks were nothing. Mobei-Jun charged through their deflection array himself, reached the nearest demon - the big one - and smashed a fist straight through his chest. Bones shattered, flesh erupted from the exit side of the wound in messy chunks, and blood smacked wetly onto the ground.

The other two demons hurried to use Shang Qinghua as a shield instead. They were not fast enough. Mobei-Jun was behind them before they could anticipate it.

The one who had choked Shang Qinghua’s voice off had a thin neck.

His kind were resilient. Snapping it did not kill him right away; instead it left him twitching on the ground, struggling to try and push the broken bones back into place. Mobei-Jun left him to suffer while he focused on tearing the arms off of the last remaining assailant.
Pathetic.

The cold of his fury pooled down around his claws and coated them in shards of ice. None of the other demons were dead but none of them would leave this place alive, either. Mobei-Jun would have killed them at a distance for the sake of freeing Shang Qinghua more quickly, but now that the moment had passed, he gave his viciousness free reign as he broke them into enough pieces to ensure they would not regenerate.

Their blood dripped from the icicles that elongated his claws. His fangs had unconsciously extended, and grazed his bottom lip as he drew in a few heavy breaths. The fight was nothing, but his heart was hammering as if it knew that Mobei-Jun had nearly lost it.

Shang Qinghua stood in place. Wide-eyed, curled in on himself.

There were bruises on his neck.

He regarded Mobei-Jun with what seemed to be stunned silence for a moment.

“My… my king…?” he eventually asked. Voice raspy.

Mobei-Jun shook his hands out. It cast the ice off of them, and the blood along with it.

“Shang Qinghua,” he growled.

The little human flinched.

“I’m sorry my king!” he blurted. “I’ve troubled you, I’m sorry! I tried to warn about the deflection array, I overheard them saying it would stop you if you came but they knew I could call for you and they had my throat and I couldn’t-”

Every word sounded painful.
Mobei-Jun couldn’t take it.

He closed the distance between them in three long strides, and then settled a hand at the back of Shang Qinghua’s neck. The human stilled as Mobei-Jun gently touched him and began to transfer a steady stream of his spiritual energy. It could not help heal, being demonic energy to a human, but it eased the cold of their contact and seemed to put a stop to some of the trembling which Shang Qinghua had been doing.

For a few moments neither of them spoke. Shang Qinghua’s raspy breaths felt like condemnation.

Mobei-Jun had been inadequate. He had not explained himself. He had frightened Shang Qinghua and so Shang Qinghua had perceived him as a danger and left, had walked into the hands of those who harmed him, and had suffered injuries for it.

Shang Qinghua did not like pain. But he had gone through it again.

“Qinghua,” he said. “Forgive me.”

The trembling figure in his arms froze. Wide eyes looked up at Mobei-Jun, full of surprise and confusion and something harder to place. Something that seemed like it might be good to see on its own, without the conflict of the other two marring it.

“W-what does my king m-”

Mobei-Jun did not hear the end of the question.

Shang Qinghua broke off with an inarticulate shout of warning, but too late. Something slammed into his back, crackling like fire. Mobei-Jun roared in pain and surprise and curled himself more firmly around Shang Qinghua, trying to shield him from the sudden explosion of malevolent energy that had collided with them. His ears rang. He moved to turn, to face his opponents, but there was a lurch inside of his body and instead of turned he felt his weight fall forward.

Shang Qinghua’s hands gripped at him. His voice seemed to call from beyond the crackling in his head, but it was drowned out.
Mobei-Jun fought to stay above the threatening tide of unconsciousness.

(Mobei-Jun failed.)

~

Consciousness returned slowly, in steadily increasing bursts of awareness that managed to push through the fog in his mind.

“-even one as powerful as these noble lord types, it will definitely be hours before he wakes up,” an unfamiliar voice was saying.

“It’d still be better if we could get some of those items off of him, his wounds have already closed… the ones on his back weren’t small either…” an equally unfamiliar voice replied, this one laced with more wariness.

“That’s Linguang-Jun’s problem if it’s anyone’s, by the time it could matter we’ll have already handed this parcel off.”

“And if he fails to dispose of his purchase? What do we do when this one comes looking to avenge himself later?”

“He didn’t even see our faces.”

“The human did.”

“Ah, well, if Linguang-Jun can’t kill a sniveling human like that, then you might have a point. But I think we can live with that bet.”
Mobei-Jun did not move. It was difficult to restrain himself, because his anger wanted to flash into the air around him and freeze everything solid as a cold snap. But he did not dare lose his one advantage so soon, not while his head was still spinning, and he could not take action without knowing where Shang Qinghua was first.

There would be time for anger later.

Mobei-Jun lay still and focused his attention inward. His wounds had indeed healed, but whatever weapon or attack had been used on him had left surges of unwelcome energy to throw his meridians out of alignment. Even if he had not overheard the name, he would have suspected his uncle’s involvement with this. This feeling was one he had encountered before; the golden demon clan, the demonic Jin family, had an ancestral weapon which was particularly effective of members of his lineage. It seized upon the weakness in a bloodline’s cultivation, like water seeping through cracks in stone, and tried to tear the target apart by increasing the natural disruptions to their equilibrium until their spiritual veins erupted.

Once, as a teenager - not too long after he had met Shang Qinghua, actually - he had seen the golden demons demonstrate the potency of their treasure in a show of power. They had made certain to let the blast from it graze him. Mobei-Jun had received reparations for the ‘accident’, but the pain had lingered for days and his cultivation had been set back.

This time he had taken a blast full-on, yet he felt far better than he had at that glancing blow.

He knew why. His chest tightened and he fought to keep his breathing even. Shang Qinghua. Shang Qinghua and his wedding gifts.

If anything had happened to him, Mobei-Jun would not stop at tearing his uncle apart. He would rip the golden demons to shreds as well for abetting this offense.

But fault also lay at his own door. He had frightened Shang Qinghua off. He had also let himself grow complacent, thinking his uncle more or less neutralized by an arranged marriage to an established noblewoman. His father still lived, however, and so the full inheritance had not been passed on. In the event of his death, his uncle still had a chance to win their rivalry. And he perhaps had whole new motivations to make such efforts.

When they were small, Mobei-Jun had trusted his uncle mindlessly. It had seen him abandoned and killed. He had trusted his father to look after him. His father had turned away and left him on his own as soon as permissible. He had learned the dangers of trust. But still, part of him could not help but long for a person who would accept Mobei-Jun’s trust and repay it with loyalty.
By a miracle, he had found such a person.

What worth did his uncle’s life have in the face of that? Mobei-Jun should have killed him. After so many years of learning this lesson over and over, he should have simply taken Linguang-Jun’s head and been done with it.

This time he would. This time-

“Wait, where’s the human?”

“What do you mean? He’s tied up over by the… huh.”

“Someone go find him! Now!”

“Relax, he can’t have gone far. The doors are sealed.”

“I’m activating the defense array.”

“Fine, fine, if it makes you feel better. Turn it on, fry the little weakling. You paranoid bastard.”

“Being paranoid is what’s kept us alive so far.”

A crackling surge of dark qi filled the air as some kind of array was activated.

And then the screaming began.

Shang Qinghua!

Mobei-Jun opened his eyes and surged upwards at once, ready for a fight. By the time his thoughts
caught up with the sounds and he realized it wasn’t his human he’d heard crying out, he had nearly staggered back off of his feet again. Black spots filled his vision, his body protested the sudden shift from prone to standing, but he ignored these things.

He was in a mid-sized chamber. Old, in obvious disrepair. It had indeed been sealed shut by the looks of things. For a second he thought the place had been lit by torches, but the flicker of firelight was instead coming from the pillars of undying flame that had erupted throughout the room. Each pillar seemed to have centered in one a demon mercenary. Mobei-Jun hurriedly looked to see if any of the screaming, burning figures was a familiar human, but he had barely begun to panic when a familiar figure rushed to his side.

“My king!” Shang Qinghua rasped. His hands clutched Mobei-Jun’s coat and dragged him back, closer to the far wall. “Stay away from it, don’t get close! I changed their array so it should only target them but if my king gets too near the flames could jump to him. Here, here, let’s go here…”

Screams nearly drowned out the words, but Shang Qinghua was close and Mobei-Jun’s attention had automatically riveted to him. He let himself be moved, too relieved to keep his legs from shaking slightly on every other step. Shang Qinghua frowned and patted at him, tugging until they were wedged into a far corner. The furthest they could reasonably get from the still-burning, screaming mercenaries.

There was a fresh bruise on Shang Qinghua’s face. Marks still on his neck. His hair had come loose and he was dirty and disheveled, his outer robe and his pouches had been taken away from him by someone, but he seemed whole. Mobei-Jun clutched him close.

“Shang Qinghua.”

“My king, my king, I’m so sorry, what are you doing here? How did you even find me? I couldn’t call out when there was trouble but I really was in trouble and I didn’t mean for things to go so badly, I was going to tell you where I was, I really was, it wasn’t my intention to take so long but I just had to find a good place to set up first because I didn’t want to call my king and have to call him again to a different place and maybe I was also nervous but - but - and it wasn’t as simple as I thought, I’m sorry I left without saying more please don’t be angry with me-”

“Qinghua.”

The stream of words halted. Wide eyes stared at him again as Mobei-Jun hugged Shang Qinghua to his chest and tried to fend off some of the excessive heat in the room. Sweat trickled down his
neck. The air felt too thick and heavy. After a moment Shang Qinghua squawked in alarm and fumbled around at Mobei-Jun’s belt. One of the carvings there gleamed and flared blue.

The air around them cooled significantly.

Shang Qinghua attempted to use his sleeve as a fan.

“Shit shit shit that thing hit you head-on, the attack, fuck, fuck that stupid fucking weapon what a stupid idea, does it hurt my king? Look at me, let me see your eyes…”

Mobei-Jun had not stopped looking at Shang Qinghua since he returned to his side. He only kept doing it, ignoring the needless instructions as he was frantically inspected.

Shang Qinghua’s hands were still patting at his face when the demon mercenaries finally finished burning. The columns of fire raged a few moments more, but apparently in the absence of any victims to keep consume them, whatever created them also began to put them away again. The flashes of unwelcome heat died down and the roar of fire quieted. The chamber went dark instead.

Piles of ash and bone littered the floor. The parts of the mercenaries which had not burned completely were left to smolder.

“Hold your breath around the ash my king, come on, come on…” Shang Qinghua advised. He patted Mobei-Juns chest and tugged at his arms. Mobei-Jun let him do as he pleased, let himself be led over to the sealed doors. Shang Qinghua stopped along the way and retrieved his sword from a scorched crate, and let out a breath of relief when he opened it to find the contents still intact. He retrieved his battered outer robe and belt and pouches, slinging all of it over one arm and then pulling Mobei-Jun along again with his free hand.

When they got to the doors Shang Qinghua hesitated, fiddling around with some things and then trying to prise them open with his sheathed sword. Mobei-Jun stopped him before he got far in that attempt and then used his fist to bash them down instead. The wood was not strong.

“Careful!” Shang Qinghua admonished. “My king is super strong of course, my king is the toughest, but that - that attack which hit him…”

It should have killed him.
Almost certainly it would have if not for the protections he had been gifted.

Mobei-Jun took stock of their surroundings, eyes keen for any more mercenaries. He would not make the same mistake twice. But the building they had been in appeared to be an old shrine, long divested of its tributes or statues, and beyond it there was only trees and wilderness. He could hear the distant sounds of a waterfall, and spotted a trampled site where the mercenaries had discarded their rubbish. It looked as though they had not been using this spot for very long. Judging by the amount of plants and the sky overhead, they were in the human world; so that fit.

This was probably only intended as an obscure location where exchanges could be made.

Chances were good his uncle was on his way, however, so they could not linger for very long.

Shang Qinghua looked even more ragged in the clear light of day. He was jumpy and battered, still wearing just inner robes and carrying the rest of his things while trying to see what had been done to Mobei-Jun. Mobei-Jun’s state was one he would recover from. Was Shang Qinghua not cold? They were in the open air and he did not have all of his clothes on…

Mobei-Jun took off his cloak, but it was mostly destroyed. The material all along the back had burnt off, leaving only a few scraps and the collar. He abandoned it to the ground and instead tugged Shang Qinghua’s outer robe from his arm and tried to put it on him instead.

“M-my king, what-? Okay, okay, wait, yes I see I’ll put it on. Seriously my king there’s no one else here, we just got out of a mercenary den I think I can be forgiven for not looking completely presentable…”

Shang Qinghua muttered but ultimately finished putting on the robe himself, and then his belt as well. He pushed his hair back from his face.

Mobei-Jun could not help but feel a conflicting rush of sentiments, the sight of Shang Qinghua’s bruises provoking anger while the sight of his hair loose provoked something altogether different. He looked vulnerable. This despite having just immolated an entire room full of mercenaries.

Such a force to be reckoned with…
Mobei-Jun fought the urge to touch his face.

Instead, while Shang Qinghua rifled through his pouches and mumbled about where he had put some medicine or other, Mobei-Jun knelt.

As soon as he went down the little human flailed in alarm.

“What?! My king! My king, does it hurt?!” he fretted. “Where does it hurt? Are my king’s legs broken? Here, here, lie back, I have some medicine I just need to find where the heck I put it…”

“Shang Qinghua.”

Mobei-Jun’s even voice gave the human a moment of pause. His expression turned more uncertain. Seeing him calm down a little, Mobei-Jun seized the opportunity.

“This Mobei-Jun apologizes.”

“What…?”

Wide, worried eyes stared uncomprehendingly at him.

“What could my king possibly have to apologize to me for…?” Shang Qinghua finally asked. His voice was still rasping, and he had to clear his throat and then cough after the question. He wavered just slightly on his feet. But he wasn’t truly unsteady, and Mobei-Jun had to resist the urge to touch him needlessly right then. It would presume too much and might undermine his apology.

“This Mobei-Jun meant no insult and no disrespect at Lord Luo’s wedding. Shang Qinghua’s value is immeasurable.” He paused, struggling to figure out what else to say. How else to say it. What did Shang Qinghua not know? Shen Qingqiu insisted that he did not know his worth, that he did not see his own beauty…

Mobei-Jun looked into his eyes.
“Shang Qinghua is… Qinghua is beautiful,” he said with utter conviction. He was unaccustomed to voicing such things, but he could. “Qinghua is very beautiful. The first time this Mobei-Jun laid eyes on him he was too young and inexperienced to recognize what he saw. But each day brings more revelations and Qinghua’s beauty becomes more apparent, his every action like a pearl of dew accentuating the artful geometry of a spider’s web. This Mobei-Jun has given his trust away unwisely before and has had it rewarded with dismissal. The thought that he has made Qinghua feel this as well is unbearable, even worse when Qinghua is the only one who has never betrayed this Mobei-Jun’s trust. Qinghua is free now and he may go where he pleases. But if he does not find this Mobei-Jun’s presence intolerable, then this Mobei-Jun would beg to go with him. To still be called by him. When Qinghua agreed to stay by this Mobei-Jun’s side he did not realize that it was for lack of good alternatives. He does not know as many things, he has no great wisdom or insight, only what is told to him. If Qinghua has a need, please speak it. Please permit this Mobei-Jun to regain his trust and prove his sincerity.”

That was many words.

Mobei-Jun was not certain if they were the right ones. But they were true, and he did not know if more would help.

Shang Qinghua looked stunned.

He opened his mouth. Then he closed it again. Then he started forward as if he meant to touch Mobei-Jun. Then he snatched himself back, and turned around in place. He jogged a short ways off, then gripped his hair with his hands and raced back. It was much like watching him when he was working and someone had told him information that ‘changed the game’ and he needed to ‘process this’. Mobei-Jun felt assured that Shen Qingqiu had been correct - somehow, Shang Qinghua had not recognized his own beauty.

“What,” the little human said, and then “my king!” and then “what?!” again, which was in-keeping with his rituals.

Mobei-Jun waited. The signal for processing completion had not been given.

After several minutes of this Shang Qinghua’s gaze snapped over towards him and he flailed.

“My king!”
There it was.

“Are you saying - is my king saying - but, you, you called me beautiful?!”

“Qinghua is beautiful,” he confirmed.

Shang Qinghua’s entire face was red. He was tugging on the loose ends of his hair. That was not a typical gesture, but then, usually his hair was up in a bun. Mobei-Jun stared at where the dark strands tangled around his fingers.

“Wha… so, so that’s why my king kissed me?!”

Mobei-Jun considered the question.

“Qinghua looked like precious treasure beneath the fireworks,” he explained. Hm. It was getting easier to say such things aloud.

Shang Qinghua made an odd noise and covered his face.

“Okay, okay, no, this is not - this can’t be right. Get up, my king, come on,” he decided, heading over and helping Mobei-Jun rise out of his kneeling position. Was his apology accepted, then? Shang Qinghua was still red-faced and flustered and patted at him oddly. “Clearly something’s up. Right? Did my king drink any weird beverages or ingest any odd-looking flowers or breathe in some funny incense…?”

“No,” Mobei-Jun said, affronted. He was not drugged!

“You just said several sentences, in a row, complimenting me!” Shang Qinghua snapped at him. “Either you’re drugged or I’m dreaming!”

“Neither,” he insisted. “I am explaining.”

“Explaining what? That you… you’re, you - my king - the most gorgeous man in the world, the
best, the most impossible, strong, noble - that somehow you have… have developed feelings for… for me? How could that be?”

Mobei-Jun stared at Shang Qinghua with incomprehension of his own.

“Well… What.

“Are you an impostor with bad information?”

“No, you can’t be, you wouldn’t have all these gifts I gave to my king…”

“But Mobei-Jun isn’t marrying me!”

“He’s marrying… you’re marrying… just, just someone else! Some demon from the south! Right?”

Mobei-Jun’s eyebrows steadily rose towards his hairline. He felt too shocked to even know how to respond to this level of absurdity.

“Why would my king marry me?” Shang Qinghua pressed. He was clutching the front of Mobei-Jun’s robe, but he did not seem to be aware of it. “I mean apart from the frankly ludicrous claim that he has feelings for me! How can Mobei-Jun have feelings for Shang Qinghua, that’s like the most unbelievable cheap and random plot twist of all time! No one would believe it! Mobei-Jun doting on and spoiling some pathetic ex-concubine with shitty cultivation and worse habits just the most annoying ‘oh I hope we don’t get too many scenes with him’ type side-character that people don’t even like because they never do people never like me so how would you like me when you’re a thousand times too good for… for…”
Shang Qinghua’s breath hitched. His rambling broke into something alarmingly near to a sob as Mobei-Jun settled a hand carefully on the back of his neck.

There were too many things Shang Qinghua did not know, and Mobei-Jun was not certain how the smartest person he had ever met had missed them. But somehow it did not seem wholly uncharacteristic either. His chest clenched with too much emotion, and it seemed to be afflicting the human far worse. His body was smaller. It was not good at holding large feelings in.

“Breathe,” he instructed.

Shang Qinghua breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth.

Several heartbeats passed. The white-knuckled grip at the front of Mobei-Jun’s robes loosened a fraction. He settled his free hand over top of one of Shang Qinghua’s.

“Qinghua does not have to marry me. The wedding can be canceled,” he said, quietly. If he didn’t know then he hadn’t agreed. The thought was painful, but it could not be left as some unwanted obligation or misunderstood arrangement.

A few stray tears tracked through the dust on Shang Qinghua’s cheeks.

“Does my king even know how much work I put into that wedding?” he demanded.

“Yes.”

“It was a lot!”

“Yes.”

“I thought I was planning it for my king and - and someone else! I thought I had to win over some haughty demon noble who was going to boss everyone around and feel threatened by me and try to use my king’s affections for their own gains!”
“No.”

“Apparently! Apparently not! No! Apparently I somehow got engaged to my dream man and didn’t know!”

“This Mobei-Jun is not a dream,” he said. And then, thinking on Shang Qinghua’s words, he went further. “Qinghua also is not unworthy. He is good. His life is not a story that must make sense to other people.”

“...Oh.”

“Mn.”

“Oh. Oh... huh. That’s... my king. My king, do you know, that’s actually very insightful?”

“A miracle,” Mobei-Jun wryly quipped.

Shang Qinghua laughed. The sound verged towards a hysterical giggle, but since it did not actually become one, it seemed preferable to the tears. Something in him began to gradually ease. He leaned more fully into Mobei-Jun’s touch and shifted his hands to pat his chest rather than clutch at his robes. It was a good change, but it also made Mobei-Jun aware that he probably required a healer.

So did Shang Qinghua. They were still standing outside of the mercenary hideout, and there was still a strong chance that his uncle would come this way. Part of Mobei-Jun was tempted to wait for him and kill him. But that would mean a fight, and he was not at his best, and did not want to risk Shang Qinghua being caught in the midst of that either.

So he pulled back just a little.

“We should leave... will Shang Qinghua return with me?” he asked.

Shang Qinghua nodded. He still seemed dazed.
“Okay,” he agreed.

Mobei-Jun’s relief alone could have provided the energy to open a portal back to the northern palace.

~

Shang Qinghua asked Mobei-Jun many times a day if he was certain that he still wished to marry him.

This did not bother Mobei-Jun. In one part, because when Shang Qinghua asked this question he also made it clear that he himself was still willing to go through with the wedding. He had resumed planning the event not long after they returned, although it seemed to be a matter of reflex in some part, and occasionally he would stop and be struck by some strange thought that would have him flustering or processing again and then running off. They were still working to gain a better understanding of what they respectively knew and did not know of each other.

In another part, the frequent requests for reassurance did not bother Mobei-Jun because they gave him the opportunity to practice informing Shang Qinghua of things that his human did not know.

It felt very novel to him.

“I still don’t understand why me, my king! You could have anyone!” Shang Qinghua would insist. Stubborn but vulnerable in a way he only truly seemed to be in Mobei-Jun's company.

“Mn. Qinghua is the best choice,” Mobei-Jun invariably assured him. This was easy - simply say something true.

“By what metric?!” was a common rebuttal.
“Tactical,” might be Mobei-Jun's answer one day.

“Oh I’m a tactical choice now? Yesterday I was the most beautiful person in the whole world!” Shang Qinghua would say, as he often referenced Mobei-Jun's previous reasons. This was good; it meant he remembered them and thought of them.

“That is also still true.” It always was still true - a benefit to honesty.

“My king, be serious!”

Mobei-Jun was not known for espousing humorous untruths, so he did not know why this accusation arose so often.

“Marrying Shang Qinghua will keep him by my side. Tactics.”

See? Always true, therefore always explicable.

“Gah! Fuck!”

Shang Qinghua often ran off at such points, red-faced and agitated, before inevitably coming back and looking at Mobei-Jun until Mobei-Jun kissed him.

At times he would often run away again once the kisses were done.

The running away was more bothersome than the questions. He was not accustomed to having Shang Qinghua flee his presence so often, but as he also always came back, there did not seem to be much to do except wait for this strange and prolonged processing to run its course. Mobei-Jun was at fault for this situation in many ways, of course. He had been too impatient and assumed too many understandings existed where they didn’t. He still did not entirely understand how this had all come to pass, but he was learning.

Shang Qinghua was powerful and wise. He was also human and weak. Few people had ever
appreciated him, and while that was in a way a boon for Mobei-Jun - because it meant that he
alone competed to win over Shang Qinghua’s heart - in more ways it was a problem, because even
Mobei-Jun had done a poor job of making his admiration explicit. This had injured Shang Qinghua,
had left peculiar flaws in his cultivation, gaps in his knowledge, and wounds in his spirit.

He did not know how to be loved.

He ran away because he was not accustomed to dealing with so many things he did not know,
probably. Mobei-Jun felt that perhaps he needed to leave to gain distance, to look and see what was
happening and then come back and claim what he wanted.

That he wanted kisses so often was an agreeable outcome. And when he did not flee, his courage
seemed to lend itself towards a very appealing type of boldness instead.

“My king,” Shang Qinghua’s voice summoned him up from his thoughts to where the human was
sitting at his desk. The light in the study had gotten low, and Shang Qinghua was stretching as he
usually did when he intended to finish working. His tone was light. “I think that’s about all we can
do for now. Shall we say goodnight?”

Shang Qinghua’s sleeves fell down his arms. The skin of his wrists was revealed. A stray lock of
hair had gotten free of the light ornaments he was wearing, and was almost grazing the side of his
neck. Mobei-Jun reached over, unthinking except for the profound urge to touch, and brushed it
aside. He stared at the spot where the skin of Shang Qinghua’s neck met the powder blue collar of
his inner robes. The material shifted as his betrothed swallowed.

Mobei-Jun forced his eyes back up to meet Shang Qinghua’s stare, only to find it hungrily fixated
on the open front of his own attire.

He smirked.

“Qinghua is beautiful.”

Shang Qinghua’s eyes snapped up. His cheeks flooded with colour.

“My king!” he whined. “You can’t do this to me, you can’t insist we wait until the wedding like
some prude and then say ‘Qinghua is beautiful’ while you undress me with your eyes! Do you
know how horny I’ve been? It’s terrible, even in this cold weather I keep getting too hot under the collar, you’re teasing me too much! I mean it's not too much or it wouldn't be if you actually followed through too! It's good but really. We could be having sex right now! Why aren’t we having sex right now?”

Mobei-Jun’s smirk widened.

He very much liked teasing Shang Qinghua, he had found. Even though it was ultimately teasing himself as well it was good - just so long as nothing between them became confused again. Waiting to have sex to him seemed pointless in and of itself. He wanted to do very many things to Shang Qinghua and with Shang Qinghua and have Shang Qinghua do things to him also. But there had been too many misunderstandings. Mobei-Jun feared that if they actually went through with something that held disrespectful connotations that Shang Qinghua would misunderstand again, even if the matter was clear to Mobei-Jun and ostensibly clear to him as well.

And the first time this had come up Shang Qinghua had said something along the lines of ‘I don’t even have a reputation to ruin’, which had led Mobei-Jun to believe that it would, indeed, be a disreputable thing to do.

But also… he absolutely enjoyed teasing Shang Qinghua. And the thought of riling him up enough that he needed to seek relief in his own hands, the thought of filling his mind with Mobei-Jun’s touch and voice and knowing he would use these recollections while writhing in his bed at night, was very appealing as well. He would not have guessed this about himself in the past. When he had given thought to sex it seemed as though being direct and efficient would be best.

Now that idea was almost laughable to him. He wanted to savour every moment, to see every facet of what existed between himself and Shang Qinghua. Nothing between them should end quickly except for misunderstandings.

He wanted to learn new things too.

With teasing care, Mobei-Jun brushed a claw down the side of Shang Qinghua’s neck.

“We will marry soon,” he consoled.

He liked saying that.
Shang Qinghua shivered and then pouted before batting his hand away in a fit of pique.

“Eight months is not ‘soon’!” he insisted.

“It is soon.”

“No, it’s an eternity! An eternity of frustration, my king! That’s what you are consigning me to!”

“Hm.”

“Don’t look so smug, ah! You’re getting off on this, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? Maybe you’re getting off on blue-ballng me?! My king! Come on! You better not do this sort of thing even after we’re married or I’ll die from deprivation. How is my ideal man this insufferable and merciless and mph-”

Shang Qinghua’s protests died as Mobei-Jun leaned in to kiss him. A soft little sound escaped his mouth when they came together and Mobei-Jun’s hand slipped towards his nape. His lips parted eagerly, yielding, the heat of his mouth so unexpectedly intoxicating, the sense of connection as Mobei-Jun passed him a portion of spiritual energy so potent it made his breath hitch. Shang Qinghua took his face into his own hands and greedily drank in more, turning one kiss into a succession while his thumbs pressed against the sensitive skin behind Mobei-Jun’s ears.

It took great effort to break away again.

“My king, I want your big thing in me!” Shang Qinghua implored in a seductive tone.

Mobei-Jun snorted.

“Not good? Oh come on! Lemme see, I’ve got more - let me ride your legendary icicle, cure the heat in my blood with your frosty manhood, get me a first class ticket to pound town, grease up the
His ridiculous human squawked a protest when Mobei-Jun broke into an actual laugh and pressed his face against that lovely neck.

“My king, come on, that tickles! Ah! I’m trying to be sexy here, you’re killing the mood!”

“Me?”

“Yes you! So cruel! Cruel northern tyrant Mobei-Jahhh!”

Shang Qinghua wriggled frantically when Mobei-Jun breathed a short burst of cold against his skin. A fist smacked the back of his shoulder, shivers and squirming delightful.

“Cold cold cold! Don’t bully me!”

Licking the same spot in apology got him the most delightful squeak in return. By the time he pulled back Shang Qinghua was thoroughly flustered, too much to even say silly things. A few more strands of hair had escaped their restraints, his breaths were uneven, and his eyes were bright and happy.

Mobei-Jun pulled back. He lifted Shang Qinghua’s hands and kissed each one.

“Goodnight,” he said.

He managed to get out of the study before Shang Qinghua’s thoughts caught up with the situation again.

“My king!” he whined after him. “Seriously?!”

Mobei-Jun smirked all the way back to his own rooms.
Drinking had always made his A-Jiu emotional. As they grew older he avoided it more and more assiduously, but in the early days he had been eager to try every sort of wine and fine drink that their new status could afford them. Secretly, Yue Qingyuan had always liked it when his husband got a little tipsy. Full blown drunkenness could be worrying, but with only a few cups in him, Shen Jiu’s cheeks would go pink and his countenance would soften, and he became more affectionate and prone to saying sweet things even without the cover of darkness to loosen his tongue.

But there was also the risk that he would turn maudlin. The last time Yue Qingyuan could remember his husband getting drunk was in their fourth year of marriage. After an argument between them - one Yue Qingyuan could no longer recall the substance of - he had gone out and gotten a box of confections that his husband was partial to. When he returned, tail between his legs, he had found Shen Jiu sitting in his chambers with an empty jar of wine beside him and tear tracks running down his face.

The distress he’d felt in that moment had been palpable.

Shen Jiu was many things. He was sharp and acerbic, intelligent, judgmental, stubborn, aloof… even when he was emotional, he was more prone to insults and anger than tears or despair. To come back to him after a fight and find him crying was awful. Yue Qingyuan had gone to his husband and wrapped his arms around him, apology gift all but forgotten, guilt so heavy in his chest that he could scarcely breathe. Had his husband been sober, he had no doubt that the gesture would have been met with hisses and reproach, sharp nails digging into his back or his arm, watery eyes glaring at him in defiance; as if challenging him to comment on the display of weakness.

But drunk, Shen Jiu’s reaction was different. He still glared. But he also wept harder, and clutched at Yue Qingyuan as if he was afraid that something might carry him away otherwise. The alcohol made him babble, inspired half-broken apologies and soft pleas for forgiveness to spill out of him. It was incoherent nonsense, but that didn’t make it any less wrenching.
Even though his face was different, Yue Qingyuan discovered that the awful feeling was still the same when he saw Shen Jiu’s eyes begin to grow suspiciously wet as he sat in the rundown little way house they’d managed to procure. If A-Jiu cried right then, in front of an entire contingent of demons and a pair of unfamiliar hirelings, in the midst of this ambitious venture of his own design…

Hurriedly, Yue Qingyuan moved to comfort and appease his husband’s reincarnation.

_Don’t cry, don’t cry_, he thought desperately, as he promised that everyone could absolutely eat sticky rice. This Shen Jiu’s eyes were much bigger than the last, and his features more delicate; so the overall effect of his woebegone expression was wholly devastating. Yue Qingyuan wanted to demand that everyone else leave the room, and had to bite his tongue to keep from doing so. He wasn’t a lord here - he was in disguise, not a soul had any reason to listen to him, and certainly none of these demons seemed willing to leave him alone in the same room as their young master. But for one wild, irrational moment, he considered enforcing the demand through sheer physical might. He was strong. He could _throw_ them all out, and then not another soul would witness Shen Jiu loosing his composure.

Fortunately, he managed to retain his wits and better judgement.

Shen Jiu didn’t cry. The woebegone expression eased somewhat, although he still looked like he was on the verge of upset when he banished everyone except for the demon he called ‘Snow Bug’.

Leaving as requested was both very difficult and something of a relief for Yue Qingyuan. As he moved to go, something caught his eye.

A piece of paper was lying by the door to the little side room where Shen Jiu had rested.

It hadn’t been there before. Most likely, it had fallen from one of Shen Jiu’s pockets or pouches when he’d asked Yue Qingyuan to fetch him some water.

Yue Qingyuan quickly bent and picked it up, worried that it might be something important, and desperate to keep his hands busy so that they wouldn’t reach out to Shen Jiu. Without much thought he glanced at the page as he left the room; when he realized it was a sketch, rather than something with writing on it, he paused outside the exit and looked again.

The style of the drawing was painfully familiar. He knew at once that Shen Jiu had drawn it. He’d
seen countless portraits of himself done in the same style, with the same confident strokes and that
distinct, hard-to-place quality of an individual artist. Back when they had been newlyweds, Shen
Jiu had drawn Yue Qingyuan’s portrait on many of his fans, and had used him as a test subject for
a great deal of his ‘practice drawings’. With a pang of nostalgia, Yue Qingyuan could suddenly
envision Shen Jiu’s old rooms at the estate again. He could smell the scent of his favourite incense
and feel the texture of his silk cushions under one hand. Hear the distant sound of birdsong and the
gentle movements of ink across paper.

He chased the recollection away before it could distract him too badly.

This sketch wasn’t a portrait of him, anyway. To his relief - a relief he dared not examine too
critically - it wasn’t of any other man, either. Instead it was of an infant. Sleeping, as though the
artist had seized the opportunity to draw their subject during one of the few times when it wouldn’t
be moving around too much. The baby was cute, as most babies of course were, and the portrait
was framed with doodles of dogs and birds and flowering vines.

Why was Shen Jiu carrying around a sketch of a baby and some puppies? Especially on a trip like
this, when everything he brought was most likely to have been deliberately chosen?

Shaking his head a little at the mystery, Yue Qingyuan refolded the paper along its existing creases
and put the sketch into one of his own pockets. He’d return it once he had a moment to speak with
Shen Jiu again properly. A glance back through the doorway let his eyes linger on the younger
man for a moment. Shen Jiu sat at the table with the ice demon taking up position beside him. But
then someone nudged Yue Qingyuan’s shoulder, hard, and he found himself ushered away from
the scene.

It was one of the fire demons who had nudged him. Huo-something-or-other. He was glaring.

Probably still offended about the argument that Yue Qingyuan had given him over who ought to
ride with Shen Jiu’s unconscious form, back when they’d had to flee the scene of the battle with
the bone wolves. Yue Qingyuan could admit, diplomacy had failed him as soon as Shen Jiu had
lost consciousness. For one terrible moment he had feared that his reincarnated husband was dead
again and had nearly panicked.

“Don’t linger around,” The fire demon warned him. “You aren’t being paid to stick your nose
where it isn’t welcome.”

Yue Qingyuan gave him a measured look in return.
“Of course,” he agreed. But his tone was anything but deferential, and he didn’t move too far from the doorway to the little guest house.

Despite Shen Jiu’s inebriated insistence on everyone ‘going to rest’, it really was around about midday, and too early for sleep. Besides which, the house wasn’t actually big enough to shelter their entire party. The village they’d reached was small and impoverished, and didn’t have many empty buildings to spare. Certainly no inn. The people were also not eager to share their homes with strangers - and given where they lived, Yue Qingyuan couldn’t blame them. So, tents had been set up. As useful as they would be come nightfall, they didn’t exactly provide any allure of comfort or desire to linger.

Yue Qingyuan was fully prepared to wait by the house’s door until Shen Jiu had recovered enough of his wits to call for someone other than that ice demon again. But the fire demon seemed equally determined to chase him off, and many of the other demons whom Shen Jiu had brought along were giving him suspicious looks and lingering conspicuously as well.

Yue Qingyuan knew how to recognize protectiveness. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of the sight of demons demonstrating it towards his… towards their young master, though. It didn’t fit in his mind. Perhaps that was foolish. If Luo Binghe was anything then he was certainly protective - and while part of Yue Qingyuan had naturally assumed him to be a bad example of a typical demon in surely some regards, given his mixed heritage and upbringing, that might have been foolish.

Still.

It struck him all at once that very few people had cared to afford Shen Jiu the courtesy of protection. In his past life anyway. Few enough that seeing him treated with such obvious favour and deference was disconcerting. Even at the height of Yue Qingyuan’s power, when Shen Qingqiu had been his sole, entirely favoured husband, their own household servants still hadn’t treated him like this. Like… like a prince of sorts, really.

Yue Qingyuan wasn’t sure how to feel about that realization, nor all that it implied.

In the end his conflicting sentiments finally propelled his steps away from the way house. Eyes followed him as he made his way into the other parts of the village, until he had passed several of the square, dingy houses, and was gone from their sight.
His heart was ill at ease over this entire venture.

Yue Qingyuan had never been one to spend much time in the borderlands. It was a forsaken place; most cultivators who frequented the area were on the lower end of the social ladder, since there were few stable resources and support was often difficult to find. Nighthunting and jobs in more stable, habitable areas were much wiser pursuits. Of course, not everyone was welcome in the loftier cultivation circles, and there were many restrictions on who was permitted what work and the rewards associated with it. Those without connections, or fugitives with tarnished names, had to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

The village they were in had probably been established by people like that. Convicts, escapees, runaway slaves, debtors, inconvenient bastards, and cultivators of ill repute. In a life following a slightly different route Yue Qingyuan himself might have grown up in a place like this.

Examining the narrow dirt roads revealed strange patterns in the ground. Remnants of some old ritual that someone had once performed. The houses, too, were very particularly placed, with deliberate patterns carved into the doors, and high, rotting walls around the communal garden plots. The plants which grew there were rough and strange-looking, but also tall, and apparently healthy.

A lot of open field was cleared between the village and the nearby woodland. It wasn’t farmland. At a guess, Yue Qingyuan supposed it was more of a defence measure. The village wasn’t hard to spot, but then, short of building the houses in the trees, it probably never would have been. The open ground at least ensured that it was easy for lookouts to spot anyone approaching as well. When they had arrived last night, armed villagers had been ready to greet them. Lanterns had been lit, and Yue Qingyuan had spied archers among the ‘welcome wagon’. If their party had been truly dangerous, it wouldn’t have been enough to match them. But for the stray things that might wander out of the wilderness in a place like this it seemed to be sufficient; along with whatever old protections were laid around the area itself.

It took so much just to make this one little patch of land habitable. Shen Jiu wanted to try and build an entire road through the borderlands. Not just the road itself, either, but buildings along it as well. A thriving route of commerce. It beggared belief.

Yue Qingyuan didn’t know if he was more impressed or terrified.

He was almost furious that Luo Binghe and the other Shen Qingqiu had permitted such a notion to become more than a mere fancy. How could they endorse this sort of venture? A matter that seemed like nothing less than a deadly dangerous fool’s errand?
But the more he thought about it, the more he began to seriously ask himself that question. Why would they endorse this venture? It wasn’t as if they were indifferent to Shen Jiu’s safety. If they were or ever had been, there would have been easier ways to cast him aside long before this, and Yue Qingyuan didn’t believe that either the current Shen Qingqiu or Luo Binghe were putting on an act when they’d made it clear to him that they intended to look out for Shen Jiu’s best interests.

This venture into the borderlands was dangerous. But then again, the cultivation world itself was not the safest path for anyone to walk. Yue Qingyuan couldn’t imagine any version of Shen Jiu eschewing it in exchange for safety. Even when he’d had the opportunity to simply live as Yue Qingyuan’s husband, to be looked after and cared for without having to lift a finger, he had determinedly kept on striving to improve his cultivation.

And he hadn’t been wrong to, Yue Qingyuan thought despairingly. When they had first been reunited, he had promised to support A-Jiu in whatever path he chose to take. But in the end, after they had gotten married, Shen Jiu had never really pursued anything at all that wasn’t related to being a ‘worthy’ husband for Yue Qingyuan. Even his cultivation - for all that it was Shen Jiu’s own - played a role in that. Or else how would they have been able to spend untold years living together? How would Shen Jiu have been able to venture out into the world alongside his lord?

Not that they managed to spend ‘untold’ years together anyway.

Just… ten.

Yue Qingyuan felt a familiar bleakness close around his heart, and had to take a moment to keep from sinking into grief and despair.

No, despite his promises, he had never actually given Shen Jiu the support he needed to have his own life. Instead, he had let his husband build everything atop the foundation of their marriage, the identity of ‘Yue Qingyuan’s husband’. It wasn’t something he intended to do. Somewhere along the way he had lost sight of A-Jiu as a person who existed beyond their marriage; and yet, he had also managed to blind himself to its importance not only to himself, but to Shen Jiu’s life and prospects. He had wanted to provide Shen Jiu with comfort and safety and support, and instead had given him none of those things. Just material goods and hollow promises.

Shen Jiu was probably better off having prospects of his own to fall back on.

Was that the goal, then? To let Shen Jiu build something truly impressive for himself, to support him by supporting his ventures, rather than protect him by shielding him from the world?
Yue Qingyuan felt anxious and exposed as he stared out towards the dull, grey sky.

*But it’s still too dangerous,* he couldn’t help but think. When Shen Jiu had fallen to the ground after the fight with the wolves…

His breaths came shorter. Closing his eyes, Yue Qingyuan retreated further into the shadow of one of the square village houses and focused his attention inward. He felt lightheaded, and his fear was twisting him up inside. He had concocted this scheme to join in Shen Jiu’s venture in part to keep him safe, yes, but at the outset, that hadn’t been his main reason. Shen Qingqiu’s revelation was still at the forefront of his thoughts, and while there was a lot to take in about it, one of the more mundane (yet pressing) issues was the matter of his relationship to the reincarnated Shen Jiu.

He’d behaved foolishly. As a person of power and influence, *of course* he couldn’t simply approach the Young Master Shen however he pleased and expect it to have no consequences or implications. If he’d been thinking more clearly, he would have realized that straight away. Any interaction that they had was bound to be influenced by their relative stations and also history - though how they perceived that history was also, of course, different.

There was no way for Lord Yue to simply keep Young Master Shen’s company.

But he… he had *missed him.*

Yue Qingyuan had missed Shen Jiu for so long, he had almost forgotten what it was like to live without the ache of it. He had gone through so many iterations of this sorrow; missing Shen Jiu while he was still married to the other Shen Qingqiu, missing Shen Jiu when he thought he had left him, missing Shen Jiu while feeling an inexplicable - and inappropriate - pull towards his ‘ex-husband’s apprentice’, missing Shen Jiu when he realized his true husband had died by his unwitting hand. Missing the man he had grown up with, the person he had loved so fiercely, seeing him everywhere and nowhere and knowing that what they had once had was gone forever. With no one else to blame for destroying it but himself. Sometimes the memories of the actual good days felt like a dream. How could he have ever truly had that?

The chance to interact with Shen Jiu as himself again, to simply be in his company and offer his support as someone who carried none of the problematic associations of ‘Lord Yue’, was too tempting for him to let it pass by.

So. He had concocted this scheme. This deception, this potentially grave breach of trust.
In all honesty, Yue Qingyuan hadn’t been sure if it was actually a good idea or merely a selfish one until the bone wolves had attacked.

But after that it didn’t matter, because there was no chance he could leave until the situation was much more secure. If nothing else, no matter the outcome of whatever was or wasn’t between them, no matter the convoluted realities of the situation - if nothing else, Shen Jiu deserved to have success in this life. He deserved to live well and be safe and happy. Truly happy.

Yue Qingyuan would give everything and anything to make certain that happened.

If that meant somehow taming even a place as daunting and unpredictable as the borderlands, then so be it.

He couldn’t exactly deny that having such an accomplishment to his name would guarantee Shen Jiu all manner of successes going forward. In fact, if he presented the matter to the emperor appropriately, it might even grant him an actual lordship - a title and rights. Real ones, not just whatever scraps of influence he could hold among the demonic rabble that served Luo Binghe. Yue Qingyuan might even suggest that his old estate be granted to the newly minted nobleman. It would be fitting, he supposed; he had promised Shen Jiu once that the estate would be his home.

Considering all the promises he had broken, and how catastrophic that had turned out to be, the possibility of making amends on at least one was desperately appealing.

Yue Qingyuan brooded in the niche next to the village house for a while, until some of the demonic members of their contingent started passing him by with suspicious looks again. Then he left, making his way idly down the road instead. Not too many villagers were out and about; doubtless wary of all the strangers. He had no desire to venture far, but he had already incurred a certain amount of distrust by hovering so insistently close when A-Jiu collapsed, and he could concede that keeping too near might cause more problems than it solved.

For the time being, at least.

There wasn’t much to see and there wasn’t much to do. After a while, he came across some of the other human members of their group. One of the freelance cultivators - Xie Lian - was making good on his earlier suggestion, it seemed, and trying to talk to the villagers.
The locals’ reluctance was obvious, but Xie Lian did not have an intimidating countenance. He looked young - Yue Qingyuan highly doubted he was, but he looked it - and unlike most everyone else in the group, wasn’t armed. One of the demons must have found him some sticky rice, because he was munching on a bowl of it as he chatted with some of the older village women. The women were indulging him, albeit with wary reluctance. It seemed as though they were gradually thawing, so after a moment, Yue Qingyuan decided to leave Xie Lian to it; his presence might only set matters back and make the villagers clam up again.

After some more wandering he found the other human freelancer, the older woman who just went by ‘Auntie’, helping to set up their tents in one of the nearby fields. She glanced at Yue Qingyuan for a moment before swiftly conscripting him to assist. Having never set up any tents of this sort before, he wasn’t sure how useful he managed to make himself, but following instructions at least didn’t require any particular skill or imagination. And it kept the suspicious looks to a minimum to have a task at hand.

They paused to eat, and that was about all the restraint Yue Qingyuan could manage before he gravitated back towards the little village guest house again.

Shen Jiu and the ice demon still hadn’t emerged. Fighting back the urge to hurry in and check on things, Yue Qingyuan instead forced himself to remain outside. Shen Jiu’s demon servant - the clumsy one that had poisoned him - came and went, still so cowed and deferential after the earlier mishap that the miserable creature was one of the few demons that didn’t glare suspiciously at him.

Evening came.

The sky turned from murky grey to a strange, hazy purple. Odd lights danced in the distance. The nearby fields took on an eerie countenance. The few villagers who had ventured out went back to their homes, locked their doors and shuttered their windows. The demons in the contingent fell quiet and watchful.

Yue Qingyuan settled in to keep his own watch outside the guest house. At some point, the ice demon finally emerged to go confer with a few of the others, closer to their makeshift camp. He gave Yue Qingyuan a cold look as he passed.

At some point after that, the back door of the guest house opened.

The sky was nearly all dark by then. Shen Jiu ventured out quietly; so quietly that if Yue Qingyuan hadn’t been leaning in the particular spot he’d chosen, he probably wouldn’t have even noticed. But as it stood, he had a clear line of sight to both doors in and out of the house. He could see as
Shen Jiu ran a hand down his face, and turned his still-flushed cheeks up to look at the moon. Which was full, and framed by a red halo. The darkness around him seemed deep and thick with potential dangers.

Shen Jiu looked very small and human. Painfully familiar, and yet, utterly strange as well.

His face was not the face that Yue Qingyuan remembered falling in love with. He was not the tall, stern figure who could seem so unyielding at times. The sharpness of his features looked different in this body. But they way his wrist moved when he fanned himself was the same, and the way his mouth twisted in irritation was too.

Yue Qingyuan expected to stay there and watch for however long Shen Jiu deigned to get some fresh air.

He did not expect the younger man to turn and - after just a few minutes - move over to where he was.

He hadn’t even thought that his own presence had been noted. Somehow, he had almost imagined himself invisible; a distant observer, disconnected from the scene he was witnessing. But with a single move, that illusion shattered.

“You should be resting,” Shen Jiu said. He seemed perilously close to petulance, which told Yue Qingyuan all he needed to know about his level of sobriety. The poison still hadn’t worn off yet, then.

A placating smile found its way onto his face as a matter of course.

“This spot is quite restful,” he replied. Glancing up, he motioned towards the moon. “The sky over the borderlands is very strange.”

Shen Jiu huffed and fanned himself. The fan was familiar. With a lurch of his heart, Yue Qingyuan realized it was one of the ones he had sent as a gift. The mother-of-pearl guards were nearly too flashy, but the delicately painted seascape had been too beautiful to pass up. A pearl charm had been hung from the handle at some point.

“What’s strange about the sky?” Shen Jiu asked.
Yue Qingyuan blinked.

“It is… heavy,” he described. “The richness of the purple night air is unusual, and there is a blood ring around the moon?”

Again, Shen Jiu scoffed.

“That’s not strange. Most nights look like this in the demon realms, if the weather is good,” he countered.

Yue Qingyuan inclined his head.

“Ah. Young Master Shen will have to forgive this servant, he has not ventured to that place often, and not for many years now. He has rarely looked upon its sky.”

Shen Jiu’s eyes narrowed.

“I guess the sky doesn’t usually look like this on the other side,” he conceded. “I never really thought about it. The borderlands must be borrowing a view of the demon realm’s moon. I wonder if the storm clouds would look the same as well…?”

He trailed off.

Awkward silence descended between them for several moments.

Yue Qingyuan recollected the folded paper in his inside pocket.

Soft crinkling broke the awkward silence as he pulled it out and handed it over.

“Forge this servant's presumption. He found this lying on the floor of the guest house. It seemed as if it might be important, but there wasn’t a good moment to return it before now,” he explained.
Shen Jiu blinked at the paper in confusion. Then, as recognition seemed to hit, he hastily snatched it back. His fingers bent a corner. With a soft curse he pressed it against the nearby wall and smoothed it flat again before glancing self-consciously at Yue Qingyuan.

“It’s not important,” he said, despite his actions conveying the very opposite sentiment.

Yue Qingyuan’s lips twitched.

“It is a skillful drawing,” he complimented.

The flush in Shen Jiu’s cheeks darkened.

“Did Master Shen sketch it?”

“. . .Yes,” he admitted, as he finally became satisfied that he had fixed the corner. With a soft huff he unfolded the paper again, revealing the images on it to the bright moonlight. Some part of Yue Qingyuan’s mind half expected it to have changed without his noticing, as if he had somehow misinterpreted the subject of the sketch the first time. But it was still a drawing of a little baby and a bunch of puppies. Even in the dark he could make out that much.

Such cute and frivolous things were not art subjects he had ever known his A-Jiu to take on in his last life. Like an echo he could almost hear his memory of his husband scoffing. The Shen Jiu he knew painted landscapes, weaponry, and monsters. He embroidered symbolic things and rendered into art only subjects which had some importance or depth of meaning that could be readily explained. Preferably with an edge of condescension aimed towards anyone who asked.

“This is my master’s child,” Shen Jiu explained. No condescension. Just some small defensiveness. “Fruit Baby.”

“Fruit Baby?” Yue Qingyuan raised an eyebrow.

“She came from a fruit,” the younger man huffed. “And she’s just a baby now, so it fits to call her that. She’s Lord Luo’s heir and my Shen family’s child. Neither the Luo nor Shen families are big, so any expanding is important. But she’s so little. I’m going to be away for a long time and babies
don’t remember things very well, she’ll have probably forgotten my face by the time I get back…”

Shen Jiu sniffed.

Alarm bells began to blare in Yue Qingyuan’s head. Was he going to cry? Why would he cry? Because... the baby might forget him?

The baby whose image he had brought along for this trip?

“She surely won’t forget,” he consoled.

Fruit Baby. Luo Binghe’s child. And Shen Qingqiu’s as well. Yue Qingyuan suddenly felt very strange as he stared at Shen Jiu holding the drawing he’d done. That child… even though Shen Jiu had vacated Shen Qingqiu’s body, in a very roundabout way, that child was also his. It was Shen Qingqiu’s child. The baby which Yue Qingyuan had never given his husband… was still not A-Jiu’s, because Shen Qingqiu had become a different man and Shen Jiu had been reborn to a new life.

Did some part of him know? Deep deep down, past his conscious mind? Did some part of him feel as though this child was strongly connected to him?

Shen Jiu’s sniffles turned to scoffs.

“Of course she’ll forget,” he insisted stubbornly, before refolding the sketch and putting it into one of his own pockets. “She’s just a baby. She can’t help it. Maybe some part of her will remember my voice or something but the longer I’m away for, the less right I have to expect her to recollect me. I knew that when I started this venture. I’m not some fool who believes in mystical connections between people. But that’s alright. When I can get back I’ll remind her of who I am, and if this all works then one day she’ll be able to travel as she pleases from one world to another on safe roads that her own kin built.”

Resolutely, Shen Jiu nodded.

“One day Fruit Baby will be a demon sovereign, but I’ll still be human. It’ll be better if relations between the worlds are improved. For now, while she’s a baby, it’s not such a big deal if she forgets about me. It would matter more if she forgot about me once she’s grown up…”
Shen Jiu shifted self-consciously. He shrugged, and then glared. His usual filters still seemed to have gone far away for a while, there was no veneer of charm or sociability to soften his contrary manner.

“Not that it’s why I’m doing this or anything,” he insisted. “Don’t think I’m so sentimental. It’s just another good benefit of my own success. I’m going to make a lot of money on this venture!”

“...Ah,” Yue Qingyuan helplessly replied.

An aching sense of loss bit deep into his bones. It kept him frozen even as Shen Jiu started to move towards him. A sharp finger jabbed his arm.

“Don’t think I’m so sentimental,” the younger man insisted again.

*But A-Jiu is, he could only think. A-Jiu really is… so sentimental…*

It was such a force of effort to stop himself from reaching out and gently taking the hand that had jabbed him that Yue Qingyuan felt as if he had stepped out of reality for a moment. He wanted to take Shen Jiu’s hand so badly. He wanted to drop to his knees and apologize. He wanted to pull him close and hold him in his arms, and that was the worst of it, the most impermissible. He had lost any such right to reach for anything from this person long ago. A better man would have stopped himself from wanting. But he was not a better man.

The sharp finger jabbed at him again.

Yue Qingyuan didn’t notice that the flush of Shen Jiu’s cheeks was perhaps too dark for embarrassment. He didn’t notice the way his stance wavered for a moment.

He noticed when Shen Jiu moved to step back and tumbled sideways instead.
A startled call stuck in his throat. He reached out, acting on instinct, and caught the younger man before he could fall. The night air was quite cool, but Shen Jiu’s skin felt disturbingly warm even through the layers of his clothes.

“Shut up,” he murmured dazedly. “M’not…”

“A-Jiu, does it hurt?” Yue Qingyuan asked even as he pressed fingers to his pulse in order to check for himself. Shen Jiu’s heart was beating erratically, and his spiritual pathways seemed disturbed.

“Hot.” Shen Jiu managed to convey. That much was obvious. Yue Qingyuan was about to transfer some spiritual energy to help when Shen Jiu’s throat began to close up. He started to struggle, reflexive alarm bringing one hand up to the gentle touch on his neck while the other clutched at Yue Qingyuan’s bicep. It was clear he was having a bad reaction, either to the demonic poison he was exposed to earlier or maybe to some food or drink that had worsened it. Yue Qingyuan quickly began the transfer, clutching Shen Jiu close and trying to hold him steady but the energy from his fingertips couldn’t move fast enough.

Shen Jiu was circulating his own qi but sluggishly, the fire in his system impeding his focus.

With a soft apology, Yue Qingyuan leaned in and pressed their lips together.

It was as chaste a moment of contact as he could manage. But lip-to-lip was one of the quickest and most effective ways to transfer spiritual energy, particularly to someone who was at risk of losing air. When Yue Qingyuan coaxed Shen Jiu’s lips apart it was only to breathe a soft puff of air - infused with his own spiritual energy - into his mouth. To help open his throat while he gently passed energy to help calm the burning reaction to the poison in his system.

Shen Jiu’s grip on his arm remained tight. But he stopped struggling.

Good. Once his breathing was stable again, then they-

Something crashed into Yue Qingyuan’s side with the force of a demon bull.

“Da-ge!”
Yue Qingyuan’s reflexes worked faster than his thoughts. He kept hold of Shen Jiu and moved defensively around him, using the momentum of the blow to let them both gain further ground from their attacker rather than trying to hold his ground. To keep from losing his grasp of Shen Jiu he smoothly transitioned from clutching him to carrying him, sweeping his legs up and breaking off the main spiritual energy transfer point by necessity. The open air felt cold on his mouth. He kept on transferring what he could through his fingertips and narrowed his focus onto their attacker, even as he landed several feet away.

One of the fire demons had turned up. The male one. His eyes were sparking red with anger. A halo of flames began to form around him.

“*Put him down!*” the fire demon snarled.

“He’s—” Yue Qingyuan began, but he didn’t get much of a chance to finish before the fire demon charged again.

With a curse he leaped backwards, maintaining distance. A-Jiu was already overheated, and all of Yue Qingyuan’s instincts screamed at him to protect him from their demonic assailant.

“Huo-di,” Shen Jiu coughed, before his throat closed up again.

“Hold on! Huo-di is coming, Da-ge!!!”

Shen Jiu motioned angrily but Yue Qingyuan could only read this gesture as distaste for the sudden rush of heat that had filled up the air. Part of his mind pointed out that this fire demon was part of Shen Jiu’s entourage, that they were clearly on good terms, and that it would be best to resolve the situation diplomatically. But the urgent need to get Shen Jiu away from all that heat overruled everything else, and besides which, the fire demon didn’t seem to be interested in listening to Yue Qingyuan. So he took half a second to make up his mind and then he turned on his heel, and sped off to gain even more ground.

“Come back and die you bastard!!! Pervert!!! Rapist!!!” the dire demon shouted. Yue Qingyuan naturally did not oblige him. Rather than another taunt, however, the fire demon proceeded to let loose a kind of shrill, urgent-sounding whistle.

Yue Qingyuan’s senses picked up on something just in time for him to dodge out of the way. A silver blade caught the moonlight.
The second fire demon, the woman, had come.

Unlike the male one, the only thing sparking on her was the gold of her eyes. She was silent as she sent her blade spinning in a deadly arc. Yue Qingyuan was taken aback; he’d never seen demons use these kinds of swordsmanship techniques before. This was the sort of thing he would have expected from fighting other cultivators instead. But he adapted quickly, and when the demon moved to trap him between her arcing sword and her own body, he anticipated it and evaded.

Her clawed hand swung wide of him. A blast of qi from him knocked her back - but not off of her feet. It nevertheless bought Yue Qingyuan enough time to redirect himself, and then to avoid being trapped by a wall of summoned flames.

The flames were lively. They also gave chase, leaping and looping over themselves. Some of the dry, stringy plants nearby lit up.

Without thought, Yue Qingyuan began to lead the demons away from the village. The instincts of countless battles guided him while most of his focus remained divided between dodging attacks and transferring energy to Shen Jiu. Once Shen Jiu’s condition was no longer so dire and his ability to speak returned to him, then he could-

His few attempts to coherently plan were distracted by the sword that tried to drive him into the path of the fires again. With a gesture he drew his spare sword and used it to deflect, before calling it back and leaping onto it. Shen Jiu’s grip on him tightened painfully.

“Stop,” he said.

“Once it’s safe,” Yue Qingyuan promised.

He flew upwards. Distance, they just needed distance from all that heat…

And then very abruptly, ‘heat’ was the least of his worries.

The thin wall of ice shot up from the ground and forced him to veer upwards in order to avoid colliding with it. The angle was too steep; Yue Qingyuan’s sword flew out from under him, leaving
him to freefall. He flipped in the air, wind whipping around his hair and robes, tugging at A-Jiu until he could call the sword back under him. They hadn't gotten high enough to afford a long drop, and the detour forced Yue Qingyuan to speed back down the same route they came by in order to recover.

The end of a blunt weapon swung at his head.

Yue Qingyuan ducked, channeled some spare energy into his left arm, and struck out with force that would have been sufficient to break the ribs of most demons or any but the strongest cultivators.

His arm struck its target only to find a shocking lack of give. Pain lanced up the limb. The bones in his forearm broke.

Putting aside the sensation he moved Shen Jiu’s weight more firmly to a one-armed hold and dodged backwards.

The ice demon had shown up.

He looked different.

Although he was still wearing the same clothing as before, the odd pieces of shell that had seemed to adorn his skin had grown, such that he was actually difficult to recognize at a glance. But the clothing of course was telling, as was the heavy mace he carried, and the sense of cold he gave off was unmistakable. It was the shell that had caused the problem, Yue Qingyuan realized all at once; the demon had somehow grown it across his body to form armour. Armour so cold that it made the air around it waver, even next to the heat of the fire demon’s lively flames. Armour so strong that he had taken Yue Qingyuan's strike and hadn't even been knocked back. All of his skin looked to be covered, so only his hair and eyes remained visible.

Yue Qingyuan hadn’t been planning to hit some kind of natural demon armour. In fact he had never seen such a thing before. The mistake was costly; without both arms it was nearly impossible to hold onto Shen Jiu and evade at the same time.

Was the ice demon lucky, or smart?
He pointed his weapon at Yue Qingyuan. The male fire demon came to a halt beside him; the female, Yue Qingyuan could tell, was circling silently around behind.

“Relinquish Da-ge!!!” the male fire demon demanded, panting and furious. The ice demon remained silent, but his stance was ready. Yue Qingyuan found it difficult to gauge his strength. That armour seemed formidable, and the ice wall was on par with the sorts of things he had only ever seen the strongest kinds of demons pull off.

He took a breath, and re-centered himself.

He wasn’t simply fighting off a band of brigands. He should… well... given the circumstances...

Shen Jiu struggled his way out of his one-armed hold and staggered forward.

“Snow Bug!” he rasped. “Stop it! Put away-”

In his haste he stumbled. Yue Qingyuan moved reflexively to help, but the demons were quick. A silver blade slashed through the air between him and cut him off, while the male fire demon barreled forward. Yue Qingyuan started to shout a denial, fearful that the heat and fire would go with him, but all at once the demon snuffed them out. They were nowhere to be found - save perhaps in the furious gleam of his eyes - as he hastily lifted Shen Jiu up.

“Hongwen, Hongwen, he’s been *drugged* by that rapist," the fire demon declared. “His breathing’s not good!”

The ice demon tilted his head.

“Take him back. Have A-Ye help, it could be the spores still acting up,” he said. His voice reverberated strangely through the full-face plates of his natural armour.

“I need to transfer him spiritual energy…” Yue Qingyuan said.

The ice demon narrowed his eyes, while the look the male fire demon gave him was probably not fit to be described.
“...If a human is needed, get one of the other hirelings to help,” the ice demon concluded. "Go."

The male fire demon nodded. He seemed to hesitate just a little when he realized that the ice demon wasn't following, but then he looked at the gasping human in his arms and hurried off. Yue Qingyuan’s good hand tightened to a fist as he forced himself to make no further moves, to only watch as the young Shen Jiu was carried away. But to keep fighting was fruitless, he could already tell. He’d gotten carried away. Perhaps all of them had. And now the situation was...

...Not ideal.

Once Shen Jiu was out of sight, the female fire demon emerged from where she’d situated herself on Yue Qingyuan's opposite side.

“Senior Mo,” she called. She sounded worried.

The ice demon didn’t move from his position.

“Bind him,” he instructed. “Da-ge can decide what to do with him later.”

“This is a misunderstanding,” Yue Qingyuan assured.

“Yes, that was probably his only recourse at the moment. The female fire demon produced some immortal binding cables from her storage ring, and then set about restraining Yue Qingyuan. She wasn’t particularly rough, which meant the handling was courteous and impersonal by demon standards. But she also didn’t take much care with his broken arm. The entire time the ropes were secured the ice demon remained where he was, braced as though planning to move and thwart any escape attempt Yue Qingyuan might make.

Only once the cables were secure did his posture waver.
With a gasp the ice demon dropped to his knees. The natural armour retracted to reveal pale, sweating skin. Blood sluggishly trickled from a network of cuts across his visible skin, and soaked into the paler parts of his clothing. Yue Qingyuan’s eyebrows lifted.

A bluff…?

It was indeed a bluff he realized, as the female fire demon actually left his side and rushed over to the ice demon instead. Her sword remained focused on him, but the ice demon didn’t even have the strength to keep his pride as he let her help him back onto his feet. That technique, the full-body armour, must not have been one he had actually mastered yet. He was young still; he must have gambled on only taking a single attack from Yue Qingyuan, on using up everything he had to misrepresent his strength and force a surrender.

Cunning.

The female fire demon’s sword moved closer to his throat. It was a very good sword, he noted. It had a spirit and even looked to be of human craftsmanship, possibly even one of the Wei clan’s works.


“I will cooperate,” he agreed.

She grunted and kept one eye on him as she kept one arm slung around the ice demon, and steered them both back to the village. The field around them, which had previously danced with demonic fire, was cold and silent. None of the villagers seemed to have dared so much as opening a window to check on the sounds they had surely heard, but Yue Qingyuan wasn’t surprised. It was that sort of place.

He looked anxiously for signs of where the other fire demon had taken Shen Jiu. Back to the traveler’s house, surely, but it seemed as though every demon in the party was still awake and furious, and Yue Qingyuan was of course not permitted to go inside. The female fire demon left him to be tied to a stake in the makeshift camp instead, and then took the ice demon with her.

Yue Qingyuan heaved in a long breath. Then he let it out again, and tried to center himself. With his spiritual energy blocked, there wasn’t much he could do for his broken arm.
It was very painful.

His connection to Xuan Su could not be cut off by the binding cables, however. It would have been very possible for him to break them. That wouldn’t have engendered him much trust and so he forced himself to stay where he was put. But in his mind he kept the option open. Depending on how things proceeded, he might actually need to make some kind of escape.

It got at little easier to endure his situation when Xie Lian approached him a few hours before daybreak.

The freelancer looked tired. His clothes were dusty. He brought a dry bun and a cup of water with him.

“Ah, um please excuse the indignity and permit this one to assist,” he said, and awkwardly helped Yue Qingyuan with eating and drinking around the obstruction of his bound arms.

“Is the young master alright?” he asked.

Xie Lian peered at him for a moment before nodding.

“He’s resting, but yes. One of the gentlemen inside seems very convinced that Yue Qi tried to... molest him...?”

Yue Qingyuan sighed.

“It was a spiritual energy transfer,” he said.

Xie Lian’s face adopted the careful blankness of one who was polite but also skeptical.

“I see. Well. Hopefully any misunderstandings will be cleared up by Young Master Shen, in that case...”

“Hopefully,” Yue Qingyuan wryly agreed.
There was a long, equally awkward pause.

“There are other ways to transfer spiritual energy, of course…” Xie Lian ventured after a moment.

Yue Qingyuan coughed.

“He was choking.”

“Ah.”

“His throat was closing.”

“Mn.”

“...It was alarming,” Yue Qingyuan admitted. “In hindsight…”

Xie Lian regarded him for a moment more, and then seemed to conclude that it was possible that he wasn’t, in fact, some kind of heinous sex offender. At the precise same moment, Yue Qingyuan found himself feeling more uncertain of that. Had he really needed to take such a measure? There were other ways, and indeed, Shen Jiu’s choking hadn’t been so pronounced or urgent - especially not for a cultivator of his level - to merit desperation. Had he simply been too alarmed by the prospect of Shen Jiu’s distress, or had he found an excuse and taken something because, in fact, he wanted it?

It would have been a lie to say that his lips had forgotten the feeling of being pressed to Shen Jiu’s. Not since the kiss had been broken had he stopped feeling it, even with the intense pain in his broken arm.

Xie Lian patted his shoulder.

Yue Qingyuan flinched as pain lanced up his nerves again. Wrong shoulder…
“Ah! Sorry, sorry! That wasn't intentional!”

“It’s fine.”

“I really didn’t intend that!”

“Of course.”

Xie Lian grimaced at him and murmured another apology before finally picking up the leftover cup and hurrying off again. The air was mostly dusty and dull, but morning was getting underway. A stray butterfly had woken enough to somehow mistake the freelancer’s sleeves for flower petals, and some of the strange village plants were unfurling odd, spiny fronds and shedding droplets of dew onto the ground. As the sun rose it made an eerie effect on the sky. As if the light was fracturing parts of it, scattering it like firelight over broken glass.

Yue Qingyuan wondered how a person ever grew accustomed to such sights.

But then, with enough time and familiarity, he supposed people would learn to take anything for granted.

It was still barely light out when Shen Jiu finally emerged from the traveler’s house again. He looked tired but steady; there were the telltale signs of hardship to his body, shadows around his eyes and a certain stiffness to his movements, but his face seemed clear and the haze of inebriation no longer lingered about him. Yue Qingyuan felt a rush of relief; he couldn’t be completely sure, but it seemed that his troubles had run their course.

Shen Jiu marched his way over to where Yue Qingyuan was tied up, not bothering to show any hesitation. He stopped near the post and tutted.

“Unbind him,” he ordered one of the nearby demons.

Yue Qingyuan barely paid that person any mind as he made another assessment of Shen Jiu’s condition. He had changed clothes - probably for the best, the other set was likely sweated right through. The darker greens were more suitable to traveling through such dirty and dangerous places anything, showing less signs of dust or wear. His hair was tied back. Yue Qingyuan’s heart lurched as he recognized the crown holding it as one of his gifts. The lone emerald in the center
was both tasteful and striking.

It couldn’t mean anything. Shen Jiu had no idea that Yue Qi, his hireling, was also Yue Qingyuan, the human lord who sent him such gifts. But part of his heart still took it as a good sign.

When the cables came off, he immediately set about encouraging his broken arm to mend.

“This master apologizes on behalf of his subordinates,” Shen Jiu said. “Yue Qi’s assistance the other night was misunderstood. A bonus will be added to his pay to compensate for the trouble. Please take the day to rest and recover; our party will be delayed by the… dramatics involved with last night’s misunderstandings.”

Yue Qingyuan felt such relief that he could only close his eyes.

He wasn’t being sent away. Good. That was good. He wasn’t sure if he’d have been able to find and pull off a second disguise in order to insert himself into the project again, but keeping close to Shen Jiu was obviously imperative. Even just last night, he had gotten hurt again. What if no one had been there to find him in time, when the poison surged up once more?

And was that even what had happened? Or had someone tried to take advantage of that mishap in order to strike out against Shen Jiu? Did he have enemies here as well? In the past, Yue Qingyuan had often taken Shen Qingqiu’s insistence that he had enemies everywhere as a matter of paranoia. Not entirely untrue, of course, but a feeling also exacerbated by his history. His husband had never believed in accidents or coincidence. And yet, such things did happen…

But this was not the imperial court, where scheming was plentiful, but so were some of the most upright and honourable persons a man could find. Shen Jiu’s current political circles ran through the courts and clans of powerful demon lords. However… honest Lord Luo himself was, and even accounting for the possibility that Yue Qingyuan had, perhaps, over-simplified the matter of demons and their characters in the past, he still refused to believe that demons were safer company for Shen Jiu than his own kind.

Demons were still demons, and there were many of them in this contingent. The odds of some of them secretly harboring ill-intentions was high.

Once again, Yue Qingyuan couldn’t help but feel annoyed with Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe. What were they thinking? The only humans in this group were hired cultivators. How could they
let Shen Jiu venture out on a dangerous campaign with only demons to back him up?

Yue Qingyuan couldn’t let himself be discredited and sent away.

“The fault was mine,” he declared. “Young Master Shen’s condition seemed dire, and this servant acted in haste. Punishment for such liberties is only merited.”

Shen Jiu accepted his apology with a noncommittal hum.

“Is Young Master Shen feeling better? Does he know the cause of his earlier illness?” Yue Qingyuan couldn’t help but press.

Shen Jiu waved the matter off.

“Much better. The poison from A-Ye’s panic response takes some time to metabolize, and didn’t react well to some of the tea we brought along. It was my negligence. A-Ye’s practically flogging themselves for it so don’t say anything more to them, their punishment is my responsibility,” Shen Jiu insisted.

Yue Qingyuan couldn’t help but marvel a little at the fact that he seemed to be forgiving his servant.

Or was there something more going on? Something he just didn’t want an outside like Yue Qingyuan to know about? The Shen Jiu he remembered always mistrusted servants the most. It had confused him for a long time, given their backgrounds. They had common from a common place too. They understood the struggles of trying to just make a living. But Shen Jiu would always say that it was because he understood that he distrusted…

The current Shen Jiu, on the other hand, seemed more than tolerant of the demons he’d brought along.

“Then… is Young Master Shen’s ice demon companion recovering as well?” he asked, more carefully.
Shen Jiu’s eyes narrowed.

“Snow Bug is not Yue Qi’s business,” he declared.

“I meant no offense,” Yue Qingyuan assured him. “He just seemed to have over-extended himself last night.”

“He’ll be ready to travel by the time we need to move on,” Shen Jiu told him, in a firm tone that didn’t invite any more questions on the subject. He looked mad, but not angry… the expression on his face was almost familiar, in fact, but with his different facial features, Yue Qingyuan had a harder time placing it. He found he couldn’t quite put it aside either though. He mulled it over even after it had faded away and Shen Jiu had looked him over again, and then offered him some medicine to help replenish his spiritual energy and assist with his healing. His arm didn’t need a splint. It would be fine enough within a few hours - probably completely healed within a day or two. The breaks weren’t that bad. Yue Qingyuan accepted the medicine anyway. He had his own, so he could repay it if needed, but it was nice to receive some form of care from A-Jiu again. He couldn’t bring himself to refuse.

It was only later, when he found himself once again wandering at the fringes of suspicious demon glares that it struck him.

That look.

He knew that look, that Shen Jiu had worn when he’d dismissed his questions about the ice demon.

It was just strange because Yue Qingyuan had never seen Shen Jiu look possessive over the well-being of anyone other than himself before.

Chapter End Notes

Y’know, for a popular guy, Yue Qingyuan is surprisingly bad at making friends here... hmm...
At one point earlier on in this story journey, someone suggested that Fruit Baby might be a transmigrator. I cannot for the life of me recall who, but, even though it wasn't my plan at the time the idea has since stuck with me. So here we go gang! Fruit Baby time! :D

The world’s newest transmigrator had no idea what was going on the first time she blinked her eyes open, and found a pair of unfamiliar giants peering down at her in a heady mix of wonder and anxiety.

She felt very tired. Like she’d just run a marathon - that was actually something she had some experience with, in fact, so she knew the sensations. In this case, they were overwhelming. Her arms shook and her lungs burned, so distressed that she couldn’t keep herself from wailing like a baby.

Around about the time the giants started trying to comfort her, she figured out that was what she was.

A baby.

A really tired baby.

Was this… reincarnation?

Fuck. How fucking… weird?

Luo Lingxi - though she didn’t know that was her name yet - cried and flapped her arms and tried to communicate her situation. She wasn’t a baby! Heck! She was twenty-nine, almost thirty! An age fit to have her parents constantly bemoaning about her lack of marriage prospects, even though her older brothers and their wives had already given them four grandchildren total, so it wasn’t as if
the family’s future was in danger. But the point was, she wasn’t a baby! Not! A! Baby! She was a grown adult with her own family and oh shit, had she just been born?

Her head turned, unsteady until a big, gentle hand came down to help her. She was covered in gunk. The giant not holding her was gently cleaning her off, which was weird but… not bad. It was getting rid of the gunk, anyway. To her eyes, both of the giants looked to be men. They were dressed in soft, thin bath robes, and had really long hair. The light in the room was dim. Even though Luo Lingxi was reasonably sure that she’d just been born, she couldn’t see a mother anywhere. Just a soft nest of blankets, filled with what looked like…

Broken chunks of fruit?

What the fuck?

Who brought FRUIT into a DELIVERY ROOM? What kind of weird cult had she just been reborn into!?

Her freak-out resumed, at least until the strange men wrapped her up in a remarkably soft blanket. One of them moved her closer to his chest. He was warm, and his grip was very secure. On his forehead there was a weird red mark. Somehow the restriction of the blanket and the muted thumping of a nearby heartbeat managed to calm some innate thing inside of her.

Luo Lingxi’s cries tapered off. The men murmured gentle things at her. Welcoming her to the world and commenting on how perfect she was, and what good care they’d take of her.

…Well that wasn’t too bad, at least.

~

It took Luo Lingxi quite some time to adjust to the strange new circumstance she’d found herself in.
In the process, she figured out a few things about it.

One was that the new life she’d been reborn into was definitely weird. Her parents were both men. Which wasn’t something she objected to, at all, but did seem a little… unusual? Especially in terms of where her new baby body had come from, in that case. She couldn’t exactly ask yet, but she had a feeling the ‘where do babies come from?’ question had some more complicated answers in this place than she might otherwise expect.

And this place she’d been born into was really odd, just in of itself.

It was fancy, at least. She’d been born rich again. Which only made sense! She’d done good things in her life! Try as she might, Luo Lingxi couldn’t entirely recall how she’d died. The last thing she remembered before turning into a baby was walking down a sidewalk and then hearing a loud ‘bang’. If she strained she thought she could recall feeling a pain in the back of her head.

Had she been assassinated?

 Fucking hell! Her family wasn’t going to like that. Eldest Brother had been getting mixed up in some weird business - had he been dealing with criminals? Ugh. If he’d gone and gotten her killed, she should have been allowed to haunt him! Where was the justice?

Well, on balance, she supposed this was probably better than haunting her own family. Long-term, anyway.

Despite her new home being really fancy, it lacked modern amenities of most kinds. There were no televisions, no cell phones, no cars - not that she’d been able to see anyway. And everyone dressed like a cosplayer from one of those novels her favourite brother used to read, the ones with the people flying around on swords and marrying women in double or even triple digit numbers, and fighting weird monsters or zombies or whatever.

Luo Lingxi didn’t see any weird monsters or zombies, but she did see some pretty odd people.

For starters, there was her father with the red mark on his forehead. He had tons of thick hair and really pointy canine teeth, and she was pretty sure he could do magic. She was pretty sure her other father could do magic too, but he was less overall odd-looking. Though they were both unreasonably handsome men on top of everything else.
Luo Lingxi had no complaints about that. Assuming she was genetically related to at least one of them, and possibly to both of them, that meant good odds that she’d be attractive once she grew out of this frustrating baby body too! So handsome papas were just fine by her.

Apart from Red Papa and Green Papa, some of the servants and other people she glimpsed around her new home looked… odd. Like some nerd’s anime waifus or husbandos or whatever they were called. There were people with tails and pointy animal ears, funky coloured eyes, and claws, and things like that. There were also normal-looking people, but even those people looked sort of like video game NPC’s.

She definitely wasn’t in a normal world anymore. Even if her being reborn into some weird cosplay cult could have explained things, costumes tended to have seams. But when she reached out and yanked on a random person’s fuzzy cat ears, she confirmed that they were attached to that person’s scalp.

So, yeah. Luo Lingxi was rich, and she was in a weird fantasy world, and she had two handsome fathers, and near as she could tell they were sickeningly sweet and doting and seemed intent on spoiling her rotten. Which was just fine with her. Their names were Luo Binghe (Red Papa) and Shen Qingqiu (Green Papa). Some part of her wondered if the ‘Shen’ in Green Papa’s name was the same as her surname from her past life? Maybe, maybe not. She hadn’t seen it written down yet. Apart from her two dads, Luo Lingxi had an older brother… well, she suspected he was actually more like a cousin or something that had also been raised by her new fathers? Older brothers were the best though and it seemed liable to work out to the same deal anyway. She’d had several brothers in her past life, and even if the eldest one had indeed gotten her killed by being a criminal, in her experience it was smart to rely on doting older brothers for treats and protection and extra spoiling. Shen Jiu was a good older brother. Of the older brother model types had was far from the worst. He was a bit… what was it called? Tsundere? Something like that, he was a bit like that - but he was also extremely susceptible to her Cute Baby Act and he had a dog.

Luo Lingxi loved dogs. They were so cute!

Her new big brother also reminded her a little of her favourite brother in her past life. But thinking about that made her feel melancholy and remorseful.

Shen Yuan would have loved to have been reborn into a world like this one.

Her nerdy brother had always been into these sorts of things. When she was a lot younger she had sat through innumerable cartoons with him, and listened to him recount the adventures of this or that character in this or that book he was reading all the time. She could vividly remember many occasions spent whining about wanting to read the book, but her older brother always insisted it had bad content that wasn’t suitable for her and talked her into letting him recount ‘just the good
parts’ instead. Even though he was the youngest of her older brothers, Shen Yuan had still been a
good four years older than her and very over-protective.

But he never had any friends. He couldn’t get out.

When she’d been a teenager, she’d foolishly been a little envious of the illness that meant her nerdy
brother had no expectations heaped upon him. She’d been too young to remember when he’d been
diagnosed, but she could vividly recall the frustration that he never had to go to any stuffy parties,
and he never got lectured incessantly about his grades, and he got to lie around in bed or play on
his computer all day. Once Shen Yuan was old enough to move out, she’d gotten so angry and
jealous that she’d taken it out on him and refused to visit.

At least I won’t have to spend any more time hearing about your lame books!

Two years later, her favourite brother died from neglect.

The nurse her parents had hired hadn’t been to see him for three entire months when it happened.
No one knew, because no one had bothered to check in. Eldest brother had been overseas for more
than half a year, and second brother had been caught up in the euphoria of meeting his future wife.
Their parents were almost always occupied with the business, and she herself had been consumed
with school and her extra curricular activities. She hadn’t actually meant to seem like she was
holding some kind of grudge about him leaving. Not for that long. She just… had so much to do. It
seemed like every hour of her day was always scheduled, and the rare times when it wasn’t, she
just wanted to lie in bed and die.

She’d texted him. He came home for the New Year. He always sounded fine. He never complained
about anything, unless it was something stupid like some dumb thing an author had said or some
new game that didn’t make good on its promises or something like that. Never about anything real.

And then one day he’d eaten expired food. Because no one was shopping for him. It turned out
he’d missed three doctors’ appointments, too, and nobody knew.

It took four days for anybody to find him.

He was dead for four days. Days. While she still thought everything was fine and lived like normal.
After that, she’d never been the same. The funeral was awful. Everyone had acted as if her nerdy brother had died from his illness, they’d talked about it as if it was inevitable, but that wasn’t the case! Yes, certainly, him being sick was probably why the food poisoning had killed him instead of just giving him a stomach ache or something, but that wasn’t the point! Her brother had died because everyone had decided he was going to die soon anyway, and had never bothered to fight for him. Or to get him to fight for himself. Maybe he would have died early no matter what, but did that mean the extra years he could have had wouldn’t have mattered? If they’d cared more, could he have lived a better life, at least? Made more friends? Fallen in love? Traveled to some nice places?

She had wanted to yell at everyone. It was their fault! It was all their faults! The big brother who had always spent the most time with her, who used to tell her silly stories and let her win at tacky racing games, was dead when he didn’t have to be. When he could have still been alive.

She should have gone to visit him.

It was… it was her fault. She’d been jealous because no one had any expectations for him, but no one expected anything because they were all really just… just waiting for his funeral. Sometimes she wondered if she really would have snapped that day and made a horrible scene if not for Grandma Sang, who had suffered with dementia as long as she could remember. While Second Uncle had been helping her pay respects, Grandma Sang had abruptly and loudly asked who had died. Second Uncle had told her, and Grandma Sang had had started wailing like she’d just heard the news for the first time again.

It was the only consolation of the whole event, really. Their parents were so focused on appearances, they always kept themselves reigned in. Eldest brother and second brother were pretty solemn, too. But Grandma Sang was long past caring about appearances, and she’d always had a sharp tongue even with the dementia. She’d told absolutely everyone off. Blamed all of them. How could they let her sweet little grandson die? Didn’t they know Yuan-er was a fragile boy? What was he doing by himself anyway, who let him go out?

Shen Yuan would have hated it. The scene, being referred to like a delicate flower, having everyone else get blamed for what happened to him.

It had made the funeral bearable to realize he probably would have preferred it the way their parents set it up anyhow. To not have anyone mention that he’d died from eating expired food, but to instead just bemoan his illness. To not cause too much fuss.

Well, tough luck big brother! This little sister didn’t fuss at the funeral, but she definitely made a big stink about it afterwards! Not that anyone really noticed, but still. She had. Fuck the system! If even a rich brat like Shen Yuan could die of neglect, then what state were the rest of the sick and
disabled people of the world really in? How many of those ‘shut-in’ people who got made fun of online were living like that just because they were struggling to live any other way at all?

That was when Luo Lingxi decided she was going to be one of those bleeding-heart rich heiresses who spent all of her time on charities!

Well, on charities and on working out. But part of that was also because her mother kept fretting that she was going to make herself unattractive by gaining too many muscles, and she’d been angry enough that this actually seemed like a great idea, so she had. Surprisingly, she’d gained a ton of followers on her social media accounts after she’d rebelliously posted some photos of herself flexing. Most of them were ladies too! Some really pretty and amazingly nice. And they were really supportive of her muscles! Of course there were also jerks, but she just blocked them. It wasn’t hard.

Damn. She missed her muscles.

Thinking about her past life was always the wrong thing to do. Her dead brother was a sore spot, and dying herself didn’t seem to have made it any better. If anything, it just made her feel bad because she knew her brother would have liked to be reborn in a world like this one! Why was this the situation, then? If anyone should have gone to some weirdo world when they died, it was him! And if anyone shouldn’t have ever died at all, it was her!

And then, she couldn’t help but wonder what her own funeral was like. Fuck. She hoped it wasn’t like her brother’s. Lots of people better cry! And messily, too! Wet, snotty bawling! Especially Eldest Brother. And her mother! None of that ‘pale faced staring poetically off into the distance’ shit, she wanted real tears and cursing! Wailing! People bemoaning that her beautiful life was cruelly cut short!

Grandma Sang had passed on about ten years ago, so she definitely couldn’t be relied upon to kick up the needed fuss.

Well, her online followers would probably have her back at least. Hopefully no one committed suicide or anything, she had some pretty dedicated fans but she didn’t think any of them were that dedicated… probably…

Luo Lingxi frowned at her too-tiny hands and missed her phone. And her muscles again. Her strong legs and biceps and her good endurance and stamina. Even just the ability to walk properly would have been nice! She was, at the moment, just a chubby little dough ball, not even a baked bun. Even if it was her good fortune to be born rich again, the prospect of making it through
puberty twice had her immediately panicking. Dwelling on her dead brother made her eyes itch, too. Given that she was a baby, it maybe wasn’t all that surprising that her ruminations left her shaking, and then very abruptly crying.

Then just bawling.

Her tiny limbs trembled, but she wasn’t at it for long at all before a concerned face appeared beside her crib.

“What’s the matter?” Green Papa gently asked, tutting as he picked her up.

Luo Lingxi balled her fists into the segment of robe on his shoulder and silently demanded cuddles.

If she was a baby, she wasn’t going to hold back for decorum’s sake! She was upset! Cuddle her, dammit!

Green Papa obliged. He tutted a bit more and tried to soothe her, jostling her a little and rubbing her back. His voice was very calming. Despite how upset she’d been, it didn’t take long for her to find her tears tapering off and her sobs turning into hiccups.

“There, there,” Green Papa said. “What do you even have to cry about, hmm? You’re just a baby, your life’s pretty good.”

Don’t minimize her problems! What, was that some kind of Olympic sport category in parenting? Her old parents had already won the gold in that case! Jeez!

Luo Lingxi batted his shoulder in protest, but he just caught her tiny fist and kissed it instead. Any ire she might have held onto vanished, then, because despite his words, the look on Green Papa’s face made it clear that he was worried. He shushed and soothed her some more, and then wiped her face clean while still holding her with one arm.

“When Ling-er cries it breaks this old man’s heart,” he said.

Old man? What old man? This guy couldn’t be more than thirty, if that! Fuck off! Don’t be
Luo Lingxi grabbed his nose in rebuke. This was a serious matter. She was having an existential crisis, and also, there were no cell phones. It was entirely possible that this world had no internet at all. Could this man ever appreciate how horrifying this situation was? Probably not. He had no idea what he was missing by just living in this beautiful fantasy universe, being rich and having babies with his doting husband. She tried to communicate these very important facts, but her mouth didn’t cooperate yet, so instead all that came out was a jumble of awkward squealing and gibberish.

Green Papa nodded like he understood anyway.

“Cranky?” he guessed as he eased her hand off of his face.

Well… he wasn’t wrong…

Luo Lingxi huffed, magnanimously put her head back on his shoulder, and let herself be cuddled some more.

~

Apart from the obvious downsides, there were some perks to being a baby.

Like the cuddling, of course. And the fact that no one could expect her to behave appropriately, which meant she could basically do whatever she wanted - if it was within her ability to do it, anyway. Some of the things she could do weren’t really things she wanted to do, like shitting in public (oh the indignity), but she had the freedom to cry, laugh, make weird noises, or reach out and try to grab anything she felt like. It seemed that despite retaining memories of her old life, she was still very much a baby in this one. Her hands naturally gravitated towards shiny things even if she didn’t actually want them, and it was nearly impossible to stop herself from stuffing anything and everything into her mouth when she got hold of it. Also, fun-looking things were absolutely delightful now, even if they were really just simple flowers or toys or sweets. Entertaining herself had gotten overall easier. Almost enough to soothe the wound created by the
absence of the internet.

Being a baby, she got to eat a lot too. At first this was mostly just from the bottle, but hey, better a bottle than the awkwardness of a nipple! And when she finally started to get bigger and was offered more variety (mostly in the form of mushed up paste food), well… babies are supposed to be fat! Worrying about her diet was officially Someone Else’s Problem, so she had no troubles in coaxing as many treats as possible from her parents.

Red Papa made a lot of good squishy mush sweets and snacks for her. Amazing.

Luo Lingxi was pretty sure her new parents doted on her more in a few months than her old parents had in her entire life. She was the young heiress of a wealthy family in both lives, but she couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so pampered and kissed and cuddled. Well. Maybe when she’d been a baby the first time too? Some of her nannies had been sweet, she seemed to recall…

Either way, it was different. And this was fine by her. She liked her cuddly new dads, and her older brother, and her weird uncles.

Not being able to ask questions made it kind of hard to figure out what exactly her new family structure was, but there weren’t a lot of women. Apart from her parents and Big Brother, and Big Brother’s dog, there was Uncle Shang (somehow related to Green Papa, she was pretty sure - or possibly just his very good friend or old school chum or something), Uncle Liu (almost definitely not a blood relative, possibly some kind of well-dressed vagrant…?), and Uncle Ice Guy (related to everyone through marriage to Uncle Shang - or maybe Uncle Shang was the one related through marriage and Uncle Ice Guy was Red Papa’s cousin or something, particulars were unclear).

There were also various servants and it seemed like subjects or allies or something? Business partners? Luo Lingxi couldn’t exactly ask, but generally speaking if she pointed at someone and looked at Red Papa he’d spit out a name for her to use, at least. Like Big Brother was ‘Shixiong’ (where did martial arts come into it…?), and Uncle Ice Guy’s name had also been provided thusly, even though Luo Lingxi had heard most everyone else referring to him as ‘Mobei-Jun’.

That sounded too fancy for a baby to use though. ‘Northern Desert Lord’? Pah! Pretentious. Red Papa had the right idea, Uncle Ice Guy was definitely more her speed.

Not only were most of her family members dudes, they were all weirdly handsome and pretty dudes. Even the servants were all relatively good-looking, and while there were fewer women around, they were uniformly beautiful too. It was enough to make her wish she had a camera. Especially when Miss Crimson Silks was around, or Tall Fire Girl, or Uncle Liu’s Sister-
With-the-Veil. The latter she’d only glimpsed, but she was pretty sure that woman had *biceps* underneath the gauzy, fluttery clothes she wore.

Biceps! On! A! Woman!

Luo Lingxi had hope for her future yet!

She had even more hope when she realized that people were referring to her as Red Papa’s *heir*. Apparently girls could inherit in this world, and no one had any objection to it. Though, increasingly, she wasn’t sure if that was actually standard or if Red Papa had just decided it would be and no one had the balls to contradict him. Especially not to his face.

Red Papa was that kind of dude. Luo Lingxi gathered that he was some kind of terrifying war god? Or something, anyway. He had a reputation. That was fine, Luo Lingxi didn’t have to bother about it yet. The important thing was that he made the most delicious baby food and had the best titties for napping on.

Priorities!

Green Papa was also not bad to nap on, just for the record. His hair always smelled really nice and he almost always wore soft clothes. Solid 9.5/10, he only lost half a point for not having more meat on his chest. Big Brother was perhaps slightly less good for snapping on, if only because he moved around and talked a lot more when *some people* were trying to sleep, but he also smelled nice and dressed almost exactly like Green Papa, and had a dog. 9/10. Uncle Liu was *okay* to nap on, but it pretty obviously made him nervous which made him just a little too tense, and also he was bad at rocking. Went too fast. 6/10. Uncle Ice Guy was only good for napping if she was feeling overly warm, otherwise it was like climbing into a fridge - so he was either 10/10, like Red Papa, or 5/10, like Uncle Shang.

Uncle Shang was a terrible napping target. He wore a lot of jewellery, which tended to distract her baby brain, and he talked incessantly, and moved around too much and got irrationally nervous and woke her up a few times to ‘make sure she was still breathing’. Which Luo Lingxi did not appreciate, thank you. Also he made her a little sad sometimes because it was *painfully obvious* that he wanted his own baby, but apparently there were political reasons or something for why he and Uncle Ice Guy couldn’t have one.

“I mean, it’s not like I’m *jealous,*” Uncle Shang insisted, one afternoon while he was watching her. Big Brother was swamped with some important work thing or other he was doing, and her Papas had pretty clearly wanted to have sex, and Uncle Liu was probably off doing questionable things in the wilderness (she wasn’t entirely sure). So somehow her parents had relented enough to let Uncle
Shang watch her in Green Papa’s courtyard while they went off to do their thing in Red Papa’s rooms. It wasn’t a common arrangement, but it had happened a few times now, and each time no catastrophe resulted from it her over-protective and very clingy fathers seemed to become more comfortable with the idea.

Luo Lingxi didn’t begrudge them or anything, and she mostly liked Uncle Shang, but holy fuck he could talk. And not quietly, like Big Brother. Couldn’t a girl get a nap in here?

She frowned and furrowed her brow, and batted him irritably with her tiny, stupid baby hands.

Uncle Shang handed her a soft rattle.

Not what she was going for, but fine. Naps could be delayed. With an aggrieved sigh she started gumming the toy.

“You understand, right Little Miss?” Uncle Shang implored, gently patting her head. “Back when your father got A-Jiu, at least I got Honghong-er to match him with! And Honghong-er was a much cuter child than A-Jiu, too. Not that A-Jiu wasn’t also cute, he absolutely was, but my Honghong-er was like a world-record setting level of cute. Such a round face! His teeny carapace bits! Ah! Why do they have to grow up? But now your papa’s got you, and you’re adorable. And he doesn’t talk about hardly anything else anymore, it’s all ‘my baby’ this and ‘Ling-er’ that, and I don’t have anything nearly cute enough or cool enough to bring him down a peg with. Even if I got a kitten or something it wouldn’t work out, you can’t really compare a cat to a baby. Your father and I are like those old matrons in romance stories who are always competing and lording their successes in life over one another, but are also destined to be friends and rivals forever! But now I can’t keep up! I’m disgracing the title of Trophy Husband!”

Luo Lingxi gave Uncle Shang a look that she hoped conveyed her intense skepticism.

“Fah,” she grumbled around the rattle.

Uncle Shang gestured at her.

“See? Even when you’re spitting and grumpy you’re cute!” he protested.

Who did this dude think he was fooling? Rivalry? What rivalry? Luo Lingxi was pretty sure a rival
had to be acknowledged, and also that Green Papa would probably just say ‘get out of my house’ if Uncle Shang tried to present them as being in competition for anything. Besides which, Uncle Shang really clearly just had Baby Fever.

She’d been the Spinster Aunt who was friends with a bunch of other single ladies pushing middle age in her past life. She knew the signs. The sighing, the cooing, the wanting to babysit but getting weirdly morose about it…

Feeling a rush of sympathy, she pulled the rattle out of her mouth and offered it to Uncle Shang in consolation.

“Oh. Um, thank you,” the man said.

Yeah, yeah, weird gift, but chewing on things helped! It really did! She wasn’t sure if it only helped babies or if it was always good and she’d just forgotten when she grew up last time because it was socially frowned upon, but no one else was around. If he gave it a munch she’d keep his secrets.

Uncle Shang just gently waved it a bit and then gave it back to her, though.

Eh. Suit yourself!

After a few more minutes, Uncle Shang then let out another morose sigh.

“Honghong-er’s going to be setting out with A-Jiu on this venture,” he said.

Venture? What venture?

Luo Lingxi popped the rattle back out of her mouth and listened more attentively. Uncle Shang didn’t seem to notice, although he did jostle her playfully. One of his pale aquamarine hair baubles threatened to distract her. She mustered her resolve against it.

He might have been a less-than-ideal napping companion, but no one - no one - was a better source of gossip than Uncle Shang. And, well. She was a baby. Her options for entertainment were pretty limited here! Where else was she gonna get news? Nobody told her shit, overhearing things and
“Aiyah, they’ve gotten so big!” Uncle Shang lamented again while he played with her. “It’s much trickier to protect them now. And they both went through so much hardship when they were small…”

Hardship?

What hardship?


Uncle Shang booped her nose.

“Yup, it’s true. Your shixiong had a rough childhood before your papa took him in. So did my Honghong-er. You’re a lucky baby, you get to be a rich little miss from the word ‘go’. Nothing bad is ever going to happen to you. At least it better not, or else heads will roll. But lots of people aren’t so lucky… remember to be grateful to your elders for your good fortune and sheltered upbringing when you’re a grown Noble Lady, hey?”

No, don’t divert topics to some filial piety bullshit! Dammit! She wanted details…

Her attempts to protest mostly came out as incoherent babbling.

Uncle Shang nodded along as if she was making sense. A lot of the adults in her new life did that. It was ridiculously endearing, and she appreciated the illusion that she was carrying on an actual conversation, but at the moment it also made her keenly aware of how limited her communication skills actually were.

She blew a raspberry of frustration.

Uncle Shang cooed and pinched her cheeks.
“Such a cute little bun,” he sighed. “Don’t tell your father, but I don’t think you look as much like Lord Luo as he says. I mean you do, but you’ve got a good mix of features. You take after both of your parents.” Again, he sighed. “If my king and I could have a baby, I wonder which of us it would take after… my king’s so good-looking, it’d probably be better if they took after him… ah, babies who look like my king are always the cutest!”

Aaand back to the baby-fever pining again.

Luo Lingxi angrily bit at her rattle.

To her surprise, however, a minute later one of the servants came hurrying in and got Uncle Shang’s attention to announce that Uncle Ice Guy had turned up and was looking for him. Since he was - obviously - currently on Baby Watching Duty, Uncle Shang couldn’t just leave her and go meet his husband. He deliberated for a moment before having the servant leave to instruct Uncle Ice Guy to come to Green Papa’s courtyard.

Cooing at her some more, Uncle Shang scooped her up and settled her against his shoulder, and brought her along to the tea room. Most visitors never got further into Green Papa’s courtyard than that, unless they were Uncle Shang or Big Brother. Or, of course, Red Papa; but he and Luo Lingxi didn’t really count as ‘visitors’.

Uncle Ice Guy arrived after not too long after they settled into the room. His expressions were kinda hard to read as a rule, but he looked ‘mildly confused’ to her eye. Some of that confusion eased when he saw her.

Luo Lingxi waved at him in acknowledgement.

“Apologies, my king. I was tasked with watching over the little miss, so I had to stay here with her,” Uncle Shang explained.

Uncle Ice Guy shook his head.

“It’s fine,” he agreed.
“I don’t think Lord Luo and his husband will be indisposed for much longer, if my king wants to wait.”

“We need to talk,” Uncle Ice Guy interrupted.

Ooh, sounded like Serious Business. Luo Lingxi resisted yet another urge to try and yank the aquamarine hair bauble off of Uncle Shang’s head in favour of seeming like a totally innocent, sleepy baby who would never, ever comprehend any juicy or sensitive information spoken of in front of her.

Uncle Shang settled her onto a cushion beside him, and gave his husband a worried look.

“What is it?” he asked. “Is… should we talk about this here?”

The man glanced around as if to imply that the walls had ears.

Luo Lingxi looked between him and Uncle Ice Guy. Who just moved his head slightly, but apparently that indicated ‘no it’s fine’.

“One of my cousins has had a child with a human lord,” the man said.

Uncle Shang did a double-take.

“What?!” he asked. Yeah, what? Was this a big deal? “One of your cousins?”

Uncle Ice Guy seemed nonplussed by the question. Luo Lingxi wasn’t impressed either. The dude had married Uncle Shang after all; why wouldn’t a member of his family shack up with a human? There clearly wasn’t much of an aversion to the idea going around.

Or was there?

Uncle Shang seemed incredulous enough to imply further juicy details which she was previously unaware of. Ohoho! What was that story there? Did Uncle Ice Guy’s family not approve of his
marriage? Was that why he and Uncle Shang were retainers to Red Papa? Was there drama? Did someone get disowned, or fought with, or thrown out of a window? Curse her inability to demand details and specifics! She’d gotten stuck halfway through a weird soap opera without any means of googling the last season!

“One of my younger cousins,” Uncle Ice Guy clarified.

Uncle Shang nodded and then shook his head, like he still couldn’t quite believe it.

“Which one?” he asked. “Which lord? Is… you said ‘had’ a child, so it’s already been born…?”

“Mm. Some years ago,” Uncle Ice Guy said.

Wait, what? Years ago? So this was old news?

Uncle Shang’s jaw was practically on the floor.

“Years?!” he echoed. “My king, that’s-! Who? How? You can’t just drop information like this onto me and then not give me the specifics!”

Yeah, cough up the pertinent info Uncle! Inquiring minds gotta know!

“Mo Ye dallied with the human Lord Jin,” Mobei-Jun said.

Gasp! No way!

…Who?

Luo Lingxi looked at Uncle Shang, but he seemed to be having troubles on that front himself.

“Mo Ye…” he said to himself, tapping his chin in thought. “Mo Ye, Mo Ye… the sword
“No. Her mother was a bed servant of the second branch on my grandfather’s side,” Uncle Ice Guy explained. “She and her older sister are first cousins of Mo Hongwen’s mother. The eldest daughter’s cultivation is pathetic. The younger was more passable, and was sent to complete a trial.”

“And she fu… fooled around with Lord Jin?” Uncle Shang demanded. “Jin Guangshan? That notorious… fooler-around-er?”

Smooth, Uncle Shang. Luo Lingxi wanted it on the record that Uncle Ice Guy’s family was too big. Why were there so many unruly ice demons around? Shouldn’t they have all been too frigid to have so many kids? Not that she could throw stones, she supposed; her family in her last life had been pretty big too. But still. How was she supposed to remember all these relationships when she couldn’t even take notes?

“Yes,” Uncle Ice Guy said.

“Well why am I just hearing about this now, then?” Uncle Shang demanded. “If there’s a half-human half ice demon baby-”

“The child is six years old.”

Uncle Shang did a double-take.

“...You didn’t know either,” he surmised, somehow, from Uncle Ice Guy’s frankly unchanged expression.

“I did not,” Uncle Ice Guy confirmed. “Mo Ye’s trial was not expected to end quickly. She remained in the human realm and made no mention of her condition.”

Uncle Shang’s brows furrowed.

“Why?” he wondered. “Did Mo Ye fall in love with Lord Jin?”
Mobei-Jun shrugged.

“I believe she found the conditions of her new existence comfortable. Her servant claims the couple did not meet after the pregnancy became apparent to Mo Ye, and that my cousin preferred living in the human realm.”

“So what changed?”

Yeah, what gave? Were their pay-offs to keep things hush-hush? Did the sugar bank run dry? Did the unfaithful lord piss off his demon mistress? Did the half-demon kid develop superpowers all of a sudden and freeze some important official’s balls off?

“Mo Ye died,” Uncle Ice Guy admitted.

Oh. Yeah. That’d do it.

Uncle Shang looked like he was about two seconds from springing out of his seat.

“Where’s the child now?” he demanded. “Don’t tell me the Jin clan have taken the poor thing! We can’t let that stand, Jin Guangshan’s a piece of sh- I mean, a bad guy!”

Uncle Ice Guy motioned at him to calm down.

“The Jins do not have him,” he said. “Mo Ye’s servant fled with him after my cousin succumbed to poison. She was able to evade their pursuers and brought the boy here. I have spent the past hour listening to her account of this incident. She and the child are both in one of the guest houses.”

At that, Uncle Shang did spring up out of his seat.

“Shit!” he exclaimed. Then he looked at her, wide eyed, and waved his hands frantically like a mime on too many uppers. “Uncle didn’t say that! That’s not a word!” He turned back to Uncle Ice Guy. “My king, are you telling me that the Jin clan poisoned a member of your family to try and
cover up an illegitimate half-demon child?"

“Unclear,” Uncle Ice Guy replied.

This was getting thornier and thornier, wasn’t it? Luo Lingxi looked between her two uncles like she was spectating at a sport; Uncle Ice Guy seemed stony and unruffled, while Uncle Shang was all but leaping out of his own skin in agitation. He started to pace. His soft shoes made noisy dragging sounds as he moved quickly across the rug, and she could almost feel the static electricity he was doubtless building up.

To keep him from thoughtlessly touching her and giving her a shock, she clambered over to Uncle Ice Guy’s lap instead.

He blinked but didn’t do anything to stop her as she situated herself comfortably with him. He was cold but it was sort of like leaving a fridge door open kind of cold; not bad, just noticeable. Luo Lingxi gave him a few pats to adjust, and smiled when he tentatively patted her in return.

Uncle Ice Guy was so weird. It was lucky he found someone equally as weird but in an opposite direction to balance him out.

“Mo Ye is definitely dead though?” Uncle Shang checked, wringing his hands. When Uncle Ice Guy nodded he sucked in a breath. “That’s not good. If there’s a death then people will want answers, investigations will need to be done, there won’t be any way to discreetly shove anything under the rug…”

“Mo Ye’s parents are both also dead,” Uncle Ice Guy volunteered. “Her eldest sister is a weakling with low status and little support within the family, and she lacks titles. Her husband leads a small settlement, but nothing more. Since that is the situation, by rights the matter falls under this Mobei-Jun’s judgment as head of the clan.”

Uncle Shang blinked. Then he seemed to be doing some mental calculations.

“Oh, true, true,” he conceded. “Wow. That branch suffered a lot of death…”

“They are not strong,” Uncle Ice Guy said.
Harsh.

Uncle Shang kept wringing his hands and anxiously rearranging his sleeves.

“So then, if it falls under my king’s judgment - what does my king wish to do?” he asked, turning about mid-pace. He finally seemed to notice where Luo Lingxi had gotten to and then hesitated. “Erm. Perhaps, in light of this, we should take the little miss back to her parents…”

“They are still occupied,” Mobei-Jun said.

Uncle Shang looked at her uncertainly for a moment more but only shook his head and sighed gustily. “Right. Well, I guess it doesn’t matter; Ling-er hardly knows what we’re talking about.”

Definitely not. Nope. Just an innocent, clueless baby, that was her.

“So then… what does my king wish to do?” Uncle Shang asked again.

Uncle Ice Guy tilted his head slightly.

“That depends,” he said.

“On?” his husband prompted.

“On Shang Qinghua.”

Ooh, how so?

Uncle Shang seemed confused. He hesitated as if he was wondering where he might have missed something in the conversation.
“What do I have to do with the matter?” he wondered. “I don’t know much about the Jin clan, my king. They’re prominent and powerful enough that the emperor wavers between appeasing them and countering their plays in order to curtail them, but everyone knows that and I’m not well versed in the particulars beyond widespread gossip. They sometimes appeal to the Wen clan and sometimes are used to compete with them instead.”

“Further counsel on that is not yet needed,” Uncle Ice Guy assured him, gesturing dismissively. “Does Shang Qinghua want the child?”

Uncle Shang froze.

“My king? Do I want - do I what?” he demanded.

The plot was thickening! Luo Lingxi was riveted, and only briefly distracted by the shiny metal ring on Uncle Ice Guy’s left hand. It had caught the light when he gestured. She looked away from the conversation for a few minutes in order to grab said hand and, giving into a powerful impulse, gummed at the ring. It was round and smooth and pleasantly cool. Nice. Her gums had been aching lately. Uncle Ice Guy didn’t try and stop her from slobbering all over his hand while Uncle Shang made wide-eyed faces at him.

“Does Shang Qinghua want the child?” Uncle Ice Guy repeated, with the patience of a man who was used to having to clarify himself like eighty different times in the same conversation. “His name is Mo Xuanyu. His mother is dead and his father’s family cannot be trusted. He is half demon, related by blood to this Mobei-Jun, and requires caretakers. If this Mobei-Jun’s First Husband wishes, he may have him to raise.”

Uncle Shang hesitated.

“Like Honghong-er?” he asked. “My king would take the boy as an apprentice, he means? Or something else?”

“Whatever arrangement Shang Qinghua thinks would be best can be accommodated, I will leave the particulars to his judgment. It is his right to make such decisions,” Uncle Ice Guy said, glancing down at her. He still didn’t reclaim his hand, but after a minute he curled his fingers to reduce the risk of her gumming the ring off. Fair enough.

“The child seems mostly human,” he continued. “Weak but not notably defective. He has not
manifested any abilities as yet, according to Mo Ye’s servant. Even if he does his line is not known for strength; too few worthy traits have bred true in them. He lacks sufficient power to be a candidate for this Mobei-Jun’s successor.”

“My king’s still planning to pick Honghong-er, then?” Uncle Shang asked.

When Uncle Ice Guy nodded he let out a breath of relief.

“That’s good, that’s good. I wouldn’t want him to feel supplanted, he’s such a sensitive child… I mean, not that he knows he’s getting picked at all yet, but you know. It might be bad enough if he feels like he’s being replaced. Do you think he will? If we take in another child? Could he get jealous? He’s been our only child for so long… does my king think it would be better or worse if my king officially took this Mo Xuanyu boy for his apprentice now too? Or at least with that sort of being the official intent; obviously he’s too young right now for such a thing. Six is too little. Too little. Littler than our Honghong-er when we got him! Maybe it’s best not to say either way yet, especially if he’s not liable to be very strong, it could make him into more of a target than he can afford to be. Ah, the poor boy, it’s hard for him already… losing his mother, rejected by his father, it’s too tragic… that Jin Guangshan really is a piece of work…”

“Shang Qinghua wants the child,” Uncle Ice Guy confirmed.

Uncle Shang hemmed and hawed and fretted a little but ultimately didn’t deny the obvious. Uncle Ice Guy hadn’t bothered to phrase it as a question that time either.

“I just don’t think there are many good alternatives, my king,” Uncle Shang finally said. “If things are as you describe - and they must be - then who else could we trust with such a child? It would be too cruel to send him to some other person in the family, if he can’t keep up with demonic traditions then it might even be a death sentence. Who else is there in my king’s family with humans, either? If he favours his human half then he should be taught our style of cultivation, there’s no telling yet if he’s better suited to it… mixed blood can be unpredictable… at least with us he stands a fair chance of growing up well enough. As his family, it’d be negligent to send him anywhere else!”

Yeah.

And also: baby fever.

Not that a six-year-old was ideal for that, but hey, probably still close enough. Right? She seemed
to recall most tiny children being quite cute, and also more interactive and interesting than babies. Luo Lingxi glanced at Uncle Ice Guy to see if he’d noticed what she had about Uncle Shang’s pining for a kid of his own. Maybe. It was hard to tell.

But the dude had basically rushed over here at the soonest opportunity to tell Uncle Shang that he might be able to give him another child to raise.

So.

Probably he’d noticed, yeah.

“Shang Qinghua can meet him,” Uncle Ice Guy declared. “Then officially decide. This Mobei-Jun must see to the matter of Lord Jin.”

“Ah, I’ll help with that as well,” Uncle Shang immediately volunteered. “I might not know much about the particulars there but I know some people we can begin to make inquiries with, to keep things from getting out of hand. This matter has to be handled really carefully, my king, I can’t stress that enough. There are a lot of machinations in play and politics to consider. Just let me write a few letters…”

Mumbling to himself, Uncle Shang moved as if to leave. Then he smacked himself in the head, turned back around, and cooed at her instead.

“Sorry, Little Miss! Uncle almost forgot, he can’t leave until Ling-er’s parents come to get her. Let’s wait a while longer; they must be almost done with their ‘alone time’ by now.”

By Luo Lingxi’s count that could still take another hour, which was practically forever according to her baby brain.

But sure. Whatever worked.

After a few minutes Uncle Shang took her back from Uncle Ice Guy and his highly chewable ring. Uncle Ice Guy left to go check on the new orphan kid and deal with some other stuff in the meanwhile. Luo Lingxi waved him goodbye and let Uncle Shang cart her around while the man fretted and mumbled to himself and worried over some stuff to do with this Lord Jin person, and some other people whose names she didn’t recognize. It was too frenetic to make for a good
napping situation. Before long she found herself getting irritable again, and in a fit of purely infantile pique she gave into impulse and finally tried to steal the man’s aquamarine hair baubles.

They were pretty tightly woven in, so she ended up just yanking on them a bit while Uncle Shang yelped and protested and tried to disentangle her fingers.

She was actually trying to let go - her fingers had gotten tangled in his hair, oops - when Big Brother showed up.

Luo Lingxi greeted him with unfeigned enthusiasm. Of course, since she was a baby, this mostly came out in happy babbling and a few kicks of her legs. Her new favourite big bro tutted and walked over, deftly untangling her hands from her uncle’s hair before taking her away to hold.

Ah, yeah. Good. Comfy. Big Brother always smelled nice. Luo Lingxi dozed with her head against his shoulder while he rubbed her back.

“What is going on?” he demanded.

“Ah, A-Jiu’s here!” Uncle Shang noted, with a long sigh. “Thank goodness, you can watch the little miss, I have to go and see to some urgent family matters. Something’s come up with one of my king’s cousins.”

Shen Jiu’s eyes narrowed.

“Lower your voice; Fruit Baby should be napping, you’re too loud,” he scolded. “What time do you think it is? Has she even slept at all yet or did you keep her up with your nonsense? Nevermind; I’ll take her. What’s come up? Did something happen to Mo Hongwen?”

Uncle Shang blinked but then shook his head reassuringly.

“Oh, no, Honghong-er’s fine! It’s another cousin, of course. No need to worry. I’ll apologize to Lord Luo for the trouble, it was a family emergency so the situation came here, but it really couldn’t be helped. There will be more time for explaining things later. A-Jiu will have to forgive Uncle for rushing off!”
On that note, Uncle Shang finally fled to go follow after his husband. Nyoom; off he went. Luo Lingxi waved at his departing back before finally letting out a gusty sigh of her own and sagging completely against Big Brother.

Peace and quiet at last!

Her new nap time buddy tutted and fussed sufficiently over her interrupted schedule. Really, on balance, Luo Lingxi didn’t mind; she’d enjoyed the show! But her baby body definitely got cranky when her routine wasn’t followed, so now that she’d seen and overheard probably all that she was going to, this was good. Shen Jiu took her back to his own courtyard, with the dog, and laid her down in her crib there to sleep. She was tired enough to let him, not putting up a fuss or even demanding further cuddles this time before closing her eyes and conking out completely.

When she woke up, she blearily pulled herself up by the side of her crib. Her mouth was kind of sore again. She was trying not to think about why that might be (because she suspected she knew, and she wasn’t looking forward to the matter). One good thing about being a baby was that her body was quick to recover from various states. She woke up easy, and once awake didn’t take long at all to be alert. No need to wait for breakfast! Of course the downside was definitely waking up wet. Ugh. Changing service, please! Where was a suitable adult?

Almost as if summoned by her thoughts - or more likely, by noticing her wake - Red Papa filled up her vision and scooped her out of her crib.

A glance around the room confirmed that Big Brother was at his desk. His dog was waggling at Red Papa’s ankles, trying to lick one of Luo Lingxi’s feet; but she was much too high up to reach. Red Papa shooed Lady away and the little dog went obediently sat at Shen Jiu’s side instead, while her brother told them to get lost because he was busy.

When Luo Lingxi babbled a goodbye at Shen Jiu he nevertheless smiled.

~

In her old life, Luo Lingxi’s eldest brother had traveled a lot.
He’d been older than her by quite a few years, and already set to inherit their parents’ business matters by the time she was born. Eldest Brother had been a major over-achiever, but not terribly principled either. He was the sort of person who would cheat to get ahead and only care about it if someone caught him or could prove it. Image was everything, reputation was everything, but actual work ethics? Trash! Forget them! Why do things the hard way if there was an easier one? Why be honest if it was more beneficial to lie? Why stick to legitimate dealings if you could have more success with criminal bullshit?

Eldest Brother had always been full of big ideas, and often got himself into hot water for it. He never learned. People tended to keep her and her youngest big brother in the dark, but she knew that there were incidents involving him that had caused serious upheaval in the family, and that their parents had bailed him out of some very big trouble more than once. In an effort to try and curtail the amount of sticky situations he could get into, they had sent Eldest Brother on trips very often. The reasoning being that it was harder for him to get up to mischief if he never stayed in one place long enough to make connections there.

By the time she’d grown up, Eldest Brother had officially acquired enough wanderlust of his own that he just naturally took to it. Expanding business dealings was something he was good at. So, he was away a lot, and mostly communicated with everyone else through the internet.

Despite his troubles - and the fact that his shady business dealings had probably gotten her killed - Luo Lingxi had liked her Eldest Brother. When she was tiny she’d pouted a lot at him being gone, but had also enjoyed a lot of spoiling on account of it. Eldest Brother was too distant to ever be close with her, but she looked forward to seeing him whenever he wandered back home. He always brought gifts. The messages he sent, too, were usually funny, and he never failed to take pictures of interesting things for her to look at. She’d had a pretty collection of trinkets and curiosities he’d brought back with him from abroad. It was nicer than doing too much traveling herself, she’d thought, because airports were such a hassle, but photos and videos and exotic goods were the best parts anyway!

But nevertheless, when she managed to glean that her new Big Brother was going away on some kind of business trip she felt a familiar reluctance overcome her.

Shen Jiu played at being aloof - badly. There was a reason he reminded her more of her favourite bro than her eldest one, after all, and it was because he seemed like an enormous homebody to her. The sort of person who liked nice things but was much too delicate to be subjected to a lot of hassle or conflict. Despite his best efforts, after all, he had such an obvious soft belly that pretty much everyone had picked up on it. Luo Lingxi had to listen to their parents worrying from one evening to the next about him ‘branching off on his own’, and she felt like their concerns were valid. Big Brother might have had an older body than hers, but he was still young! He was a tiny dude, fragile like spun sugar!
Well, okay, no, in fairness she was pretty sure he could… probably kick a lot of ass. If he wanted to. He owned a sword and seemed to have superpowers just like the rest of the family, and a lot of the servants spoke of him in the same sort of hushed whispers used when a person didn’t want to risk drawing the notice of a malevolent spirit. But still. This world was full of dangerous stuff! Zombies and monster birds and giant spiders and shit!

Who wanted to go out into that? Wasn’t it crazy? Just stay home and dote on your cute baby sister, Big Brother!

But nobody could really stop a bird from flying out of the nest. Least of all another, much smaller bird who didn’t even have the motor skills to form coherent sentences yet. If Big Brother wanted to go on adventures… okay. Okay. She would support him! Spiritually, anyway. And maybe with some enthusiastic burbling!

Luo Lingxi found herself thinking about when she woke up at night. Her gums were itching again, and even though it was dark, she didn’t feel sleepy. Sometimes that happened. Baby bodies could be weird; she supposed if she was a normal baby, she’d probably cry for her parents or something. But since she wasn’t, and she didn’t really want to make a fuss at the moment, she just sat awake and chewed on her fingers and thought about the brothers she’d had and the trouble they tended to get into.

She tried not to wonder too much about what had happened to her original older brothers. The two who hadn’t died before her, anyway. It seemed like the sort of question she would never get an answer to, and that was difficult to reconcile.

Better to just not try. What else could she do anyway? She was a baby! If you can’t handle something, just ignore it until it goes away! That had practically been their family motto in her last life…

Unfortunately, her efforts to avoid thinking about the wrong things didn’t work out so well. Before too long she found herself thinking that even if he was an idiot who had gotten her killed, she hoped her eldest brother sorted his shit out. And her second eldest brother, she hoped he was taking better care of himself. He’d always been the one rushing to defend his younger siblings; the reliable one who only got into hot water because he was trying to drag someone else out of it. She hoped her favourite brother had gotten a chance like this one, that he’d been reborn into some fantastical place full of people who loved him and doted on him.

But she didn’t know.
She didn’t know what would become of her friends without her. Or her parents. How they really would take her death. Ah! It was hard! Why was she thinking about this?! She’d never even been all that close with most of her family, and yet…

It was hard to leave a life behind.

Soon enough Luo Lingxi found her eyes were welling up. She didn’t burst into wailing tears like most babies, in fact she barely even sniffled. Still, she couldn’t say she was surprised when a figure came a few moments later and leaned over her crib. Her parents seemed to have ridiculously over-developed senses. Red Papa especially; and it was Red Papa who made a soft, soothing sound and scooped her up into his arms. Red Papa who rubbed her back and then worriedly checked her mouth, and pressed a gentle finger to the itching soreness of her gums.

Luo Lingxi bit down without thinking. Gah! She didn’t want to bite her papa, what the heck?! But instead of making trouble, the action just seemed to fill her mouth with a gentle tingling sensation. She hadn’t quite realized exactly how bad she was feeling until the soothing energy seemed to spread through her and inspired a lot more relief than she would have expected.

Her wet eyes drooped shut. Red Papa gently rocked her, then carried her back to Green Papa’s bed with him.

This also wasn’t a surprise. Most nights, if Red Papa was the one who got up to check on her, then he’d bring her back to bed with him. At first she’d even spent the majority of nights sleeping with both of her parents - until she started getting big enough to try and climb or roll down and crawl away. What? It was was boring to just lie there! And she didn’t want to disturb everyone else! Green Papa usually at least tried to put her back in her crib, but Red Papa never bothered. Sometimes she’d even found herself semi-roused from an otherwise peaceful sleep to the feeling of him carrying her with him and settling her in between himself and Green Papa.

He always blamed her when Green Papa asked. ‘Oh, Ling-er wouldn’t settle’. Bullshit! She was a very good baby, thank you! Very well-behaved! Red Papa was such a liar! But she didn’t really begrudge him over it either. It was… it was really nice, actually.

Green Papa rolled over as they settled in. He murmured a question that she honestly couldn’t make heads or tails of, but Red Papa answered him anyway.

“Teething,” he said quietly. “She was hurting.”
Luo Lingxi wanted to protest. No! Don’t say it! Maybe it no one said it, she wouldn’t have to deal with it, ah!

She forgave Red Papa for bursting her bubble when he gently rubbed her tummy.

Green Papa made a sound like someone had hurt him, and then brushed one of her cheeks with his finger. That felt nice too. There was more pleasant tingling. Luo Lingxi let out a soft coo of approval, even as she felt herself getting sleepier. She wanted to stay awake to kind of enjoy the comfort, to be honest, but alas it wasn’t to be. Green Papa kissed her curls and Red Papa held them both, and Luo Lingxi was irresistibly lulled into a deep and restful sleep.

The next day, Green Papa kept her with him the whole day. He wouldn’t even let Red Papa take her off to any meetings or anything. Instead, Luo Lingxi was presented with several new toys to chew on and these were maybe her favourites of all time, because they made her mouth tingle and soothed her gums and were really weird but also cool. She only stopped munching on them when her face got tired, or when she was being fed actual food instead. Green Papa fussed over her so much she actually felt bad for him. Part of her wished she could assure him that she was more than capable of handling a little physical discomfort. No pain no gain! It sucked, but she wasn’t actually a baby with no idea of what was going on or why her mouth hurt. She knew, it was weirdly embarrassing and bound to be unpleasant and also felt like a rip-off since she’d ostensibly already done it a lifetime ago and had taken VERY good care of her oral hygiene in that life, thank, but at the end of his debacle she was gonna get teeth out of the deal.

She was gonna be able to eat meat again! Heck yeah!

Of course, another part of her was certain she could never ever EVER tell either of her Papas the truth because holy shit no. These guys so clearly loved their baby. Luo Lingxi wouldn’t dare hurt them by making them think she was anything else. More and more often she was even finding herself wishing that she wasn’t. Why did she keep her memories? That wasn’t normal for reincarnation, was it? Then again, nothing about this really seemed ‘normal’. But still.

It just seemed to make things harder. She wasn’t sure if she was glad she still remembered her past life or if she hated it. It didn’t seem right to wish away her memories - it felt like wishing away too much of herself. Or being ungrateful to her first family. But on the other hand, Green Papa and Red Papa deserved a baby that was all theirs. They were such good parents. And Luo Lingxi found she… she really wanted to be theirs. She missed her old life, but she was sure she’d never felt so cherished in those days as she was in this one. Maybe it had been like this when she was a baby the last time too though. Maybe she would get older and discover that it all faded away when she wasn’t cute and portable anymore.

But somehow she doubted it. Somehow this just felt different.
She loved her new family. It hadn’t taken long at all. So she was afraid that if they ever realized the truth about her, that she wasn’t ‘really’ their baby, that they’d be devastated and wouldn’t… well…”

Anyway. It didn’t matter so much in the end. Luo Lingxi still wasn’t good enough at communicating to convey a complicated notion like that, and so all that remained was to be as good of a baby as could be. So she smiled for Green Papa when he seemed too worried, and chewed on her toys, and indulged in cuddles, and didn’t even try to wander off out of his sight or get up to any shenanigans more complicated than her continued efforts at speech and mobility.

It seemed to work. By the end of the day Green Papa had calmed down, enough so that he even let Red Papa take over minding her for a while.

Of course, Red Papa might have let Green Papa take over the fretting for some reason, but he seemed even more visibly distraught about the whole deal.

These two. What dorks! They honestly were the kind of softies that the world enjoyed chewing up and spitting back out, so it was a good thing that they had a tough daughter who’d be able to look after them when she was older!

Still. Uncle Shang’s comments kept sticking in her head, about people in her family having gone through hardships. From what she’d seen this world was more fantastical and magical than the one she remembered, but it wasn’t any nicer. People still got poisoned and shit, after all! Luo Lingxi tried to imagine her parents or brother or uncles going through hardships, and she couldn’t do it. Her mind shied away defensively, and when it didn’t she felt herself getting all puffed up and angry like she used to whenever someone tried to bully one of her friends or her sickly brother in her past life. Not allowed! No! She needed her punching muscles back ASAP!

In a fit of rage Luo Lingxi picked up one of her stuffed dolls and thwacked it against the floor. Take that bad guys! Whoever you were! And that, and that, and THAT! Ha!

The doll exploded.

Luo Lingxi blinked.

Wow. That was a surprisingly shoddy toy, huh? Couldn’t even take a little rough treatment…”
She examined the remains and noticed that her papas were looking at her in surprise. After a few silent beats, she held up the tattered remnants of the destroyed doll.

“Oops,” she said.

Surprisingly, Green Papa recovered first.

“Ling-er won her fight, hm?” he pronounced. Like it had been a mini gladiatorial match and not just some light toy-thwacking. Luo Lingxi dropped the largest remnants of the doll back down again and started picking up the chunks of stuffing. Red Papa hurried over at that point, making soothing sounds as if he worried she’d be distressed.

“Don’t worry, baby, Papa will fix the dolly! We can put her back together! Ling-er didn’t mean to explode her toy, right? It’s okay, accidents happen. Sometimes we use too much strength…”

Green Papa looked at Red Papa with an expression that said he fully believed Ling-er had meant to beat the ever-loving shit out of her dolly. Which was accurate, so, fair. Luo Lingxi still beamed at her other papa though and helped him pick up all the pieces, and let him fuss about her apparent ‘distress’ at ‘accidentally’ killing her toy while he went and got his sewing kit.

In the end it was Green Papa who stitched the doll back together, though, and it was Red Papa who seemed to need the most comforting.

“She doesn’t know her strength,” he murmured.

Green Papa patted his head.

“It’s alright, Binghe. She has plenty of time to learn, and toys can be fixed in the meanwhile.”

“It’s so easy to break things by mistake…”

“It wasn’t a mistake, Ling-er meant to bash this thing to bits.”
True.

“But she loves her toys!”

Also true, they spoiled her rotten.

“She was angry. She’s teething. So she took it out on the doll.”

“She would not deliberately destroy something she loves…”


Luo Lingxi blinked in surprise at his choice of terms. Oh? They had phrases like that in this world too, huh? Seemed a little casual for him, but then again, whenever Green Papa and Uncle Shang were together their speech patterns got a lot more relaxed. Maybe they both had secret low class backgrounds!

Actually that would make a lot of sense…

She distracted Red Papa by presenting him with another, not-broken toy, and resolved to not bash anything else when he was around. How was this the same guy who basically told demons in his office to go fuck themselves when they annoyed him? It was a mystery…

Later on, after her evening meal, Red Papa convinced Green Papa to take a break and read for a while and stayed to play with her instead. He settled Luo Lingxi in his lap, and then produced a colourful wooden rattle-type toy.

“Look, Ling-er!” he cooed.

Pretty neat! Luo Lingxi was about to reach for it, but then Red Papa produced a tiny drum, too. Double neat! No one had given her instruments to try out yet. Understandably. She’d seen plenty around, though, Green Papa played and so did Big Brother. Red Papa beamed at her and set down
the little drum, and started hitting it with the stick.

“See?” he said. “Doesn’t it look like fun? Let’s try.”

He handed over the stick and moved the drum so it was in front of her.

Alright! Time to make some noise!

She had no idea if she’d been a ‘banging pots and pans’ kind of kid when she was an actual child. She’d had a nanny at that age but her parents had fired her when Luo Lingxi was around three or four, as she understood it - there had been a lot of nannies until she was old enough to be trusted to school and the care of general servants and older brothers. But hey, whether or not she had been last time, bashing a drum seemed like it could definitely be fun!

Luo Lingxi hit the drum with the stick.

It made a satisfying ‘bong’ sound.

With Red Papa’s encouragement, she kept going. She didn’t really try and make any actual music. That seemed conspicuously un-baby-like to her, and she had a ruse going on still. Mostly. Well, suffice it to say she wasn’t eager to somehow break the truth to anybody yet. But just bashing the heck out of a drum was also pretty good. Red Papa swayed like he was dancing to music anyway and Luo Lingxi wiggled around too, getting into it and thwacking the drum around until, after a few minutes, she brought the wooden stick down much harder than she meant to.

*Crack* went the stick.

The drum made a terrible breaking noise too.

Luo Lingxi watched in surprise as the thick wooden stick snapped in half. The broken end went flying across the room. The top of the drum split open and it, too, went flying. Or rather spinning. It turned like a top and skidded to a halt, still in one piece but definitely broken when it finally rolled to a halt.

Silence ensued.
Luo Lingxi looked up at Red Papa.

Red Papa looked down at her.

“Oops?” she offered.

Red Papa smiled softly and patted her head.

“Oops,” he agreed. “That’s alright. Ling-er is very strong. Papa had some strength bursts when he was very tiny too!”

Strength bursts…?

Luo Lingxi looked at the stick she’d broken. The doll she’d exploded had, admittedly, been something of a surprise. But it had also been a doll. If the stitching was just too cruddy or the material weak in some places, it was hardly surprising to see it break. She’d seen Lady rip apart similarly soft toys by bashing them around as well; sometimes Big Brother gave her little stitched mice to ‘hunt’ around the room.

But the wooden drum stick wasn’t made out of a paper towel tube or anything like that. It wasn’t a light wood either. It was thick, solid, like a table leg. The drum, too, despite being a toy, was clearly not a lightweight or frivolous one.

…She was pretty strong for a baby, huh?

Luo Lingxi looked back at Red Papa and offered him the broken half of the stick as apology.

“It’s alright,” he cooed, taking it from her but then putting it down and showering her in kisses instead. Lifting her up, he even gave her a few playful tosses to distract her. “Being strong is good! Papa’s so proud of his little girl! We’ll just have to make some special play time to practice, hm? We don’t want Ling-er to break important things by accident, or hurt anybody by mistake. Right?”

There was a certain kind of worry in his eyes. Luo Lingxi let her adult mind take over for a second.
She was a baby - a magic demon baby. Red Papa loved her, she knew. So that worry… it was probably for the hardships of being strong enough to break things without meaning to, right? Maybe he’d done something as a small child. Unintentionally hurt someone or broken something important, something that made him think this might cause problems for her, too.

Luo Lingxi wasn’t so worried. She wasn’t a true baby, after all - in fact that was probably the reason why it had taken her so long to realize she was much stronger than a normal infant. Babies used their full strength on things all the time, but she was already used to not doing that, to knowing how to modulate her effort so that it was just whatever was needed to accomplish her goals. She wouldn’t hurt anyone by accident. She might still break a few things but… well. She’d try and handle important stuff carefully! And maybe not bash any toys in front of Red Papa anymore, either…

Although…

Did this mean it was going to be even harder for her to build up muscle mass?! If she was super strong then wouldn’t it take ten times the effort to get a workout done?! Ah! Shit! What was she going to have to, figure out some kind of work out routine where she was weight-lifting whole carriages…?

…Actually that sounded pretty cool. Maybe she could even get some beautiful ladies to sit on fancy couches and lift them up while they laughed and clapped. She’d always wanted to do that!

Smiling, Luo Lingxi patted Red Papa’s face and cooed back at him.

He didn’t need to fret! She had this in the bag. Super strength! Heck yes!

~

Okay so maybe the ‘super strength’ business was a little more complicated than she’d initially given it credit for.

Luo Lingxi and Lady both stared with matching incredulous gazes at the wreckage of Lady’s cute little dog basket. After a few moments of silent contemplation, Lady turned her head and licked her
cheek. Very, very carefully, Luo Lingxi patted the dog’s back and then got onto her unsteady legs.

Big Brother had left on his important business trip a few days ago. He had pretended like he wasn’t going to miss anyone while he carried Luo Lingxi everywhere and let Green Papa fuss over his things, and acted (really badly) like he was indifferent when Red Papa patted his shoulder and gave him a box of snacks for the trip. She hadn’t been able to gather much about where he was going except that it was some kind of ‘border’ place, and also that Uncle Shang and Uncle Ice Guy’s son was going with him.

Luo Lingxi had yet to meet her big cousin, or her new, less big cousin - Uncle Shang hadn’t been back since the Baby Scandal broke, and nobody else was gossiping about it around her; much to her frustration - so it seemed like that could go either way. Was Big Brother heading out with someone like Uncle Ice Guy? Or somebody more like Uncle Shang? No offense to Uncle Shang but honestly she figured Uncle Icy Guy was better for like, bodyguard type stuff. Just going off their vibes.

Before he finally managed to leave, Big Brother asked Green Papa to make sure his servants took good care of his dog. Sure enough, as soon as he was gone, Green Papa did what he always did whenever Big Brother left for a while and had the servants relocate Lady and her things to his own courtyard.

Much as she already missed Big Brother, Luo Lingxi was excited. Dog! Playmate! Dogs were even more fun when you were a baby, just for the record. She’d forgot how ecstatic animals made people at this age. Plus they were more or less the same size! And Green Papa wasn’t as fussy as Big Brother about letting her get her face licked off. Red Papa also didn’t like to leave her to just play with Lady; she’d thought he worried about the dog accidentally nipping her too, like Big Brother, but now…

Actually, maybe it was the opposite?

Luo Lingxi would never hurt a dog but she had to admit, if she yanked on Lady’s ears or tail the way a normal baby might, with her super strength… yeah, that would be bad. They’d just been playing tug with the dog basket and somehow it had ended up all broken too.

With another gentle pat, Luo Lingxi peered at Lady’s mouth. But the dog didn’t look hurt at all. It had been a team effort to destroy the bed! Did Lady have super strength too?

…Nah. Just sharp teeth, like most dogs.
Satisfied, she used the nearby wall to help turn herself to where Green Papa was quietly sitting and reading his book.

“Ba!” she called.

Green Papa looked over.

Plonking back down, Luo LINGxi pointed at the ruined dog basket.

Green Papa frowned and came over.

“What happened here?” he asked. “Weren’t you two just playing nicely? Did a little goblin vandal get in somehow?”

Definitely. Yup. That was indeed what happened.

Green Papa snorted in amusement when Luo Lingxi nodded and Lady wagged her tail. He bent down and picked up the ruined basket, and confirmed that it was, indeed, pretty damn broken. It had cracked down the middle. It happened all at once, really! She hadn’t been pulling that hard, just enough to make Lady slide in circles on the floor while she held on with her mouth…

…Okay maybe they should have just done that with the rope toy. In hindsight.

Why did people make such shoddy dog baskets anyway?

With a tut Green Papa set the broken basket aside to get thrown out. He took the soft cushion off of it - well the cushion was fine - and then headed over to one of the cabinets in the next room. Probably to get a spare basket. Luo Lingxi patted Lady’s fur and waited for him to come right back.

A minute passed.
Then another minute passed.

With a soft whine, Lady padded into the same room Green Papa had gone into. Luo Lingxi frowned and got back up, and toddled unsteadily after them. Walking was still a work in progress but she could do it for short distances, especially with stuff to hold onto. The next room wasn’t far.

When she got there she found Green Papa standing in front of an open wardrobe. There were some spare bedding pieces in it, a rolled up mattress, and a few other things. Green Papa had set down the pillow from Lady’s bed, and with both hands was holding another basket. It looked like a dog basket too, but it was lined with soft red cushions. Luo Lingxi hadn’t seen it before. It looked as if Papa had been dusting it off and had plucked a short hair from it.

He was staring at the hair.

And he…

Was he… crying…?

“Baba?” Luo Lingxi called.

Green Papa looked over at her. He shook himself as if he was coming up out of deep water, and then smiled at her like he had no idea that there were tears on his face. Luo Lingxi’s heart clenched. She was suddenly, viscerally reminded of a time in her past life when her third older brother’s gerbil had died. It had been a curious little animal, tidy enough to keep her brother company while he was bedridden, but also prone to playfulness and displays of acrobatics and running around. Gerbils were colony animals, though, and despite her brother’s concerns about his pet getting lonely, their parents refused to let him have more than one. So of course her third brother had done his best to make up the difference and had doted on his pet excessively. When the little animal died he said it was only to be expected; such pets never lived long.

Second eldest brother had been the one to point out that he was crying. Rather than talking about it any further, her third brother had then locked himself in his room and refused to come out until they promised not to bring up the gerbil again.

Luo Lingxi looked at the red basket.
...Oh.

Of course. Of course Lady would not have been the first dog anybody had. Why hadn’t she thought of that before? Naturally, people who kept pets might have owned others in the past. That basket had probably belonged to a dog Green Papa owned in the past.

“Well, this should do for now,” her papa said. Still crying.

Luo Lingxi’s heart still ached too.

Who said her papa was allowed to look so sad? What kind of classless magical universe was this? Dogs still died here? That was bullshit. Who gave permission for that? Huh?

An unhappy noise escaped her.

“What’s wrong?” Green Papa asked. He put down the red basket and went over to her. His throat bobbed like it felt thick as he swallowed and then scooped her up. Luo Lingxi couldn’t help it. She wasn’t trying to be upset, but seeing the tears still on Green Papa’s cheeks, what else she could be? She was still a baby, even if she remembered a whole past life! Reaching out she gently batted a hand on the wet face across from her.

“Ah? What... oh,” Green Papa realized, wiping at his own face. “Oh, no, it’s alright. Your father’s not sad. Ha! How silly of him. No, no, he’s not sad, Ling-er doesn’t need to be upset either…”

Bullshit!

BULLSHIT!

He was clearly sad! Very sad!

Luo Lingxi let out an aggrieved sound that somehow hiccuped into a cry. Her face started to get hot. Dammit! Now this idiot was trying to not be upset so she was being upset, it was the stupid gerbil all over again... it hadn’t even been her gerbil but she’d cried over the silly thing too, and now it wasn’t even a dog she’d met but here it was, because Green Papa was CLEARLY SAD!
Clearly! And if he wasn’t going to do a proper job just accepting it then - then, somehow still had to, right?

“Shh, no, oh no,” Green Papa tried to soothe. But it was working. Luo Lingxi started to cry and sure enough, her papa was too weak from having already cried himself to pull himself back together either. His voice cracked as he tried to soothe her, and more tears started to spill from his eyes. Lady whined and jumped up at his legs while Green Papa cuddled her close and rocked her, and also cried into her hair.

That was how Red Papa found them an indeterminate length of time later. He hurried into the room looking as though he’d run from the other end of the palace with a worried expression on his face. Luo Lingxi wondered if he had some kind of detector alarm for if everyone started going to pieces while he was away. Or maybe just a magic sixth sense for it?

“Shizun?” he asked, coming over. “What happened?”

Green Papa looked over at him. He was a total wreck. Luo Lingxi knew she wasn’t any better but it ought to be illegal for her new parents to look sad, it was too awful.

“Everything’s fine,” he said. It wasn’t convincing. His voice broken and his eyes were red and wet and he moved toward Red Papa, clearly expecting to be held and not getting anything less. Red Papa gathered them both into his arms, letting Luo Lingxi be squished comfortably between them while he cradled the back of Green Papa’s head and made a comforting sound.

After a few minutes of soothing Luo Lingxi got Red Papa’s attention and pointed at the basket which had started all of this meltdown.

Recognition crossed Red Papa’s features.

He patted her head and Green Papa’s back, and then steered them all back into the other room.

“Let’s go somewhere more comfortable,” he said. “Shizun and Ling-er are surely dehydrated after all the upset, this lord will get some things for us to drink.”

Green Papa let himself be coddled, although once they were situated onto his couch, he also managed to look embarrassed. Red Papa didn’t let him get away with it for long. Instead he kissed
his cheeks and fussed over his cushions and acted a hundred times more embarrassing. Luo Lingxi developed a sudden appreciation for the technique. It seemed that her Red Papa knew his husband’s temperament pretty well, and was willing to make himself the most silly person in the room if only to spare Green Papa the trouble of feeling that way instead.

Luo Lingxi helped.

She hiccuped and let a few more tears out, which immediately gave Green Papa something else to focus on as he fussed over her in return. Lady jumped up and tried to lick their faces, which also gave him plenty of distraction.

“Allright, alright,” he said gently, after a few minutes of this. “There wasn’t even any reason for all that.”

Yes there was! Green Papa got sad!

Luo Lingxi huffed and crammed a fist into her mouth. Her thoughts just turned to the fact that on top of everything her gums were sore again when Green Papa seemed to realize the same thing. “Binghe, bring one of Ling-er’s teething toys, please?” he requested.

“Allright away, Shizun!”

Red Papa turned up with cool drinks and one of Luo Lingxi’s hard, round teething rings. The frosty kind. She eagerly picked it up and jammed it into her mouth. Green Papa tutted and arranged her more comfortably, and Red Papa also produced a cloth and bowl of fresh water and set about wiping both of their faces for them.

When he had finished, Green Papa let out a freeing sort of sigh of release.

“All that fuss over teething,” he tutted.

“Mm. Ling-er also misses A-Jiu,” Red Papa suggested.

“It’s probably made her more sensitive.”
“This lord wouldn’t be surprised if a few more episodes like these happened before he got back.”

Green Papa shook his head.

“We’ll just have to keep her distracted he reasoned.”

Excuse her? Hello? *Excuse* her? WHO was upset? Well okay she got there *eventually* but it DEFINITELY was not her fault that this all started! This was slander! Misrepresenting the situation! Her dignity was being besmirched and Green Papa was weaseling his way out of talking about his dead dog or cat or whichever it was, and Red Papa was aiding and abetting this deliberate shifting of responsibility! She puffed out her cheeks around her toy and made a sound of aggravation.

Immediately both of her parents start coddling her again.

…Well…

Okay, okay, *fine*.

Let him blame the upset on her. There were worse things than being the scapegoat. For now anyway, while she was still a baby and not allowed much dignity anyhow.

But seriously! What would these guys do without her around to be their excuse all the time, huh? They were nearly as lucky she’d been born as she was.

Which… was really lucky, in fact.
Mu Qingfang woke up in a daze.

His head was pounding. His spiritual veins were very obviously agitated - intoxication? Poison? Some kind of spiritual energy transfer had taken place. In the hazy mindset of pre-waking his thoughts grasped at straws, assessing the problem with something not quite like clinical detachment. He was too disoriented for that, but too distant from reality to for anything else. Lingering intoxication effects… his body ached. Where? Hips, calves, backs of the shoulders, throat, mouth, waist, and genitals.

…Ah.

He remembered.
Opening his eyes, Mu Qingfang looked with dread towards the other side of his mattress.

Early morning light was diffused into geometric shapes by the windows overhead. Clothes were strewn across the floor of his room. The door to his medicinal herb garden was still partly open. One of his wardrobes had been tilted, knocked sideways by some collision. His mind took note of these things in the background of his thoughts while most of his attention focused on the naked man in his bed.

Luo Binghe.

The terrifying half-demon. Heavenly Demon. Liu Qingge’s... lord. The man whom Mu Qingfang had kept supplied in stealth charms and amulets for the better part of a year, until he’d stopped hiding his demonic heritage altogether. Shen Qingqiu’s former apprentice. Luo Binghe, who had grown from a tragic child to a miserable youth to a conflicted young man to this, this demon lord who had not shown up at Mu Qingfang’s doorstep in months. No need, he’d supposed. They weren’t exactly friends. Mu Qingfang had not received an invitation to his wedding - nor to his subsequent ones, though he had heard tell of them. The last time Luo Binghe had deigned to stop by it was on his usual business. Dumping an injured party and the required payment on Mu Qingfang’s doorstep before heading off again. Prior to that, there had been a few instances of him bringing individuals suffering from unusual spiritual depletion and signs of sexual trauma instead.

He had been glad, in many ways, not to have Luo Binghe darken his doorstep for so long.

In many ways more he had worried. It had been even longer since he had seen or heard anything of Liu Qingge.

But last night...

Last night. He had seen Luo Binghe again. One of the local brothel girls had come by to let him know that Yang Yixuan and Liu Mingyan had turned up again, intent on compelling some of their peers to join them in another attack on Huan Hua Palace. Luo Binghe had somehow seized control of that place, and ever since he had done, members of the Liu clan and others connected to Luo Binghe’s swiftly-growing harem had chosen it as a focal point for their ire. Some party of cultivators from one major clan or other was celebrating a successful hunt at the brothel, and apparently the young sword experts had seen an opportunity to make another strike against the man who was, now, lying in Mu Qingfang’s room.

So he had gone, of course. Somehow that had become a new segment of his life. Well, ‘somehow’. Before he had agreed to marry Luo Binghe, Liu Qingge had asked Mu Qingfang to keep an eye on
his sister. There hadn’t been much else he could do, or so it seemed to him. Liu Qingge was convinced that marrying Luo Binghe was the only honorable course of action left open to him. He had taken it. The demon realms were far from the capital, and few people had seen Luo Binghe’s First Husband since the wedding procession carried him off.

It was a hard pill to swallow. Mu Qingfang did not blame those who refused to accept it. He himself was hardly satisfied with the situation. However, he knew Luo Binghe cared about Liu Qingge. And he knew, also, that Liu Qingge was not at Huan Hua Palace. Liu Mingyan and Yang Yixuan were fighting a fruitless battle, risking their own reputations and risking the ire of numerous cultivators whose allegiance Luo Binghe had somehow managed to win, all over a course of action that would never accomplish what they wanted it to.

Fortunately, it hadn’t taken much to talk the pair down. That time. The cultivators at the brothel were from Yunmeng and Lanling, and were not the staunch allies of anyone present. They had only a tenuous connection to Liu Qingge via Yue Qingyuan; Lord Jiang had married Yue Qingyuan’s disowned half sister, which was… barely anything to build an association off of. The bigger problem was when a few cutting tongues ventured disparaging remarks about Liu Qingge’s character; then Mu Qingfang found himself holding two hot-blooded young warriors back from defending it.

“This will only make more trouble for him,” was the rebuke that finally got Liu Mingyan, at least, to step back and away. Yang Yixuan was more frustrated, but one of the brothel’s more diplomatically inclined employees managed to insert himself into the conversation; and then after about ten minutes, Liu Qingge’s former apprentice was pouring out his sorrows in a tastefully sequestered side room to someone who specialized in offering a willing ear, while Liu Mingyan apologized for troubling Mu Qingfang and flew home.

The wake of the incident left Mu Qingfang feeling hollowed out and drained.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t understand. Liu Qingge was… it was complicated. He himself didn’t know what should be done. If anything could be, in the end. Even with his own perspective on demonic matters, that just seemed to leave him at an even further loss. All he knew for certain was that fruitless conflict would lead to further trouble - not solutions.

He was about to take his own leave at that point, when a presence made itself known at his elbow.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

“Healer Mu,” a rich, low voice greeted him.
Mu Qingfang swallowed down his reflexive alarm. It was an instinctual thing. Heavenly Demons were very, very powerful - and Mu Qingfang’s demon blood was not. He was not a fighter by nature either, and while it was rare for him to feel intimidated, he could concede that his instincts were not entirely foolish in alerting him to danger every time this one was nearby.

“Lord Luo,” he acknowledged politely, nevertheless.

The demon lord was dressed in nondescript red and black clothing. He was wearing a mask - a popular game at this particular brothel. His hair was slicked straight, half down and half up. Much of his demonic aura was being surprised by some technique, which was probably why Mu Qingfang hadn’t noticed him sooner.

Luo Binghe smiled.

“It seems Healer Mu is owed some appreciation,” he said. “Those two were very worked up. Such a shame when family does not support one another.”

Many powerful men with full harems made a point of frequenting brothels. But Luo Binghe had never struck Mu Qingfang as that type. Even with his… apparently libidinous reputation, he honestly seemed more the sort to require some kind of connection to the person he was with. But Mu Qingfang had been wrong before and he would certainly not bat an eyelash at being proven wrong about this, either.

However, it seemed a painful coincidence that Luo Binghe would happen to be frequenting the same brothel were Liu Mingyan and Yang Yixuan were to be found stirring up trouble.

“Appreciation is not required,” he said. “People act reckless when they feel worried. Perhaps Lord Luo would foster better harmony if he observed more traditional practices in his marriage.” Liu Qingge had certainly not paid a return home visit to his maiden family, after all.

Luo Binghe hummed noncommittally.

“We observe what traditions we can. Unfortunately, this misunderstanding may persist a while,” he replied.
“I am sorry to hear that,” Mu Qingfang said, with full honesty.

A slight wave dismissed his concerns.

“No matter. It is good to know that there are some who will defend this lord’s reputation even when he himself cannot.” Luo Binghe’s smile took on a friendlier quality, though it was hard to discern the tilt of his eyes through the mask he was wearing. “Healer Mu has never misunderstood me.”

Mu Qingfang could only incline his head in acknowledgement.

“That's good. Then, I’ll be leaving first,” he concluded.

“So soon?” Luo Binghe objected. One of his hands reached out and gently stalled Mu Qingfang by grasping his elbow. “It has been a long time since this lord and Healer Mu crossed paths. Even longer since there was not some unpleasant matter at the heart of it.”

“Unpleasant matters are customary for a man in my line of work,” Mu Qingfang replied. His mouth was dry. These days, the lord looking at him had become something of an unpleasant matter in and of himself.

Luo Binghe chuckled.

“Perhaps so. Perhaps for a man in my line of work as well. Conquest is ugly business. Still - I am not here as ‘Lord Luo’ tonight, and the evening is just beginning. Come in, let me buy Healer Mu a drink. We can talk. Surely Healer Mu would like to know how First Husband is doing?”

Mu Qingfang hesitated.

The hesitation was enough to seal his fate. Luo Binghe did not manhandle him by any means, but he was keenly aware of the fact that the hand which settled into the crook of his elbow would be able to break every bone in his body, if so inclined.

“I don’t really drink…” he nevertheless tried to protest.
“A meal, then,” Luo Binghe insisted. “This way when I return home, I will be able to tell First Husband as well how his friend is doing.”

It felt like an inescapable fate, at that point, to be drawn back into the brothel. Luo Binghe procured them a room with a view of the dancers who were performing on a nearby terrace. The next building over was a brothel as well - Mu Qingfang was not certain, in fact, if both were owned by the same proprietor or not - and the revelries taking place there were lively and quite visible as well. Both houses were reputable enough that the displays were sensual, but not lewd. Still fit for public viewing.

“This lord noticed one of the girls run out when those two people began stirring up some trouble,” Luo Binghe said, after ordering the promised meal. He lounged elegantly across from Mu Qingfang, somehow managing to look as if he owned the place. To think, this was the same man who had once seemed uncertain of every room he walked into as a youth. “What hard times have befallen Healer Mu, that he is now being summoned to come chase off trouble makers from a mature establishment? Is this not the same Healer Mu whose summons once required the courtesy of a high-ranking household member?”

Luo Binghe’s tone was not insulting, merely curious.

Mu Qingfang did not feel at ease.

“The Liu estate is some ways away from here. Most likely, it was hoped that as a friend of the family, I would be willing to intervene for Miss Liu’s sake,” he reasoned.

“And so Healer Mu did,” Luo Binghe noted. “Does Healer Mu have many friends in the Liu clan?”

“Some,” Mu Qingfang hedged.

“There is this lord’s First Husband, of course.”

“Liu Qingge was this physician’s patient through many ordeals.”

“Indeed. He has only ever mentioned Healer Mu with praise for his skills. I am relieved to know
that I will not need to inform him of any loss of reputation on Healer Mu’s part, and he will doubtless appreciate knowing that Mingyan is being looked after as well.”

Clearing his throat, Mu Qingfang resettled himself in place.

“So how does Lord Luo’s First Husband fare?” he politely inquired.

Something crossed Luo Binghe’s features. There and gone again, too quick to discern the meaning of.

“Adjusting has been a challenge for him,” he admitted. “But he is very strong. Of course, as this lord’s husband, no expense is spared on him either. He has the finest clothes, the finest food, books, treasures, everything his lord can still bring him from this world that he might need, and anything his heart desires from the demonic realms as well.”

“Is he happy?” Mu Qingfang asked.

The shadow flit across Luo Binghe’s masked expression again.

“His lord strives every day to provide him with a good life.”

Silence fell between them. It was weighted with a kind of grim understanding. Mu Qingfang knew, then, that Liu Qingge was in fact not doing well. It was easy to tell from what had been said and not said. He did not doubt that Luo Binghe was fully capable of outright lies when so inclined, but the man also had a persistent habit of couching things in obfuscation and half-truths. Mu Qingfang was well versed in seeing past the discretion or misdirection of nobles. Luo Binghe also knew this. There was some strange fascination in him for it, even; some hunger for being known, that had persisted throughout their interactions ever since Mu Qingfang had first tipped his hand and revealed that he had insight to Luo Binghe’s mixed heritage.

In this context, the weight of a knowing silence felt dangerous. Like an accusation that was just waiting to be spoken.

Some lords, in Mu Qingfang’s experience, were ignorant. They didn’t understand what it was like to be born outside of privilege, or if they once did, then they had worked to forget it; to bury the unpleasant memories even at the expense of a broader perspective. Some
lords feared understanding other perspectives, as if it could bring them closer to a place where they’d fall from their own lofty position. Or force them to acknowledge certain aspects of their lives which they cared not to. But the ones that were simply unaware were also the ones who could benefit from that occasional accusation or twelve.

Lord Yue had been like that. If it was Lord Yue who was sitting across from Mu Qingfang, then the words would have passed his lips. *Is he still doing the things he loves? Is he fighting his battles? Does he fly upon Cheng Luan? Make his own challenges? Win his own trophies?*

*Have you forgotten who you married, yet?*

*Has he become the trophy yet?*

But Luo Binghe wasn’t ignorant. Mu Qingfang didn’t think this person had forgotten the perspective of a weak servant; if anything, he clung to it with both hands, bitter and unwilling to ever forget how much the world despised him. How many cruelties he’d been dealt as a result of that.

He was a lot like Shen Qingqiu, in that.

Ironic.

So Mu Qingfang didn’t say anything. There wouldn’t have been any point in telling Luo Binghe what he already knew, and had chosen not to remedy for his own reasons. The tense silence passed and was broken by a beautiful maiden setting out an assortment of dishes and two jars of expensive wine instead.

He drank water.

Luo Binghe’s lips twitched.

“Ah, this lord forgot. Healer Mu said he did not drink,” he noted.

“It’s fine,” Mu Qingfang replied. “The meal is more than enough. Lord Luo is very generous in
“I wonder… does Healer Mu not drink as a result of his profession?” Luo Binghe asked him, with what seemed like honest curiosity.

“Indeed,” Mu Qingfang confirmed. “Things go awry very often and at unpredictable times. I have found it is best to be sober. Drinking is not entertaining enough to merit the trouble.”

“It takes quite a lot to get a person with a half demon's constitution drunk,” Luo Binghe confessed to him. His smile was charming, his attitude relaxing even as Mu Qingfang's tensed.

Was that comment innocuous or not?

He couldn't tell.

“All things considered, that is not a surprise,” he ventured.

“Does Healer Mu know much about the physiology of Heavenly Demons?”

Mu Qingfang fought the urge to tense.

The atmosphere did not change. The question, though potentially loaded, did not actually appear to be so. But there was no way to tell for certain. He weighed his options and then decided that the truth was apparent and at least no more troublesome to admit to than any lie.

“No,” he said. “Only what I have gleaned from tended to Lord Luo himself on occasion. To my understanding, knowledge of Heavenly Demons’ bodies is not widely known even among demons.”

“Ah, that is true!” Luo Binghe agreed. “Still, Healer Mu is a keener observer than most demonic healers I have met. I had wondered if any of his training involved things from that end. Considering his access to… interesting relics.”
Mu Qingfang failed to suppress his tension at that.

“It does not,” he asserted, tone clipped.

“Oh?”

“The particulars of my education are not a secret. I studied under a single master, and my family has lived in this region for my entire life. I do not travel often. If Lord Luo is seeking someone with a broader range of knowledge, I fear he would find me disappointing. My understanding of most demonic physiology is very limited and otherwise theoretical.”

Luo Binghe waved permissively, as if his little comment had not held a world of threatening weight. Mu Qingfang warred often with regret over helping him. He wasn’t sure if he truly did or not. Most likely, he wouldn’t know for certain until a time came when Luo Binghe either betrayed him or did not.

So far, he had not.

So far, he had not even asked. Not outright.

Mu Qingfang turned his attention to the food. He wanted to be done with this encounter. The air of the brothel smelled sweet and heavy with perfumes; enough to muddle the flavour of the dishes. Luo Binghe moved a more leisurely pace. He set the sensitive topic aside and instead chatted about the quest that had ostensibly brought him back to the capital. Chasing some information it seemed, though he would not allude to the reason for it. Mu Qingfang didn’t press, but merely let the demon lord direct their conversation.

At some point in the midst of it, things became… fuzzy.

It was the air, Mu Qingfang thought. Or maybe the food. He recalled lifting his bowl to drink and tasting alcohol, and wondering when he had agreed to have a little wine. Perhaps that was the culprit. He was a physician; he recognized the signs of intoxication in himself. Unlike Luo Binghe, who had Heavenly Demon blood and what seemed to be a fully hybrid constitution, Mu Qingfang’s physiology was mostly human. He was a short man and ultimately a lightweight. So a few drinks could have done it. And yet somehow despite the presence of people seeming to be everywhere, when he looked the only actual person around was Lord Luo - and this seemed significant too.
Lord Luo, who expressed solicitous concern over his glassy eyes and flushed cheeks.

“Drugged…?” Mu Qingfang recalled murmuring. Drugged or drunk? It was a long time since he felt drunk, the difference was hard to discern from the inside.

“Ahh, Healer Mu. Forgive this lord; you really can’t handle your drink, can you? Not surprising if you don’t partake often. This lord shouldn’t have been so persistent in sharing.”

Mu Qingfang stood up and fought off a wave of dizziness. He managed not to stagger. Managed to compose himself.

“It’s late. I need to get back,” he said.

“Perhaps it would be better to take a room here. This lord does not care for the thought of Healer Mu traveling in this state…”

“No need,” Mu Qingfang insisted. His heart was hammering. He just needed to… to get away. Darkened streets did not seem as dangerous to him as the current company he was keeping. There was a gleam in Luo Binghe’s eyes. Something like anticipation. The light caught on the pommel of his sword, and Mu Qingfang’s instincts wanted him to run.

He moved swiftly towards the exit.

Luo Binghe had no trouble matching his pace.

The brothel was a whirl of silk curtains and music, figures he could never quite seem to catch the attention of. When he reached the exit at last he stumbled. A strong arm caught his waist; a steady hand patted his back.

Luo Binghe tutted.

“At least let this lord accompany Healer Mu home.”
Mu Qingfang tried to refuse, turning over words and fighting to maintain his equilibrium past the heat in his skin, the nausea in his gut. Vomiting seemed like a good idea, actually. Get whatever it was out. He managed to push Luo Binghe aside and emptied his stomach onto an unfortunate street corner. But the distance he gained was meager, and soon enough that steady hand was on his back again. Making his hair rise, making his heart pound.

“Don’t be stubborn. First Husband will scold me far too much if I am ever discourteous to his good friend.”

Luo Binghe settled an arm around him and took half his weight with ease. Mu Qingfang could do little else but try and head for home, and hope that would be the end of it. He had plenty of general remedies that would help with his symptoms, at least enough to clear his head and let him figure out the best way to purge what he’d ingested. The vomiting hadn’t seemed to help.

“Besides,” Luo Binghe continued as they walked. “I like to think that Healer Mu is also my friend as well. He has helped me greatly in the past, not just for Gege’s sake either. Not many other people have done that.”

Mu Qingfang declined to answer.

When they reached his home he was barely managing to keep his feet, even with Luo Binghe’s assistance. The other man tutted, seeming every ounce a genuinely concerned friend except for the fact that he was too nice. Mu Qingfang had grown up with two elder sisters, with loving parents and a grandmother, with friendly neighbours and grateful patients and fussy apprentices. Luo Binghe’s actions held no exasperation, no impatience, not the barest hint that his evening had been inconvenienced. Not even the self-recrimination of a chronically guilty man blaming himself for getting a lightweight drunk.

It was far too solicitous for someone who wasn’t enjoying the matter.

Mu Qingfang’s thoughts began to withdraw to a small, terrified corner of his mind. Shaking like a cornered animal.

He had to get this man to leave.

But his efforts to thank him and send him away were deftly evaded. Luo Binghe somehow helped him out of his boots, and went and fetched a box of remedies, and then fretted as the labels swam
before Mu Qingfang’s eyes and his focus refused to cooperate. He landed on a bottle he was certain contained a sobriety tincture, but before he could drink it a hand swept it back out of his grasp.

“Forgive this lord, but Healer Mu does not seem to be in a fit state to discern what these medications are. Permit this lord to fetch one of Healer Mu’s apprentices to assist, at least…”

Mu Qingfang blinked. The reasoning rang hollow for some reason… he knew what labels he needed, he just needed someone to read them out, perhaps, but he was sure of that bottle… but, Luo Binghe was offering to leave. More than anything he wanted that, so he found himself readily agreeing. Hands carried away the medicine box. Footsteps became more distant. Mu Qingfang sighed in relief, and…

And then what?

He’d staggered into his room, he thought. He’d expected one of his apprentices to turn up, and any of them were at least capable enough to handle intoxication, whether it was alcohol or some narcotic from the brothel’s incense or anything along those lines. He had not expected Luo Binghe to come back himself.

Why would he?

Why… except, except for that part where he had been all too insistent on coming to Mu Qingfang’s home in the first place…

Yes, he had gone into his room. And then he had lost track of time. His skin felt too hot. His heart was beating too fast. He’d stripped, and tried to wash his face; and then he’d tried to go back for the medicine box, but he had stumbled against a wall only it hadn’t been a wall. It had been a chest. His skin had been burning; the feel of a body underneath his palms seemed to light up everything about him, made the heat turn molten and slide right through his core.

He didn’t remember if he had kissed Luo Binghe first or not. He certainly knew that in his right mind, he wouldn’t have.

His stomach rebelled. But it was empty. His mind shied away from the memories before his more clinical, determined side won over, and then he found himself digging through them again. Plucking up the relevant fragments from the fog of drug-induced arousal. Shifting a little, Mu
Qingfang pushed the sheet off of himself and looked at his body. There were bruises on his wrists and hips, mottled and hand-shaped. Bite marks he could remember receiving, but his cultivation seemed to have taken care of them; they mustn’t have been deep. His body was working to fix the rest of it as well, but the lingering effects of the aphrodisiac were hindering it. Combining his symptoms with the likeliest possible sources, Mu Qingfang narrowed down the possible culprits considerably.

There were still several options, but luckily, the same remedies would work on most of them.

Luo Binghe was pretending to sleep still.

Mu Qingfang left him to it. He got up. There was no mess; well, wasn’t that nice. His gaze landed on a basin and a used wash cloth, and he moved them to a more appropriate place for disposing of before stepping out. It was early enough still that he didn’t worry about running into any of his apprentices. He didn’t bother to cover himself, barely even thought of it in fact as he headed for the relevant storage cupboard and found a small clay jar of pills.

Just one should do.

His hands trembled as he swallowed. His back ached. The fire in his lower body in particular was extremely unpleasant. Luo Binghe was well-endowed and, as his memory served, surprisingly unskilled. At least by Mu Qingfang’s standards. Then again, Mu Qingfang’s experiences by and large involved professionals. He was curious by nature, but most relationships fell outside the bounds of his interest or ability to maintain. Dual cultivation was an effective healing agent in many respects, and there was significant crossover between high status courtesans and niche healing specialists. He had ended more than a few medical conferences with dalliances.

It was fortunate that hadn’t been his first time.

Though Mu Qingfang reminded himself, clinical and detached, that these things did not always have quite the significance that prevailing social attitudes ascribed to them either. He wished this felt like a softened blow, but some part of him noted that he was probably just clinging to that idea to keep himself above the suffocating sense of violation.

His hands were still trembling.

Ah. Shock.
The nudity was probably not helping with that.

Mu Qingfang roused himself enough to try and circulate his sluggish qi, and forced himself back to his room. He ignored the figure still lying on his bed in favour of opening up his wardrobe and retrieving fresh clothing. Underthings, pants, inner robes, outer…

He was dressing when Luo Binghe deigned to roll over.

The Heavenly Demon propped his head onto one hand, and watched Mu Qingfang with a half-lidded gaze.

“Not the cuddly type, I take it?” he asked.

His voice sounded friendly. Sated. The languid teasing of a friend who had just enjoyed rolling around with a companion he had known for years.

Mu Qingfang was, in fact, the ‘cuddly type’. When consenting.

He focused on dressing. The blankets on the bed shifted as Luo Binghe sat up.

“Don’t be angry,” the demon lord had the audacity to beseech him. “Does Healer Mu not recall? He reached for this lord-”

The wardrobe door slammed shut.

Mu Qingfang met Luo Binghe’s gaze.

“I remember what happened,” he said. Clipped. Furious. Get out he wanted to say, but the bloodlust he would have preferred to feel at that moment was gone. His instincts were too keenly aware of how outmatched he was. Instead, that voice in his mind - the one that had always made him afraid of what abuses of power he might be capable of, the one that whispered urges to rip, kill, rend, tear - had turned from a languid and self-assured predator to a cowering thing. A
cornered house cat, terrified of the tiger still in its den.

“Qingfang,” Luo Binghe said.

His blood turned to ice.

“Healer Mu.”

Who gave him the right?

“Qingfang,” Luo Binghe repeated, heedless. Heedless and cruel and still entirely locked inside his own little world of perceptions, it seemed, as he came over and settled a hand on Mu Qingfang’s shoulder. The shudder it provoked was palpable, but did nothing to cast off the weight. Luo Binghe kept talking.

“It’s alright,” he said. “Such situations happen, if anyone is at fault then it is this lord. I will take responsibility.”

No.

“Get out,” he actually managed to say, then. He couldn’t take it anymore.

The hand on his shoulder slid towards his neck, as if to cup his face and turn him towards Luo Binghe.

Mu Qingfang pulled sharply away instead.

“Out,” he repeated.

He wasn’t sure if he was demanding or begging at that point.
There was a long, tense pause. He could hear his heart beat. The intensity of his agitation. His skin was crawling, his mind was empty and yet somehow racing at the same time. He wanted to scream.

“...Ah,” Luo Binghe sighed. “So that’s how it is. This lord is accustomed to being used.”

Mu Qingfang remained unmoved.

“Hopefully he served Healer Mu’s needs well last night.”

Get. Out.

Another moment dragged on, seconds stretched to eternity. And then finally, finally, the oppressive heat of Luo Binghe’s presence left the room. Mu Qingfang did not breathe until it had left his house. Until all that remained were echoes of rumpled sheets and dirtied wash clothes, strewn clothing and silent, still morning air.

He worried his head apprentice to no end when she came in to sweep and found him still half-dressed and crumpled on the floor.

~

As long as a person was alive, any injury could be recovered from.

Perhaps not quickly or completely, but it was also the nature of life to accrue scars as well.

Mu Qingfang left his house in the care of his apprentices and went home. His family welcomed him the way they always did, with open arms and too much fussing. Too much worrying. When he sharply rebuked his father for wandering in his too-big ‘house cat’ shape, tone wavering with unspoken anxieties (how much had he given away, how much offense had Luo Binghe taken, what
did he know, what did he want), his father regarded him for a moment and then headed inside and changed back.

It was three days before his father asked. Settling a hand on Mu Qingfang’s head, sitting in human shape out by the vegetable garden with him.

“What’s wrong?”

Mu Qingfang had always been the baby of his family. Last born, littlest one. He had never wanted for people to look after him and protect him. His shifu had protected him, too. She’d had a caring nature beneath her professionalism. He had been talented enough, skilled enough, that people in power wanted to keep him in business. His were the kinds of skills that were too important to just throw away in the name of idle schemes. Even when someone moved against him, there was always recourse.

He was used to worrying, of course. He worried about many things, often, and perhaps even neurotically. His family’s safety was always at risk. One powerful but short-sighted person with a grudge could undo any protection which Mu Qingfang had acquired. And of course any time he entered into the imperial palace, he knew better than to think that he was ‘above’ machinations, traps, or the punishment that would follow the wrong behaviour.

But this was different.

Those worries were real but they also were not immediate. They were largely hypothetical, abstract. If someone found out his family’s secret. If a deranged cultivator cornered him in the midst of treatment. If some offended courtier or another set him up for a crime he hadn’t committed. What if, what if, what if.

Luo Binghe was not ‘what if’.

“Baba,” he said. “I think I made a terrible mistake.”

“Tell.”

It was the part of Mu Qingfang that still believed in turning to his parents when his problems threatened to overwhelm that complied.
“I met the new Heavenly Demon lord before he ascended,” he explained. “Luo Binghe. He used to be Shen Qingqiu’s apprentice… you remember Shen Qingqiu?”

His father nodded.

Mu Qingfang sighed.

“I didn’t know him well. But he was the one who brought Liu Qingge to me after he escaped Mobei-Jun. And after that, he visited several times over. He brought me injured cultivators. It was clear that he had fought them. I had observed enough to conclude that he was… like me. Or so I assumed. Obviously his lineage is a little more…”

He gestured upwards.

His father nodded, and then simply waited for him to go on.

“I wanted to help him. So I gave him a token to help him disguise his demonic traits. One of the ones you made.”

“Ah,” his father said. “He knows?”

“I don’t know,” Mu Qingfang admitted. His voice sounded small in his own ears. “I never told him anything about our situation outright, even when he tried to ask. I hoped we had an understanding. He married Liu Qingge, and Liu Qingge is an honourable man. Luo Binghe has his own code as well, I think. But of late I have not felt so certain…”

Silence fell between them.

Mu Qingfang did not know how to tell his father what else had happened.

The warm hand on his head moved to cradle it, and guided his face to rest against his father’s shoulder. Like he was much younger again.
“Tell,” his father repeated. A very gentle command.

“I believe he drugged me,” Mu Qingfang admitted. “With an aphrodisiac. Afterwards he… stayed the night.”

His father stilled for a moment.

His chest moved with a deep breath. Sucked in, let out.

Then he moved to pat Mu Qingfang’s back in slow, steady motions.

“I don’t know what he wants,” he admitted, quietly. In that moment Mu Qingfang realized that he desperately hoped it had just been to hurt him. To take something from him, or humiliate him perhaps. To strike a blow. They had talked about Liu Qingge beforehand so much - perhaps it was jealousy. Perhaps Luo Binghe was the sort who resented even the existence of friends in his spouse’s social circle. Too covetous by far. That seemed like a terrible thing to hope for in terms of what it might mean for Liu Qingge, but for Mu Qingfang’s family, it was the best option. Because it would mean that Luo Binghe had satisfied his viciousness. It would mean that he had felt a need to lash out against Mu Qingfang but had ultimately not either discovered his secret, or opted to reveal it. Perhaps in Luo Binghe’s world that counted as a mercy. A reduced punishment, in light of the fact that Mu Qingfang had helped him.

It was terrible and warped, but at least if that was the case then it was done.

If Luo Binghe wanted something else…

Mu Qingfang shook his head. His father held him steady.

“We can’t do anything,” he said. “If he’s figured us out, then he could expose us. And even if he hasn’t, he’s too strong for even all of us together.”

“…Yes,” his father confirmed. The single admission was tight, heavy with unspoken frustration, dread, and anger he almost never heard in his father’s voice. None of it felt like it was directed at him, but Mu Qingfang didn’t need someone else to blame him. He had been foolish.
He had his answer - and he desperately regretted helping Luo Binghe.

“This is a problem,” his father confirmed, with the weight of a parent nevertheless still desperately thinking of a way to solve it.

“I’m sorry,” Mu Qingfang said.

“No.”

“I am, I’m sorry-”

“No apologizing.”

“Baba…”

His father pulled back and took his face his hands. Made him look into his eyes. Despite being a man of few words and many odd habits, his father was fiercely intelligent. He had spent a great deal of time alone in his life, had apparently spoken even less when his mother first met him. But he was also someone who invented his own talismans and charms, who figured out how to live undetected in the largest human city in the world for decades, who could read most of Mu Qingfang’s journals and understand them even if he didn’t have all the context or education to know exactly what was being talked about.

“This is someone else’s wrong.”

Mu Qingfang clutched at his father’s hands and squeezed his eyes shut again. His father leaned down and pressed their foreheads together.

He didn’t promise to fix it.

He couldn’t. They both knew it. This matter… in the end, what would come of it rested in someone else’s hands.
Silently, Mu Qingfang vowed that if Luo Binghe left him be after this, then he would also put this matter behind him. That seemed like a miserable outcome to be hoping for, but sometimes the best that could be made of a situation was still far from anything good. Mu Qingfang did not delude himself into thinking that he posed any threat to a Heavenly Demon. But there was a kernel of his mind that whispered that, perhaps, given enough time and incentive… he could.

It was probably just the desperate hope of the feral beast that had taken hold of his heart, the same one that kept cowering at shadows and snarling at unexpected visitors.

Even so. Even so, if Luo Binghe left him alone, then Mu Qingfang would never address the issue again either. Perhaps in his heart of hearts, Luo Binghe truly believed that he was the one who had been used that night. Perhaps Mu Qingfang had, in fact, read some aspect of the situation incorrectly. Perhaps he was not the only one weighing these matters, weighing the price of pain and violation against some nameless future dread.

Perhaps it truly was a misunderstanding rather than a manipulation.

Three days later, a gift showed up at the door of his family home. Brought by a little errand boy. There was a box of rare seeds, a small sack of jewels, some very expensive tea…

There were two jars of wine. The same sort that had been served at the brothel That Night.

And at the bottom, damning, mocking - a wrapped box of finely-made cat toys.

~

It was simple, really.
Luo Binghe wanted Mu Qingfang for his harem.

‘Why’ was another matter. Mu Qingfang highly doubted it was for himself. Their single night together had not gone well, his reaction had certainly not endeared him to the demon lord, and while they shared a certain… understanding, in some respects, he did not believe this would be compelling enough on its own.

No, more likely Luo Binghe was after what most people were after when they came to Mu Qingfang’s door - his skills.

Although going to such bizarre lengths to acquire them remained another subject.

Motivations aside, once Luo Binghe began to ‘court’ Mu Qingfang and made his awareness of his family’s status known, it really was simple. Luo Binghe was too powerful to get rid of discreetly, and had information that would make it impossible to openly refuse him. Running might buy them some time, but where would they go? All Luo Binghe had to do was expose them and there would be cultivators coming after his family. Even if some forgave Mu Qingfang, they wouldn’t forgive his sisters or father. Most of the human world would become too dangerous for them. Even more so given the number of cultivators whom Mu Qingfang had personally treated over the years. They would know his face - they would recognize him even if he changed his name and dress and gave up his practice, tried to disappear to some obscure village or mountain.

Which left the Borderlands. The demonic realms were too hostile for his mother and grandmother. Indeed, traveling altogether would prove dangerous for his grandmother’s health. The Borderlands were more livable for them than the demonic realms, but they were still hostile, dangerous, and also within the range of many cultivators and demons. If Luo Binghe put a bounty on him, even just let it be known that he wanted Mu Qingfang, then sooner or later someone would find him there as well.

That made it simple.

Luo Binghe won.

Mu Qingfang was caught. Already, rumours had begun to spread of an ‘entanglement’ between himself and the notorious demon lord. Mu Qingfang had never priz ed any perception of his sexual virtue - his family was not highborn, his marriage prospects were personal and largely irrelevant to his status as a capable physician - but the notion that he was in Luo Binghe’s thrall certainly seemed to put off many of his former patrons.
He wondered how thoroughly this trap had been plotted and laid out. If he had stayed at the brothel that night, would some ‘innocent mistake’ have occurred, wherein a patron and employee of the establishment perhaps opened the wrong door and caught Mu Qingfang in a clutch with Luo Binghe? That night at his house, when Luo Binghe had left to go and get one of Mu Qingfang’s apprentices… had he? Mu Qingfang didn’t recall seeing anyone else, but then, his senses had been far from sharp at that point. Had one of his own pupils seen him throw himself lustily at the demon lord? A witness to help corroborate the rumours?

Tying Mu Qingfang to Luo Binghe would certainly give it much more credibility if some convenient third party were to suddenly turn up with information about Mu Qingfang’s background and his family, of course. The demons flocking together. Not only would his family be hunted, but Mu Qingfang’s work would likely come under intense scrutiny. Who would trust the medical papers of a demon, after all? Forget that Mu Qingfang had always worked honestly. His apprentices, too, would doubtless face many hardships. They would fall under scrutiny and suspicion. Did they also have ties to demons? Were their educations to be trusted? Had they learned dark and wicked things at the hands of their demonic teacher?

Mu Qingfang’s reputation was not just his own. It was his work’s. It was part of his apprentices future and credentials.

Luo Binghe’s leverage was thorough.

So.

Only Mu Qingfang’s father knew what was going on. At his request, it stayed that way. Both of them could see the situation for what it was, and both of them knew that the rest of the family would not make the right decision. Even his father clearly struggled with it. Absolutely, however, they could not tell Mu Qingfang’s sisters. Regardless of the odds, the stupidity, the danger, the likelihood of their immediate deaths… in his heart, Mu Qingfang knew his older sisters would try to kill Luo Binghe if they ever found out.

They couldn’t find out.

Even still, despite his efforts to make it seem like a legitimate courtship, his mother and sisters clearly felt uneasy with the situation.

“Little Kitten… wants to marry this person?” his eldest sister finally asked him one evening,
cornering him after yet another ‘gift’ arrived.

Mu Qingfang almost just confirmed it. He was lying, after all - so the lie nearly fell out of his mouth as a matter of course. But he stopped himself in time. His sisters were perceptive. The look in his eldest sister’s eye, the tone of her voice… she knew. Mu Qingfang had tried but his attitude towards Luo Binghe was pushing the bounds of his acting skills at ‘friendly tolerance’ these days. If he claimed to be in love with the man, the lie would be apparent. And then Jiejie would figure out he was being blackmailed, because she was clever and because that was the obvious explanation for why he would be hiding at home and putting up with courtship suits from a powerful demon lord he wasn’t actually interested in. If his sisters found out, they would surely do something very dangerous and very unlikely to succeed.

The obvious lie wouldn’t work.

Mu Qingfang needed something else. Something that he could affect adequately.

“Not precisely,” he said.

His sister blinked.

“Then why entertain his pursuit?” she wondered, of course.

Mu Qingfang swallowed.


A few emotions flitted across his eldest sister’s face before her expression finally settled on ‘concern’.

“Little Kitten…”

“Luo Binghe knows,” he claimed.
His sister regarded him for a long moment. Then she let out a breath and squished his face.

“This is probably a bad idea,” she told him. “It’s putting an awful lot of trust in someone who isn’t the person you love.”

“I know,” he agreed, quietly.

His sister’s eyes searched his, just as sharp and shrewd as their father’s. Her nose twitched.

“Is he worth it?” she asked.

The answer was obvious, but for some reason Mu Qingfang found himself actually thinking about the question. The lie had been an act of necessity, born from the knowledge that he would be much, much better at acting like a lovestruck fool over Liu Qingge than Luo Binghe. Luo Binghe’s name was ashes in his mouth now. The thought of him was fear and dread and despair. Liu Qingge… Liu Qingge, on the other hand, did not require much acting to speak of with admiration, or worry, or affection. It had been years since they had seen one another, but Mu Qingfang still found himself missing the other man’s presence.

If Mu Qingfang had become a swordsman on par with the likes of Yue Qingyuan, would he have fought Luo Binghe for Liu Qingge’s honour?

…it in fact… perhaps. Perhaps he would have.

Mu Qingfang had been wrestling with his despair ever since he had forced himself to concede. But suddenly this thought had come and in the moment that it did, a different perspective presented itself. He was marrying Luo Binghe. He was going to live in the same harem as Liu Qingge. In light of everything that had happened, Luo Binghe’s true colours had been laid bare to Mu Qingfang’s eyes. His friend’s lord was unworthy of him. In a sense, wasn’t this much like a second case of Liu Qingge’s capture by demons? Perhaps this one was simply longer and more thorough in its nature, more profound in its betrayal. Back when Mobei-Jun had stolen Liu Qingge, Mu Qingfang had lamented his inability to help. He had not been able to do much except assist in picking up the pieces afterwards.

If nothing else, in this situation, that had changed.
Perhaps if he thought of this not as his surrender to Luo Binghe, but as his chance to do something for Liu Qingge…

“It is worth it,” he said, with conviction that surprised even himself. “Jiejie. That man inspires the strangest things in me.”

He smiled.

Tentatively, his eldest sister smiled back. Then she playfully knocked the side of his head.

“Then I’ll give Little Kitten my blessing,” she promised.

Considering the way his thoughts were turning, Mu Qingfang suspected an assassin’s blessing would be quite fitting in fact.

~

A vow.

Mu Qingfang decided, as he sat within his unwelcome wedding sedan, that what he needed was a vow. A promise to himself. Something that he could hold onto in the midst of all this, something to temper his rage, to anchor him against the storm of his dread. Something he could tell himself when humiliation threatened to become self-hatred, when this marriage and what would likely be required of him pushed him to the edge.

‘Help Liu Qingge’ he thought, but no. Liu Qingge was also married to Luo Binghe. That promise itself would drive Mu Qingfang to its own despair any time he couldn’t uphold it; and with what he knew, he highly suspected there would be times when he couldn’t. Luo Binghe held too much power, and there was too little to go against him with.

‘Heal’, he thought. That had been his doctrine for so long. He was a physician. He helped the world by healing people. Whether it was always the best answer or not, it was the path he had
chosen, and even when he wavered he inevitably came back to the idea that it was ultimately the best path of them all.

But bitterness weighed his heart at the prospect. It was his life as a physician that he was being carried away from. His career, his accomplishments. Defeat still left his chest feeling tight, his skin hot, his blood boiling with the desire to harm instead.

Helping someone had gotten him into this situation. Helping Luo Binghe had endangered his family. Mu Qingfang would by no means disavow the path he had chosen even so, but he was... he was no longer on it. However much he hoped to return to it, he could almost feel it falling further and further behind him. Like his family’s home, like the house his shifu had left him, and the apprentices he had found new teachers for. Luo Binghe’s harem lived in the demon world. He could not take his human disciples there, even if any of them would have followed him so far.

Help.

Heal.

No.

Mu Qingfang thought of the feelings that had overcome him in the wake of That Night. He thought of what made it most bearable to live with, what sort of sentiments picked him up and kept him going.

This vow was not a noble oath. But as he gave it to himself, he knew it was the one that stood the best chance of working. An illness, a parasite, a disease, was his enemy. No matter if it was demon or human or anything else in origin. No matter how challenging, complex, or deadly it was. In the end he had only ever truly had one mindset towards his enemies.

No matter.

His hands felt steady.

No matter how.
If the thought of helping Liu Qingge made some measure of this trial seem hopeful, then Mu Qingfang’s promise to himself would make it seem conquerable.

No matter how long it takes, I will destroy Luo Binghe.

~

Mu Qingfang spent his wedding night with Liu Qingge.

It was not as promising as it sounded.

After their bows had been exchanged and the blood had been imbibed, after the ceremony was done, Luo Binghe had taken a look at Mu Qingfang’s face beneath his veil. Then he had sighed and shaken his head. His expression was sympathetic.

“When you’re ready,” he declared.

As if magnanimity was going to make up for anything at this point. Still, Mu Qingfang felt both relief and surprise. He hadn’t been looking forward to another round of *that*, particularly not without any sort of intoxication to soften the ordeal. The decision was a surprise that lingered with him while he changed out of the formal wedding attire. Until he found himself called upon *again*, then led away from the living space he’d been afforded and brought to the finest courtyard in Luo Binghe’s ‘Garden’.

First Husband’s courtyard.

Mu Qingfang had wondered why Liu Qingge had not attended the wedding. He had spared some concern that perhaps his friend perceived this development as a betrayal; but most of him felt sure that Liu Qingge would have still attended regardless, out of some sense of duty or obligation. When Luo Binghe brought him to the elaborate chamber, with its false indoor garden, its well-tended practice field, he felt suspicion solidify into urgency.
The front doors of Liu Qingge’s ‘courtyard’ opened at Luo Binghe’s behest. Inside the space was large and surprisingly airy, though it was also dimly lit. Medicinal incense burned; Mu Qingfang’s nose recognized some of the ingredients as being good for calming and restoration, but he was not familiar with the particular blend or some of the others. He had not been lying when he told Luo Binghe that his knowledge of the demonic realms and demon medicine was limited. This day was his first day in this world altogether.

But that was a curiosity for another time. His focus narrowed to his patient as Luo Binghe led him to the bedchamber. Liu Qingge was sequestered in the middle of the wide bed, curtains partially shielding him from view. It was a painfully familiar image, despite the unfamiliarity of the chamber itself. Mu Qingfang swallowed back a rush of anger.

The unfairness was striking. Even cloistered away like a pet bird in a cage, Liu Qingge could not have the scant luxury of safety.

“What happened?” he asked, because in the moment, this was what he needed to know.

Luo Binghe moved to Liu Qingge’s other side. He settled a hand against his First Husband’s cheek.

“This lord’s blade, Xin Mo, is a thing of hunger,” he explained. Mu Qingfang glanced at the phallic hilt of the weapon in question before he returned his attention to his patient. “Sating it works best when the energy is acquired via dual cultivation. But this lord needs more partners. He has been over-taxing his existing ones, and First Husband… gave too much.”

Mu Qingfang’s lips hardened into a thin line.

*No matter how long it takes, I will destroy Luo Binghe.*

But first:

*Help Liu Qingge.*

Fortunately, weapons and other spiritual tools which drew too much from their wielders or opponents were things he had considerable experience with. He had treated Yue Qingyuan on
many occasions following his catastrophe with Xuan Su, which was perhaps the most extensive case, but over-eager disciples getting their hands on spiritual tools beyond their cultivation was not an uncommon incident, and poorly made spiritual tools which threatened to cripple a wielder’s spiritual veins were also - unfortunately - easy to find.

Mu Qingfang examined Liu Qingge with care. Measures had obviously been taken to try and alleviate the man’s discomfort and encourage his recovery, but the disruption to his meridians was extensive, and his spiritual veins had been damaged. The damage was comparatively minor, in fact, or would have been for most cultivators. But Liu Qingge had suffered extensive trauma in the past already, and it had created a certain weakness in his system.

Carefully, Mu Qingfang shifted his position, settled onto the bed beside him, and began transferring his own spiritual energy. He could tell where the pathways were misaligned; even after years, it seemed he still recalled the map of Liu Qingge’s veins particularly well. At least it made it straightforward to settle into the first step of cleansing his meridians and re-aligning things so that the flow of qi through his body could pass as unimpeded as possible.

Luo Binghe watched his actions carefully.

Mu Qingfang primarily ignored him, and let the minutes trickle by while he lost himself in the intricacies of his work. He took stock of the rest of Liu Qingge while he did. The man was dressed only in a thin inner robe, darkly coloured, and was wearing the red coral collar of this place. Mu Qingfang had a matching one, now. Liu Qingge’s muscles looked too defined. Dehydration. Likely a result of his current state, he had a low opinion of Luo Binghe but he suspected that at the very least water was provided for his spouses. Material things and sustenance were not the main areas where he seemed deficient.

Otherwise, Liu Qingge looked clean and relatively well cared-for. His hair was brushed and comfortably tied, his skin was clean, his bedding was well-kept.

As Mu Qingfang fed him spiritual energy, he started to rouse as well. The depletion in his system was appalling.

“Get him something to drink,” he instructed. A man of Liu Qingge’s cultivation could do without food and water, but that was when his cultivation was actually functional, and not sucked dry and rattled out of alignment. Spiritual energy could not compensate for any bodily needs when there was not enough to do so.

Luo Binghe retrieved water.
“Qingfang is being quite authoritative,” he observed.

It didn’t quite sound like he was angry about it. Perhaps amused. Mu Qingfang didn’t spare the attention to figure it out.

“Lord Luo brought me here to be a physician,” he surmised. “In that capacity, I expect to be deferred to.”

Luo Binghe glanced at him while he tried to coax a barely-conscious Liu Qingge into drinking.

“Within reason,” he agreed.

Mu Qingfang let out a silent breath and opted not to admit that, for a moment, he had forgotten leaving all of his apprentices behind. In truth he would have rather ordered Luo Binghe out of the room than have him fetch and carry again, but this wasn’t the first time that he had conscripted the man to do such things. The return to an older dynamic felt uncomfortable and awkward, like trying to put on clothes that no longer fit.

“...Healer Mu...?” Liu Qingge asked, finally blinking bewildered eyes open. He pulled back a little from the water, but the sips he’d taken were clearly needed. His voice still managed to sound dry.

“Naturally,” Mu Qingfang replied, and lifted up the wrist he was holding to indicate that he was working. “Master Liu shouldn’t move too much, his state is fragile.”

Liu Qingge made a face of displeasure at that assertion.

Familiarity eased some of the tension in Mu Qingfang’s chest. This was not the reunion he had hoped for, but perhaps it was exactly the kind he should have anticipated.

“This lord is also present,” Luo Binghe mentioned. His tone was wry rather than sharp, fond and gentle, but there was something tight in his jaw as well. Liu Qingge diverted his attention to his lord, but he was far from coherent. Still, just looking in that direction eased the tension for a while. Luo Binghe glanced at Mu Qingfang.
Thankfully, he seemed to decide it was better not to interrupt.

After an hour of being tended to, Liu Qingge’s condition had become more stable. His breathing was easier and the flow of qi throughout his body had improved. Some of the damage to his veins would need to be surgically corrected, however. Specifically the ones located at his amputation site were a problem, as the missing limb left them with a tendency towards substantial misalignment; and of course, as all things in the body were interconnected, this had an impact on his entire system.

But the surgery could wait a day or two. As Liu Qingge’s condition improved so did his coherence. He sat up more fully and finished drinking several cups of water. When he expressed hunger, Luo Binghe commanded an impish little servant to go and retrieve something. Mu Qingfang began applying gentle pressure to Liu Qingge’s extremities, checking for pain, numbness, or bruising that might indicate hidden problems. He was carefully applying pressure to his patient’s ankles from over top of his blankets when Liu Qingge’s gaze landed on the red coral charm that Mu Qingfang was wearing.

At once, Liu Qingge froze.

Mu Qingfang felt him tense and met his gaze.

“Does this hurt?” he asked. He squeezed again but Liu Qingge didn’t seem to react to the pressure. Instead, he stared back at him with something akin to horror.

Understanding was slow to dawn.

The necklace which Mu Qingfang was wearing felt heavy and tight against his skin. He was not a person prone to adornments; there was too much risk of them falling off and when one was sometimes leaning over people with gaping wounds or surgical openings, that was obviously not ideal. The unfamiliarity of wearing jewellery was easier to focus on than the full implications of it, and the parasites currently set loose into Mu Qingfang’s system.

He was, in fact, trying very hard not to think about the parasites. Later he would. Later he would think about them extensively. But since he didn’t have the luxury of being extensive at the moment, it was better not to focus on such things.
“What is it?” he asked.

Liu Qingge shook his head and then turned to look at Luo Binghe.

The glare he took on could have punched through stone.

“You,” he snarled. “Get out.”

Luo Binghe frowned.

“Gege,” he chided. There was something oddly familiar about the exchange; the tone, the dynamic. The way Luo Binghe was looking nobly forlorn at his First Husband, who suddenly seemed uncharacteristically vicious in countenance. Liu Qingge could be violent, for certain, but Mu Qingfang had rarely seem his aggression take on such a sharp edge.

And then it him.

Yue Qingyuan and Shen Qingqiu.

Luo Binghe’s behaviour… it was a lot like Lord Yue’s had been. The ‘patience’, the magnanimity, the sorrowful glances. Except in this case, these gestures were more clearly an affectation as well. They were undercut by the intensity of his gaze, by the clear truth that Luo Binghe was a far more cunning and canny individual.

Mu Qingfang wasn’t sure what to make of his observation yet, but he nevertheless filed the information away.

“Gege, this lord must supervise-” Luo Binghe tried.

“Everyone else can stay. You, get out.”

For a tense moment it seemed as if the demon lord might refuse. But then he sighed, weary and wronged, and pulled himself up. With a closed-off expression he nodded at his First Husband. He
barely glanced at Mu Qingfang, gave some quiet instructions to the remaining servants, and then went out. He cut a tragic figure, a man who projected the air of one misunderstood or wrongly accused.

When he was gone, Mu Qingfang softly snorted.

A lord hurts his husband badly enough to leave him bedridden, marries another, and then has the gall to act like the injured party. A dance he had seen before, in fact, but never from such a close position in it all.

He found himself suddenly wary of meeting Liu Qingge’s gaze again.

He managed to do it all the same.

“You didn’t know,” he guessed, gesturing at his neck and the symbol of his new status.

“He… what did he do?” Liu Qingge asked with a tight voice.

Mu Qingfang lowered his head.

“I have no intention of competing with anyone for his affections; least of all his First Husband,” he promised. “This is not a romantic match.”

“I don’t care about that,” Liu Qingge snapped. “I know you don’t - you wouldn’t have wanted this. What happened?”

“Whatever happened, it’s done,” Mu Qingfang pointed out. Then he sighed and reached over to pat Liu Qingge’s knee.

Awkward silence fell between them. He could tell that Liu Qingge had tensed considerably. Mu Qingfang’s estimations of Luo Binghe fell several more notches. So he hadn’t told his First Husband of his intentions. Well, on some level that was expected - Mu Qingfang hadn’t thought Luo Binghe would tell Liu Qingge of his actual machinations. But he had assumed that the man would at least be aware that his lord was marrying his former physician.
To have it sprung on him all at once like this, while he was bedridden…

“I thought you knew,” he offered quietly.

Liu Qingge looked stricken.

“If I knew I would have stopped him,” he said. “If he was going to bring you here then he should have hired you, not… this.”

“I am inclined to agree,” Mu Qingfang replied, tone dry as the desert.

Despite everything it at least provoked a snort from Liu Qingge.

Neither of them could seem to speak much more as he carried on with his inspection. The discomfort with the situation was palpable and mutual, but Mu Qingfang didn’t want to expand upon anything. There were servants in the room and he had few pleasant words for Lord Luo’s courtship. On top of that, explaining some of it would be difficult without going into the particulars of his own family’s situation, which was not something he planned on explaining to anyone within this place. Not even Liu Qingge, not unless he had to.

Meanwhile, Liu Qingge seemed to be at a loss of what to say or do with a situation that had progressed so far in his ignorance. When Mu Qingfang finally finished and broached the topic of surgery, he listened quietly, and agreed to the matter easily enough.

Then he glared at the red coral charm again.

“How long has Healer Mu been in the Garden?” he asked.

“Not long. I arrived today, in fact,” Mu Qingfang admitted.

Liu Qingge tensed up again.
“Today?” he blurted, incredulous. “It’s Healer Mu’s wedding day? And he’s here?”

Mu Qingfang’s lips quirked.

“Don’t be concerned about that. I would much rather be tending to one of my patients than doing anything else with this time,” he promised. “My wedding vow would likely seem atypical by most standards, and in that light, assisting Master Liu is a far more appealing ‘obligation’ of my new status than any other ‘marital duties’.”

Liu Qingge’s expression turned conflicted.

“Healer Mu… has always been very dedicated to his path…” he remarked.

Mu Qingfang inclined in his head in acknowledgement.

“Something we have in common,” he noted. Liu Qingge’s path was different, but much like Mu Qingfang, he had nonetheless committed himself to it. And much like Mu Qingfang, circumstances seemed set on pulling him away from it as well. A swordsman and battle god like Liu Qingge was incredibly ill-suited to frequent convalescence and containment.

As it to acknowledge what was left unsaid, Liu Qingge let out a sound of pure frustration.

If possible, Mu Qingfang would have preferred to spend the entire night talking with Liu Qingge. He would have preferred to tend to his patient’s condition, perform the necessary surgery, managed rehabilitation - and then taken him and headed for the damn hills. But of course, that was not the situation. So after a few more minutes Mu Qingfang reluctantly instructed the demonic servants in Liu Qingge’s immediate care needs, and what would have to be prepared for the surgery. His lack of assistants would be a problem for that, which meant speaking with Luo Binghe; which meant stepping out to find the lord waiting just outside of Liu Qingge’s doors, and then explaining the matter of the surgery to him as well.

Luo Binghe listened and nodded in acknowledgement.

“There are healers in the palace, I will find someone suitable to assist,” he agreed.
Mu Qingfang glanced at his sword.

“Should the obvious be mentioned?” he wondered.

Luo Binghe raised an eyebrow.

“Fourth Husband means to inquire after Xin Mo?” he surmised.

“A faulty spiritual tool is a dangerous thing. But I suspect Lord Luo is already aware of such a basic concept,” Mu Qingfang observed.

“Fourth Husband’s faith in this lord is truly staggering,” Luo Binghe quipped. “But confusion is understandable. Xin Mo is not a faulty spiritual tool. It is a powerful one. Its hunger is great, but its ability to redistribute and disperse any energy it takes in is far more efficient as well. With this sword, the security of this lord’s home and his harem is beyond doubt. It is only a matter of finding the right balance.”

Mu Qingfang couldn’t tell if Luo Binghe truly believed that or not.

His gaze drifted towards the weapon in question. He was going to be expected to feed that thing, he realized. That was what the harem was for. Why Luo Binghe had been building one up so quickly. Liu Qingge was obviously suffering in the efforts to feed that thing. Distributing the damage across more bodies would take the burden off of one, but it would also ensure that the damage was - of course - more widespread.

A stone settled in his gut.

“Is Fourth Husband nervous?” Luo Binghe asked.

Mu Qingfang regarded him silently for a moment. Just long enough to see some of the veneer slip; to watch something conflicted actually cross Luo Binghe’s expression. It settled into a more serious countenance.

“Don’t be afraid. It won’t hurt,” the demon lord promised. “This lord doesn’t hurt those he has
The urge to glance conspicuously back towards Liu Qingge’s doors was too powerful to resist. Luo Binghe’s fist clenched and tightened around the hilt of his sword. He let it go a moment later. A gusty sigh escaped him.

“Ah. My new husband knows how to cut even without scalpels or words,” he observed.

“Shall he politely ignore his lord’s hypocrisy in the future?” Mu Qingfang inquired.

Luo Binghe laughed. It sounded painful.

“Things are still new,” the man decided. The intensity was back in his gaze. “This lord cannot expect faith where he has not yet had the opportunity to prove himself. Fourth Husband, please give your lord a chance to demonstrate his sincerity. Anything Fourth Husband needs or wishes for, he should not hesitate to request. Any fears he feels, he should voice freely. Any desires as well.”

Nodding to himself, Luo Binghe took a step closer.

Mu Qingfang fought the urge to take a step back.

“Misunderstandings should not persist either. Fourth Husband was brought to First Husband’s courtyard because of his skills, this is true. But he should not labour under this misconception that he is not also precious to this lord, that he was brought into this lord’s harem for such cold purposes. In this garden he is ‘Fourth Husband’, no longer ‘Healer Mu’.”

He would have rather remained ‘Healer Mu’.

But there was no point in saying so. Luo Binghe took a strand of his hair between his fingers. Mu Qingfang inclined his head, willing the matter to end. Fighting against the visible signs of his own tension, and the feeling of a prey animal eating at his instincts again. Keeping his hands relaxed and his shoulders low, he centered himself.
No matter how long it takes, I will destroy Luo Binghe.

When he offered no reply, Luo Binghe eventually stepped back and let him return to the rooms that had been allotted to him.

~

Afterwards.

Afterwards, Luo Binghe lay in so many torn pieces. Strewn across the once-pristine and well-kept floors of his Garden. Liu Qingge was silent and shaken, ashen pale and at an obvious loss. Mu Qingfang transferred him a low stream of spiritual energy to help with the shock. He took him back to his rooms.

Mobei-Jun was gone.

Not entirely surprising, all things considered. The man must have woken up. Whether he had realized that Luo Binghe was dead or not was a bigger question, but ultimately, Mu Qingfang decided it was no longer their business. Or at least, no longer needed to be. A distant sound of wailing started up from the other side of the Garden. One of the remaining concubines had found what was left of Lord Luo, it seemed.

Liu Qingge twitched.

Best to be done with this place.

Mu Qingfang left him to stand in the middle of his front room as he gathered up some things they might need. With Mobei-Jun gone they could not ask him for a portal. That made things more complicated, but it wasn’t an eventually that Mu Qingfang himself had failed to consider. Cheng Luan was still at Liu Qingge’s side, and the security of the Garden was still decimated from the other Luo Binghe’s assistance. With his red coral charm still in place and Luo Binghe’s blood still in his veins, none of the other palace barriers were likely to present a problem to them. Mu Qingfang gathered up his own sword, and his qiankun pouches, and took one last look around the gilded walls of his prison.
Then he took Liu Qingge by the arm and walked him back out again.

The man was still. Silent. It was a state which Mu Qingfang had seen him in before, more times than he cared for. The pliability was useful for now but there was no denying that this was a matter of trauma.

He wished he could have found an opening to kill Luo Binghe that would not have injured Liu Qingge further in the process.

Ideally, he would have preferred a less overall torturous method as well. Even though there were days when ‘torturous’ appealed to the darker parts of his nature. Alas, Heavenly Demons were resilient. Instant death was nearly impossible to cause in them without essentially vaporizing them, and Mu Qingfang knew of nothing which could manage that. Luo Binghe had woken from cursed slumber, had recovered from lost limbs, he had been frozen solid, flung into demonic volcanoes, and swallowed whole by massive beasts.

Mu Qingfang’s poison had been designed to work against the very physiology that permitted this. To use the regenerative abilities of Heavenly Demon physiology to spread contamination instead. It was painful, unethical; the work of two long decades. The fruits of so many years observing how Luo Binghe’s body reacted to every kind of stress and stimulus it came across.

That it worked, in the end, was the most he could accomplish. Faster, less painful, less gruesome… given more time, perhaps those could have been managed as well. But when would an opportunity like this present itself again?

And Mu Qingfang had quite clearly run out of time.

He took Liu Qingge from the Garden by way of the servant exits that would not bring them past Luo Binghe’s remains again.

Dark satisfaction had calmed something within him. The cringing animal in his instincts no longer cringed. Mu Qingfang had read many philosophical takes on the concept of vengeance. Revenge, it was said, was at best only a partial satisfaction. Because it could not undo whatever crime had provoked it to begin with, and because most revenge was in and of itself an act of malice, of hatred, the catharsis was often short-lived. He wondered if some erroneous expectations perhaps played into this effect; if many people who sought vengeance expected to find the world making sense again once their demons were slain.
Perhaps it was the disappointment of not ‘making things right’ that ultimately gave off the impression that vengeance had not to nothing to recommend it. Perhaps the notion that satisfaction would be absolute and uncompromised by other, less simplistic emotions was also part of the pattern.

But despite his regrets, despite his concerns, despite the knowledge of that other Luo Binghe - the awareness that the man he had killed could have, in another life, been someone more or less heroic - Mu Qingfang did not find vengeance hollow.

He had fulfilled his promise. He was satisfied. It did not undo the damage that had been done, but then, finding a cure for a disease never resurrected those who had still died from it in the past either. It could only help to ensure that no further damage would be done. It could only bring the satisfaction of ending a problem that might otherwise persist, might otherwise go on to ruin more lives.

That, he believed, had been accomplished.

It kept his footsteps steady, his stance confident, and his arms strong as he guided Liu Qingge out of the chaos of the Underground Palace. Chaos and confusion; alarms had been sounded, and individuals were making their way towards the garden. A few of Luo Binghe’s followers spotted them and attempted to stop them. Mu Qingfang dissuaded two with ruses, and a third with his blade.

A fourth simply charged at them, wielding a net-thrower as if they were tigers escaping a menagerie.

Cheng Luan sang before Mu Qingfang could react, and the assailant ended up slipping in his own blood as his torso was cut open. The net-thrower never even launched.

Liu Qingge remained silent, but Cheng Luan also remained unsheathed for the rest of their departure.

When they finally managed to get out, Mu Qingfang drew his own blade and made the decision to ride together with Liu Qingge. He didn’t trust the other man’s condition for flying alone. Fortunately, this only required him to tug Liu Qingge up behind him. His friend was much taller, which left Mu Qingfang taking the front position in order to see. He kept hold of Liu Qingge’s arm to ensure that the other man wouldn’t lose balance or jump off without him noticing.
Cheng Luan kept pace beside them as they took off into the fractured skies of the demonic realms.

It was a long trip to the nearest boundary crossover into the borderlands.

Mu Qingfang didn’t dare let them stop, however. He had no idea what the fallout of Lord Luo’s sudden and unexpected death, the dismantling of his harem, the disappearance of his heirs, and the abandonment of the Mobei-Jun would have on this region. But he did not imagine it would be non-violent or festive, and he did not doubt that being two of Luo Binghe’s runaway spouses was a dangerous state to be in. Even if Liu Qingge’s face was not widely recognized - and it was; his beauty mark in particular would have made him identifiable, even to those who had never seen him - two humans traversing the demonic realms alone was more than suspect. Not to mention that neither of them had an abundance of ‘innocuous’ clothing. Liu Qingge was still dressed entirely as Lord Luo’s First Husband. Mu Qingfang had donned more neutral outer robes before they left, but even those were still things he had been given to suit his status, and more readily spoke of ‘someone important’s spouse’ than ‘random cultivator braving the realms to hunt some monster or other’.

It had been a long day. A long, trying day. His body felt scraped raw by the removal of the Heavenly Demon Blood. Liu Qingge was beginning to sag against his back, and all possible reasons he could think of for that were concerning as well. Mu Qingfang pressed on, and on, and did not stop until the air around them wavered and cracked, and the landscape finally shifted from the Northern Desert to a stretch of far more human-seeming scrubland.

The sky was black by then.

Mu Qingfang set them down near a broken, almost petrified sign post. With an exhausted sigh, he began pulling things from his storage spaces - it probably wasn’t wise to spark a fire, but he produced a pair of travel blankets and some qi replenishing pills.

Liu Qingge stood, still stiff and silent, and resisted for the first time when Mu Qingfang attempted to coax him into sitting.

That was not surprising. In this state, Mu Qingfang had learned, Liu Qingge would stand. He would sometimes fight - as he had done earlier. He would let himself be moved. But anything approaching relaxing would not be accomplished easily, and required much more persistence.

“Come and sit,” he coaxed. “We need to rest for a while.”
A muscle clenched in Liu Qingge’s jaw.

Mu Qingfang settled one of the blankets around his shoulders. He shrugged it off.

“It will help,” he said, quietly.

“I’m fine.”

“Alright.”

Mu Qingfang took his own blanket, and sat, and waited.

After a few minutes Liu Qingge began to pace. He walked like a man with a destination, but he didn’t actually go anywhere; only marching a few steps away. Then stopping. Then marching off to one side, more or less walking in a square around the area.

“I have a pill for Master Liu to take,” Mu Qingfang said.

Liu Qingge’s steps halted.

He had been deliberate in not calling the man ‘First Husband’.

The wind swept quietly through dry and desolate brushes. The moon was out, and its light was fair enough to see by.

Liu Qingge came over. It took a while, but eventually he reached for the pill. And then he accepted Mu Qingfang’s invitation and finally sat down, and let a blanket be settled over him.

“There’s nothing nearby,” he said.
“Good.”

One heartbeat. Two. Three.

Liu Qingge’s hand gripped the edge of his blanket with white knuckles.

“...You killed him.”

Mu Qingfang breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth. He looked up towards the moon.

“I did.”

“You broke your vow.”

A wry smile quirked up the corners of his mouth.

“No,” he corrected. “I fulfilled it.”

When he glanced over at Liu Qingge’s face, he wasn’t entirely certain what he would see. Anger? Sorrow? The blank mask of shock, as yet unmoved? Perhaps even relief. But Liu Qingge simply looked confused; like a man trying to figure out how the shape of the world had changed on him so suddenly and completely.

“You are a healer. You do not do harm,” the man beside him said.

“Master Liu has seen me fight and injure others before,” Mu Qingfang pointed out. There had been occasions, over the years, where he had been forced to draw his sword. And even today he had done so.

“That was self-defense,” Liu Qingge argued.
“Yes. This was more proactive,” he agreed. “And Master Liu is correct, it is not a measure I would ordinarily take.”

The confusion did not seem to ease much. Liu Qingge closed his eyes and opened them again. A man trying to see if he would wake up, it seemed.

“...Your promise, your vow... was to heal,” he said. “No matter what. That was what you did.”

“Of course I would heal the residents of the harem,” Mu Qingfang pointed out. “Those people were captives, just like us. And of course I also healed Luo Binghe. Until I could kill him, almost any injury would be something he recovered from. Refusing to tend to him would have accomplished nothing but trouble for me in the long run.”

Liu Qingge swallowed.

“Fourth Husband...”

“Qingfang,” he request. “Or Healer Mu. We are neither of us husbands anymore, and after so many years, formality seems unnecessary. But either would be fine.”

There was a moment of hesitance.

“...Healer Mu,” Liu Qingge settled on. Mu Qingfang did not let himself feel disappointed. Now was far from the right time to demand any sort of intimacy from Liu Qingge. Even something like a name was too much. Especially given that there were very good odds that Liu Qingge would never forgive him for what he had done.

“I vowed to kill him,” Mu Qingfang admitted instead. “The day he married me. That was the promise that kept me going. I won’t blame Master Liu if he thinks less of me for that. But it was something that... worked.”

Liu Qingge let out a single, bewildered huff of breath.

It made Mu Qingfang’s chest ache in sympathy. Or perhaps that was the tension of the moment. He
was left waiting a long time for a response. Long enough to tear his gaze back towards the sky. Long enough to feel the cold of the night press at his fingertips, even as the pill he’d taken began to replenish some of his spent energy.

When Liu Qingge spoke again, however, it was as if hardly any delay had occurred at all.

“Think less?” he asked. A bitter sound escaped him. “For what? Killing? Our lord was moments away from killing Healer Mu instead.”

The dismissal sounded casual, the logic made sense, but Mu Qingfang knew it wasn’t as simple as that. Over the years he had watched as Luo Binghe manipulated people to his own ends. He was good at it. But no one received the brunt of it to the same extent that Liu Qingge did. No one was ever as thoroughly lied to, twisted up, given cause to question himself and his concept of reality. Luo Binghe had convinced Liu Qingge that the Liu family which had fought for him were disgusted by him. He had convinced Liu Qingge that the strength which was an intrinsic part of his own nature was a lie - that he was weak. He had convinced Liu Qingge that people he believed to be friends were enemies, that people he believed to be enemies were friends, that love was suffering and sacrifice, that his own failures were Liu Qingge’s fault.

He had done this to keep Liu Qingge from ever leaving him. Nevermind that Liu Qingge was the most steadfast person Mu Qingfang had ever met. Reality had no impact on the shape of Luo Binghe’s fears.

All this meant that realizing Mu Qingfang was different from what he thought was bound to take a toll.

Especially at this moment.

Mu Qingfang could not offer excuses, nor try to direct Liu Qingge’s thinking. He had no right to tell his friend how to feel about this or what to think of it. That had been going on for too long.

But he could explain. Finally, thoroughly - he could let himself be known.

“I have always had a vicious streak,” he admitted. “It is not something which I generally care to indulge. I chose the healer’s path because I was good at it, but I am a person who cares about the consequences of my actions as much as anyone. Watching members of the nobility beat, rape, and terrorized members of their own households… who would not think of stopping the problem at its
source? If a disease causes sores and lethargy, treating only the sores and lethargy is naturally inferior to curing the disease.”

Liu Qingge’s hand shook.

Mu Qingfang let out a breath.

“Luo Binghe was a plague.”

“He was a man,” his friend sharply refuted.

He shrugged.

“That too.”

“You-!”

Liu Qingge cut himself off.

“Say what you must,” Mu Qingfang encouraged. He desperately did not want Liu Qingge to hate him, but that was not for him to decide.

A moment passed. Then another. Liu Qingge looked tense and brittle and breakable. Once, Mu Qingfang had seen Luo Binghe destroy a rival lord’s statue by simply striking Xin Mo, once, against a particular spot on it. The entire structure had shattered like ice or glass. That had been the last time he had been outside of the Garden, in fact; brought along because Third Husband had been captured again, and Luo Binghe had only trusted Mu Qingfang to attend to his husbands’ health.

Their relationship had always been strange. At times Mu Qingfang felt as though there was an unparalleled understanding between them. Luo Binghe had that effect on people - he made them feel as if they were the only ones who could truly see him, even while revealing only a small fragment of himself. Yet, in return, he seemed to understand everyone else so well that he could have them dancing to his tune with appalling ease. There had been many nights when Mu
Qingfang woke up in a cold sweat, terrified that Luo Binghe saw right through him.

And yet…

Liu Qingge was right. Luo Binghe was a man. The impression of infallibility was just that - an impression. A person didn’t really need to understand everyone in order to manipulate them. Mu Qingfang had been cornered into marriage not because Luo Binghe saw through to his truest self, but because he figured out a secret and used it to his advantage. If anything, in fact, Luo Binghe quite clearly had not seen Mu Qingfang for himself at all.

It was almost pitiful.

But regardless, it was done.

Liu Qingge stared at his hand.

“…Healer Mu used me to kill my lord,” he said in the end.

Mu Qingfang really did feel his regrets then.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “I meant to do it myself, but it had to be done then or the chance would have been lost. I’m sorry.”

Liu Qingge didn’t reply. The night proved more tense than restful, but their bodies still needed the break. They spent the rest of the time in silence, and eventually left when the first signs of daylight made it less dangerous to fly. By then Liu Qingge seemed to have fallen into a state of tense internal conflict, and didn’t let Mu Qingfang direct him as before. He rode Cheng Luan himself and followed for a while, but Mu Qingfang was entirely unsurprised when he veered sharply off-course and away after a while instead.

It took some time for him to catch up. When he did he found Liu Qingge annihilating a small band of walking corpses.

The corpses weren’t sufficient for the man to even vent on. They were just shambling things,
driven by resentment and old grudges, not even strong enough to move very quickly. Cheng Luan struck them down with ease; none even got close enough to force more complex techniques or moves from Liu Qingge. The frustration was a palpable thing as the corpses fell in defeat and Liu Qingge was left standing without so much as a hair out of place.

He sheathed Cheng Luan with an aggressive move.

Mu Qingfang landed on his feet beside him, and watched as Liu Qingge stalked away.

“Where is Master Liu going?” he asked.

Liu Qingge motioned sharply with his arm.

“Back,” he said.

“Back to the palace?”

The question made the man hesitate.

“He’ll return,” he said. “If… it would be better if I was still there, when he does. I might be able to… talk him out of some things.”

Mu Qingfang moved into step alongside him.

“He’s dead.”

Liu Qingge shook his head.

“He’ll recover. Somehow. He always…”

Another shake of his head. Then Liu Qingge began striding purposefully again. Mu Qingfang kept
pace, and when the other man mounted his sword, he followed suit and flew beside him. This persisted for only a few minutes before Liu Qingge stopped. The wind whipped his air to one side. His brows were furrowed.

“Don’t follow me,” he said.

“The palace is not a safe place right now. If Master Liu insists on returning, then I will accompany him.”

“No you won’t! If he gets his hands on you, he’ll kill you.”

“If Lord Luo is able to recover so quickly from what just happened, then my fate is probably sealed regardless,” Mu Qingfang mused. “By the time we left, his remains would have been liquid. Even his bones would have dissolved. Within an hour said liquid would have dispersed into a toxic gas as the last remaining blood parasites were decomposed. Anyone close by would have experienced nausea and dizziness. No spiritual component would have remained, leaving nothing for a soul to anchor itself to while the body irreversibly disintegrated. Possession via resurrection is his only option at this point, and while it can’t be discounted, any body he takes will not be recognizable as ‘Luo Binghe’ for the time being. There will be no way for him to regain control of his territories or restore order without considerable efforts on his part, and meanwhile, it is likely that Sha Hualing will seek to take control of the situation. She knows Luo Binghe’s odds just as well as we do, and knows that Master Liu would be an excellent bargaining chip should any version of that lord ever return. Going back to the palace will simply fly Master Liu right into her hands.”

Sha Hualing would most likely lock Liu Qingge up if she got her hands on him. She was a smart and accomplished individual, one who had accrued a great many grudges towards Luo Binghe even while using their alliance to her advantage. To say she was a threat to Luo Binghe would not have been accurate - but to say that she would make it easy for him to regain power when there was an opportunity for her to step into the vacuum herself was also laughable. Of course, it was entirely possible that Mu Qingfang was wrong and the scales of power would tip differently. But his argument didn't seem unlikely, as an outcome.

Liu Qingge visibly hesitated. He stared at the horizon.

“...Where are you going?” he asked, then. Tone brusque, verging on accusatory.

“Home,” Mu Qingfang said. He couldn’t keep the longing from his voice. He didn't particularly try.
Liu Qingge faltered.

“Home,” he repeated.

“Yes. Home to my family. My grandmother has surely passed away by now, she was old and her health was starting to fail her by the time I left,” Mu Qingfang explained. “But I have hope for the rest. I want to see my parents and sisters again. I want to know that they are alright. I want to see what their lives have become. If I have any nieces or nephews now, I want to meet them. It has been a long time.”

Something profoundly conflicted moved in Liu Qingge’s gaze.

“Master Liu could also go home to his family,” Mu Qingfang suggested.

Immediately, the other man shook his head.

“I can’t.”

That probably wasn’t as true as he thought, but Mu Qingfang decided not to press it. It wasn’t something that Liu Qingge would be convinced of overnight.

“Then, come with me,” he requested instead. “My family will welcome Master Liu as my guest.”

Liu Qingge’s throat worked silently.

“You really think they’ll take you back?” he asked. His tone was rough. “Even after you’ve spent years sharing your bed with a demon?”

He wasn’t really talking about Mu Qingfang, of course. It was so obvious it was painful, but still, a question had been asked.
After a few more minutes of conflicted silence, Liu Qingge turned his sword around. He didn’t say much, but then, Mu Qingfang didn’t expect him to. He was just grateful that they really weren’t heading back to that place again as he led Liu Qingge towards his home.

~

Liu Qingge tried to leave six times before they managed to reach the capital.

Each time, Mu Qingfang simply followed him until the other man changed his mind and headed back with him instead. It slowed their journey, obviously, but Mu Qingfang had waited years for this. Years and years. He was a patient person; a few more days was nothing. Especially not when there were necessary delays as well. They traveled by pseudonyms, of course, and at the first possible opportunity, Mu Qingfang acquired less conspicuous clothing for them. Plain robes in material rougher than anything he had worn in years, even before Luo Binghe had taken him into his harem. He doubted Liu Qingge had ever, in fact, worn such simple clothing, but the man offered no complaints.

He did not take off his red coral charm. Mu Qingfang knew better than to ask, either. Not with how things were. Instead he made sure Liu Qingge’s new clothing had high collars, and procured a length of grey fabric to tie around it.

Even so, they ran into trouble. News was spreading like wildfire. Luo Binghe’s death remained a mere rumour, not something most people seemed to give a lot of credence yet, but some of the other members of the harem had already escaped and word of that had spread. A few people noted the symbol on Liu Qingge’s collar and either knew what it meant or were bold enough to hazard a guess. The runaway members of a demon lord’s harem seemed like tempting bounties, even without any bounties having been placed on them; Liu Qingge gained some small catharsis from cutting down the individuals who tried to ambush them when they rested at night.

Mu Qingfang left the fighting to him when he seemed to wish for it, and took care of matters himself when it seemed like he didn’t.
Finding his own control over the situation was soothing in its own way.

It wasn’t until they actually reached the capital that his nerves began to assert themselves.

His family could have moved. He wouldn’t have known; Luo Binghe’s harem did not have free contact with the outside world. The streets were busier than any place that either Mu Qingfang or Liu Qingge had been in a long time, and seemed all the more unfamiliar for the fact that they had to navigate them as pedestrians on foot. There were no sealed off carriages moving them through the streets, no processions of guards, no demon lord riding alongside and projecting an aura that kept the crowds at bay. Liu Qingge’s discomfort was visible, stiff and silent as he tried to remember how to walk down a simple street.

Mu Qingfang wasn’t faring much better, but he forced himself to keep moving. To try not to think of what might happen when or if someone happened to recognize their faces. After all, everyone knew who they had married. Where they had gone. He wasn’t sure how catastrophic being recognized might or might not be at this point, all things considered - it wasn’t as if they were actually wanted criminals. But he knew he would rather not have to deal with it yet, and in that, at least, the crowds and the fact that it had been years since either of them had set foot in this place worked to their advantage.

When they reached his family’s house, Mu Qingfang’s heart sank at the sight of an unfamiliar woman leaving by the front gate.

“Excuse me,” he nevertheless called. “Is this… is this still the Mu family’s residence?”

The woman turned towards his voice. She was middle-aged and mature-looking but very soft-featured, dressed in a fashion in-keeping with prosperity if not actual wealth. Her hair was done up in a style that indicated marriage. It was only as she moved that Mu Qingfang realized she had a Human Egg strapped to her back by a fabric carrier. Human Eggs were one of the most commonly available methods of reproduction used by middle class families. Easier than pregnancy, more stable than a lot of the alternatives; still expensive, but not absurdly hard to come by.

Hope eased in beside his heart instead.

The woman smiled politely.

“Indeed it is, sir,” she said. “This is my wife’s family household.”
“Is your wife Mu Chuyang?” Mu Qingfang pressed.

The woman blinked, and then smiled. She nodded, confirming his suspicions. His second sister had found someone to settle down with, then! His gaze moved towards the Human Egg and it was all he could do to restrain himself from acting strangely and going over. The shell was a healthy pale pink colour; that was a good sign…

“And sir is…?” his sister’s partner asked, pulling him back to the moment at hand.

“Forgive me, that was impolite,” he said. “I am Mu Qingfang. Mu Chuyang is my older sister.”

The woman dropped the basket she was carrying. Her hands flew up to her mouth while an apple rolled its way slowly towards Liu Qingge’s foot.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “How dimwitted of me, I should have realized! Brother-in-law looks so much like mother-in-law! Oh my goodness, it’s too surprising, no one expected… they’ll surely - oh dear, brother-in-law has been gone for so long, he has to come in! Hurry, hurry!”

Mu Qingfang’s heart clenched as he was frantically waved inside. He’d known his family would want to see him again, hadn’t lied when he told Liu Qingge that there was no doubt in him. But having it so close to being a reality was still nerve-wracking. He didn’t know what exactly to think or feel, his eyes kept drifting to this woman he’d never met, to the Human Egg on her back, and then to the achingly familiar walls of his family home.

From the outside, at least, it hadn’t changed much.

Liu Qingge followed quietly just one step behind him. Irrationally, for a moment, Mu Qingfang wished he could hold his hand. If only to have something solid to hang onto. He rubbed his fingers together instead, aching and agitated, soothed and somehow thoroughly displaced until his sister-in-law’s calling caused the front door to open.

His mother’s hair was grey all over. She looked much more frail than Mu Qingfang remembered, her shoulders more narrow, her arms much thinner. But when she saw him her face lit up the same way it used to whenever he would come home again in the past.
“Mama,” he said.

He had seen demons in battle move with less speed than his mother did when she flung herself towards him with an incoherent cry. He moved forward to meet her, incapable of doing anything else. Her hands clutched at him and then dragged him the rest of the way forward, pulling him into her embrace before pulling him back out again so she could look at his eyes. Mu Qingfang took in the new line on her face. The weight of worry was written there as it hadn’t been in the past. He remembered his mother as a smiling person, but she looked as if she had spent too much time frowning while he had been away. Tears formed in her eyes, and the sight made him start to cry as well, as surely as anything.

“My son,” she cried, and touched his face. “My son is home! My son came home!”

“I’m sorry,” he cried back. “Mama, I’m so sorry. It took so long.”

Her expression broke into sobs and she clutched him to her as if she was afraid he would turn into dust without her arms around him.

~

The house hadn’t changed too much since Mu Qingfang had left.

His grandmother - to his sorrow but not his surprise - had indeed passed. His parents promised to help him pay respects at the soonest opportunity, but after so long and so much travel, he knew his grandmother would have wanted him to get his bearings first. His second eldest sister had moved out to live with her wife’s family, who were tailors by trade. They had more room, and also a business which they hoped to pass down to their daughter, so it made sense.

His eldest sister still lived at home and still plied her trade. His father had gotten into an altercation with other demons a few years ago and been injured, and while he had recovered, it had slowed him down somewhat as well.

Mu Qingfang knew it was lucky enough that the only losses were the expected ones. He had entertained many anxious and unanswered thoughts over the years, not knowing if his family had
been met with struggles, or if they had been discovered anyway. If someone else might have found out the truth and targeted. There were even some nights when he feared that Luo Binghe would simply have them killed in a fit of pique or cruelty - even though that was, admittedly, not quite his style.

After his mother finished crying on him, his sister-in-law hurried to fetch an errand boy to go and retrieve his father and sisters, who were all busy running errands or working. Mu Qingfang wondered if he should have somehow sent word ahead, but it was obviously too late to think of such things. Liu Qingge remained a step back from the proceedings as his family home filled with excited shouts and tearful embraces, as Mu Qingfang found himself crushed by the strong arms of his father and sisters, smothered in relief that was so profound that it seemed to take a long time before anyone even asked how or why he had come home.

Thankfully, it being daylight and visitors being present, no one transformed.

He hadn’t…. had a good moment to inform Liu Qingge about his family’s secret. Nor had he become entirely convinced of whether or not he should. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust the other man; but it was another revelation to pile on top of a great many, and Mu Qingfang was incredibly reluctant to reveal this matter even to people he trusted inordinately. Even just giving out a single clue to the wrong man had caused so much trouble, after all.

His eldest sister was the first to really same to take notice of his guest. She pointed at him.

“This is your Master Liu, then?” she guessed.

Mu Qingfang very suddenly remembered that he had once told his eldest sister he was wildly in love with Liu Qingge and intended to marry Luo Binghe in order to go be with him.

He coughed.

“This is Liu Qingge,” he confirmed.

His eldest sister looked them both over and then nodded once.

“Good,” she said, before turning fully back to Mu Qingfang. “Tell Jiejie what happened, and then she’ll take care of any problems. Later.”
“...Later,” he agreed, knowing better than to argue with his sister over the subject right then. He didn’t particularly want to anyway. His chest ached with warmth, with the feeling of security that finally managed to wash over him. Even if Liu Qingge was correct and Luo Binghe’s death was only a forestalling measure, Mu Qingfang had figured out how to destroy Heavenly Demons. He had learned many other things during his time in the harem as well, many other tools that were far better suited to persons with his older sisters’ proclivities than his own. The situation had gone from a fight they could only lose, to something much more easily handled with help and assistance.

Liu Qingge awkwardly kept to his corner. A few times he tried to slip away in the midst of Mu Qingfang’s warm reunions, but his family was sharp. Someone always noticed and then dragged the other man back, coaxing him like a reluctant stray until he was fed and watered and at least somewhat included.

Mu Qingfang loved his family. So much.

This warmth was like nothing he had felt in that other place.

Somehow a lot of time managed to pass with his family fawning over him. Questions were asked but Mu Qingfang deflected the first few, not quite ready to get into it all yet, and with understanding such topics were set aside in favour of informing him about everything that had happened in his absence. He inspected his sister’s Human Egg and found it seemed to be developing normally. The child from it would most likely be entirely human - due to the nature of the egg - but that would hopefully just make some things easier for it. He also inspected his father, tutting as he found the old injury that had cleaved across the man’s torso and left behind a considerable scar.

“How did you get into such a fight?” Mu Qingfang wondered. It looked like a sword gash.

Looks were exchanged above his head.

“How misunderstanding,” his father said. “No matter. Done is done.”

The wound was old. In the end, there wasn’t much to be done to change that, although Mu Qingfang knew some treatments that would help reduce the scar and fix a few of the impediments to his father’s physique that had resulted from it. Apparently one of his old apprentices had tended the wound in his absence, and had done a good job.
“Your house is still yours,” his second eldest sister informed him.

He blinked at that.

“I gave it over to my head apprentice,” he said.

“Ah, well… the property was still technically in your name when you married,” she explained. “And your lord gained control over all your assets of course, and intervened before the transfer was done. I think he bribed a clerk, actually.”

Mu Qingfang stilled.

“Luo Binghe took it?” he surmised.

More glances were exchanged.

“Some of his people took it over,” his mother said. “Not doctors. They seemed… polite. They seemed to watch a lot of things going on.”

“We’ll get it sorted,” his eldest sister assured him with a certain tone to her voice. “Now that Little Kitten is back, what’s his should be his. Or should be given to the person he wanted to give it to in the first place.”

So Luo Binghe had used his property to plant spies in the capital.

Mu Qingfang glanced at his father’s scar again, and frowned. A suspicion gripped him.

“Baba…” he began.

One of his father’s big, warm hands settled on his head.
“It’s fine,” he insisted.

Mu Qingfang detested the feeling of helplessness that nearly overcame him.

But it was hard to hold onto any bitterness or dismay, even with the realization that some bad things had most certainly gone on despite all his hopes. His family probably had to ease into a few things themselves, and before he could pry any deeper his mother declared that they clearly needed proper food. His sister-in-law and his father both piled into the kitchen to help her, while Mu Qingfang’s older sisters dragged Liu Qingge out of his corner again and started sharing all the news they’d heard about the Liu clan’s business in the past few years.

Liu Qingge was stiff and didn’t manage to make a lot of responses. His expression was coloured by a rare kind of desperation, however, and his hand gripped the fabric over his knee very tightly as he listened with rapt attention to all the details that could be spared.

Mu Qingfang was certain his sisters noticed.

They were observant people, after all.

Small talk about the Liu family then became general news and discussions as the evening progressed, and they ate too much food, and Mu Qingfang found he barely passed a minute without someone touching him. After the meal was finished his second sister finally had to take her family home. His eldest sister went along to walk them safely back - a habit that had been picked up in his absence, it seemed - while his mother insistently set up his old room for him and his grandmother’s room (now guest room) for Liu Qingge, and bickered at his father every time he took over doing something for her.

Mu Qingfang couldn’t escape the concern that Liu Qingge might disappear during the night.

When the house was quiet and everyone had ostensibly retired, he got back up to go check on him.

He wasn’t particularly surprised to find the man halfway out of the open bedroom window.

“If Master Liu wishes to call upon the Liu family household, the morning would be a better time.
But we can also leave right if that’s his preference,” Mu Qingfang said.

Liu Qingge froze.

“...I’m not going there,” he said.

“Then where?” Mu Qingfang asked, already knowing as much. But it was important to ask where Liu Qingge was going, he had found. The question seemed to remind the man that he should probably have a destination, and not just blindly run ‘away’.

Sure enough after a moment Liu Qingge let out a breath and came back into the room.

“It’s not a good idea for me to stay here,” he said.

“Stay tonight,” Mu Qingfang requested. “If Master Liu wants to leave tomorrow, then we will leave tomorrow.”

Liu Qingge’s lips thinned.

“Alone,” he said. “It would be better for me to go alone. Healer Mu… should stay with his family.”

“Master Liu is my family now as well, and has been for years,” Mu Qingfang pointed out. “Lord Luo’s death doesn’t change that. Until I feel confident that Master Liu will be alright, I would prefer to stay by his side. If it’s all the same to him.”

“It isn’t,” Liu Qingge told him, frowning outright by then.

He stayed put however.

Mu Qingfang took in a long breath and let it out again.
“Master Liu surely knows I can’t really stop him from going,” he said. “It would be easy for someone of his skill to prevent me from following in the end as well. So all I can do is ask. Please don’t go without me.”

Liu Qingge looked stricken.

That wasn’t the sort of expression which Mu Qingfang hoped to inspire. He held up a hand, requesting a moment, and then went quickly back to his room and retrieved some things. When he returned, he set them out in front of Liu Qingge; who was, thankfully, still present and not halfway out of the window again.

“These are some of my father’s old clothes. I requested them,” he admitted. “They should fit Master Liu well enough and be more comfortable than the ones we purchased before. If Master Liu still plans to leave, then at least take them.”

Reaching out, Liu Qingge touched some of the material.

He let out a long breath.

“Where would I go?” he asked. He sounded weary. Defeated.

Mu Qingfang wanted to reach over and smooth the lines from his face. He wished such a touch could ease the feelings that caused them. He wished he could give Liu Qingge his spirit back. Not that it was truly lost, but it had been trapped for so long that removing the cage bars could only confuse it. He understood. Despite everything, in many ways he was fighting against the same feelings as well. A lot of this still felt like a dream he had dreamed too often.

He was standing in his family’s home again.

He still couldn’t believe it.

“Master Liu could go home,” he nevertheless reiterated again.

“My family’s not like yours,” Liu Qingge said. He swallowed, and looked down. “None of them
are demons.”

Mu Qingfang stiffened.

The tension in the room changed considerably.

“...What gave it away?” he finally asked.

“Nothing in particular,” Liu Qingge told him. “Little things. Your father and sisters sniffed your hair. Second sister growls a little when she’s excited. Father looks younger than your mother but must at least be the same age. He got into a fight with demons but doesn’t seem to be a cultivator. You treat demons a little different from humans, medically - you treated your father the way you would a demon. Checked different things, asked different questions.”

Mu Qingfang sighed.

“Ah,” he said.

“You never told me.”

There was a hint of accusation in that comment. Maybe it was deserved.

“I’ve never told anyone,” he admitted. “Not outright. Lord Luo figured it out himself as well.”

“He could tell?” Liu Qingge guessed. “Some sense of it?”

Mu Qingfang snorted.

“No. I tried to help him cover up his own secret, once. He correctly deduced the reason for my sympathies,” he explained. “Then he used that information to blackmail me. Naturally.”
Liu Qingge shook his head. He looked like he was on the verge of some reflexive denial or defense - surely there was a misunderstanding. Luo Binghe did have standards. He wouldn’t simply throw someone’s kindness in their face like that. Not unless he could justify it to himself as something other than betrayal or ingratitude, anyway. But Luo Binghe had always been so good at justifying things to himself. And the man hardly considered inclusion in his harem, in his bed, as a punishment for anything. Did he? No, that was just looking after the things he cared about. Taking responsibility. Bringing them into his fold.

The words tapered off, unspoken. The foregone and obvious conclusion of the argument - that Lord Luo would, had done, did - too obvious for even reflexive defenses.

And what was the point in trying to argue for the character of a dead man? Especially to someone who had hated him enough to become his murderer?

“...I’m sorry,” Liu Qingge ended up saying instead. “I’m sorry. It’s my fault. It’s always been my fault that he saw you, that he-”

No.

Absolutely not.

Mu Qingfang couldn’t take it. He crossed the few steps between them and took Liu Qingge’s hand in his own.

“Master Liu,” he said. “No apologizing. As my father would say - that was someone else’s wrong.”

Liu Qingge didn’t believe him. That much was apparent. He couldn’t, but sometimes thing needed to be said many times over before they could be understood. Liu Qingge’s hand was warm in his own. Softened by too little sword practice, pale from too much time spent indoors. Mu Qingfang squeezed it tightly between his own and willed every ounce of sincerity he could into his countenance.

He didn’t blame Liu Qingge.

One day, perhaps, Liu Qingge wouldn’t either.
I swear I was going to get all the way through to Liu Qingge's family reunion but this was getting LONG so that will probably still have to wait for some possible future update. ^^; And also I wanted to sort some of this out for my reference for the Wishful Thinking chapters too.

Basic summation:

- Luo Binghe either arranged for or took advantage of Mu Qingfang's exposure to a Sex Pollen-like fantasy aphrodisiac and they slept together. MQF fully believes that LBH deliberately arrange the incident, this is likely.

- Luo Binghe then went about courting Mu Qingfang while also alluding to the fact that he knew that Mu Qingfang's family were demons. In this way, MQF was coerced into marrying him in order to protect his family.

- MQF was vowed to kill LBH in retribution for trapping him into a marriage he didn't want.

- After successfully killing LBH (as he does in the BvB bonus chapter), MQF took Liu Qingge home with him to try and recover from what had happened and to reunite with his family (and hopefully one day reunite Liu Qingge with his as well).

- Lots of Liufang feels happened but in a slowburn-y 'could still just be really good pals' kind of a way.
Flaming Roach

Chapter Summary

Huo Zhenglang's POV.

Chapter Notes

This one's been edited quite a few times so please excuse any mistakes! We got a lot of demon culture lore here, Huo Zhenglang is probably the most steeped in it of anyone outside maybe Mobei-Jun, and focuses on it way more. So I decided I wanted to get this out before the next Borderlands installment. Hope you all enjoy! ^-^

One of Huo Zhenglang’s earliest memories was of his mother’s earrings.

He remembered the molten gold of them. They were large and round, with red stones in the center. His mother was from Huo clan as well, cousin to the Lady she had married, and always wore either gold or orange or red. On her clothes, on her nails, on the paint of her eyelids, the shape of her lips. Huo Zhenglang remembered reaching for the earrings and seeing something spark at his own fingertips. Shiny and red, too, just the barest puff of flame.

His mother had smiled at him.

“My little prodigy,” she cooed.

That wasn’t the first time Huo Zhenglang had made fire. It was his first memory, but the fire preceded it. It had always been there. Something that came when he needed it but also when he didn’t, something that made him special. He had burned countless toys, destroyed yards of bedding, curtains, rugs, and clothing in his youthful exuberance. There was nothing but endless patience towards him in his mama’s eyes.
Lady Huo had been waiting for his birth, waiting for a prodigy of the fire clan to come, for someone who could restore their reputations and carry them to glory again.

Huo Zhenglang was one of six babies born to the three wives and three concubines of Lady Huo in the same year. For Lady Huo’s wives a fire fruit tree was grown. Each wife fed her blood and qi to it, and so did Lady Huo, and the fruits were nourished to grow the likeliest heirs of the Huo clan. For Lady Huo’s concubines, Lady Huo swallowed a special pill and visited their chambers at night, and put the children into their bellies herself. Then the concubines were secluded within the ancestral fire temple to attempt to infuse the right energies into their wombs.

The fruits of the fire tree grew faster than the fruits of the loin, and within six months Lady Huo’s three wives each held a babe in their arms. It did not take long for catastrophe to strike. Second Wife’s child, the most promising, was stolen by a rival clan within a week. First Wife’s child, the most precious, died mysteriously in the cradle. Third Wife’s child, the last left, almost did not survive the ritual of flame needed to confirm her status as a Fire Demon. She barely manifested any fire traits at all, instead taking after Third Wife and her earthy nature.

Three months later, the concubines of the temple gave birth. The rituals to infuse their wombs were potent and not always successful. Two of the babies came out stillborn.

The third was Huo Zhenglang.

His birth mother was promoted to Head Concubine as a reward, and Huo Zhenglang was taken and given to First Wife to raise in order to replace the child she had lost. From that day on his mothers were Lady Huo and Lady Huo’s First Wife, with his birth mother as Auntie instead. His only remaining sibling, Huo Changying, bore a large scar on her chest from her nearly-failed ritual and cried more often than not. Lady Huo had less patience for watery tears than accidental flames, and largely ignored her daughter.

More attempts were made to produce further clan heirs, but disasters were too frequent. When Huo Zhenglang was six, Third Wife went to the fire temple with the concubines to try and produce an heir more suitable to the fire clan for the sake of Lady Huo and their family’s future. Changying cried and clutched her skirts until Third Wife gave her the green silk handkerchief from her sleeve, the human-make one with impressions of leaves, and said she could keep it if she behaved. Huo Zhenglang watched without really understanding.

Changying was given to Second Wife to look after.

Third Wife didn’t come back out of the fire temple again. Her baby died and so did she.
But somehow Changying learned how to stop crying after that.

For a while she took lessons with Huo Zhenglang. She wasn’t very good. Not that Huo Zhenglang minded, he liked that he won most games and received the most praise and could seem to do things better, even though his sister was older. His fire flourished and danced at his touch, so eager and easy, while Changying had to struggle and concentrate forever just to light a candle or make a flare. One time Huo Zhenglang was making the brazier fires dance with him, giggling madly, and Changying came out of nowhere and punched his face hard enough to leave a bruise. She used both hands and knocked him straight into the brazier as well. Not that he burned, of course, but it was very surprising!

Second Wife made her kneel for a really long time to repent, and after that they stopped having lessons together. Instead Huo Zhenglang studied with some of their older cousins.

“Little Changying really hates you,” one of his cousins opined on a heated morning, not long after the change had been made.

Huo Zhenglang laughed at the absurdity.

“No she doesn’t,” he said. “Why would she hate me?”

“Of course she hates you,” his older cousin stated with authority. “You have talent and she doesn’t. Your mothers love you but nobody loves her. If she doesn’t hate you, why do you think she hit you hard enough to leave a mark on your face? That’s not playing. She probably wishes you were dead.”

It wasn’t until Huo Zhenglang’s second cousin nodded in agreement that he began to feel doubt.

Nobody had ever hated him before.

He didn’t know what to do with the idea. But after thinking about it a while he decided that he didn’t like it. He didn’t hate his sister. Even though she was bad at a lot of things, he didn’t mind that. So why should she hate him for being good at things? It made no sense! The thoughts jumbled in his head, leaping like angry sparks over the course of several days. They wouldn’t leave him alone. So eventually Huo Zhenglang snuck away after one of his lessons and went Second Wife’s courtyard to corner his sister.
“Do you hate me?” he asked.

Huo Changying looked at him with a carefully blank expression.

“Of course not,” she replied.

Hou Zhenglang puffed his cheeks and wondered if she was lying.

“Really?” he pressed.

Changying nodded.

“Then why did Jiejie mark up my face?”

“...”

It took a long time for his sister to answer. He itched to fill the silence himself until he couldn’t take it any more.

“It was dumb. Jiejie could have hit me anywhere else and it would have been fine! Even with a mark! But instead Mama said we needed separate lessons,” Huo Zhenglang whined. “I have to study with our big cousins now. It’s not fair! I can’t beat them as easily!”

Changying’s face twitched.

“...I’m too easy to beat,” she said. “Our Huo family’s important heir needs challenges to improve himself. That’s why he has to study with our big cousins instead.”

“I don’t need challenges. I’m good no matter what!” Huo Zhenglang insisted.
Changying rolled her eyes.

“Stupid,” she muttered.

“What did you call me?!” he replied, affronted. He wasn’t stupid! Everyone always said that he was very smart!

His sister’s fists clenched.

“I called you ‘stupid’,” she said again, more clearly. Her chin lifted up. “Didi is stupid. Didi is a fool. The only thing he’s good at is fire but fire is stupid too!”

“No it isn’t!” Huo Zhenglang scoffed. Fire was the best! Changying was obviously talking nonsense just to be contrary, but it still made him mad.

“Yes it is! Fire is stupid and I hate it! I hate it the most!”

That kind of talk was too far!

“Do you want to fight?!?” he demanded.

She hesitated. Then her eyes gleamed.

“Yeah!” she snarled, letting out her claws. “Yeah I want to fight! I want to fight you! Let’s fight!”

With a startling battle cry she charged at him, and before Huo Zhenglang could react she had knocked him clean off of his feet. He recovered by the time she tackled him again at least, and the two of them broke out into a full-fledged tussle. Biting, kicking, punching, using what little training they’d had and every ounce of viciousness in their small bodies. Huo Zhenglang made some fire but he couldn’t get it close enough to help him fight, all he succeeded in doing was burning up some nearby scrub. Changying, on the other hand, used sharp claws and teeth and showed no mercy. She wrenched his shoulder and bit his neck and tried to scratch out his eyes. She was too fast for him to keep up.
Eventually the sounds of them snarling drew some attention, and one of the nannies came to pull them apart.

But they didn’t reach the children before the fight concluded on its own. Changying managed to get Huo Zhenglang pinned down and then angrily spat on his face.

It shocked him so much that he didn’t know what to do.

By the time they were being pulled apart, spit wasn’t the only wet thing on his cheeks. His sister’s eyes went wide, taken aback. Huo Zhenglang didn’t feel any less shocked himself as he sniffled. His expression crumpled, his shoulders shook, and with unceremonious gravity he dropped onto his butt and started to bawl like he hadn’t since he was a toddler.

The crying itself was more frightening than the fight had been. Something inside of him shook at the knowledge that Lady Huo didn’t like tears. If he was a crybaby like Changying, would she not want to see him anymore either? He didn’t want that! He tried to stop, but he couldn’t. His chest hurt and his cheeks burned, and erratic sparks of fire kept everyone else at bay while he choked on big, heaving sobs.

“Stop that!” Changying told him, stomping her foot.

“I can’t!” he cried. “Jiejie, Jiejie hates me…”

His sister wrinkled her nose and gave him a long look before she let out a breath like a bull. Then she picked up a rock and threw it at him, yanking her arm free when one of their nannies tried - too late - to stop her.

“I don’t hate you!” she snapped. “Didn’t I say so already?”

“I lost the fight!” he cried instead. “I lost, I lost! I can’t lose!”

“So what if you lost? I lose fights all the time! Don’t cry! Just get better!”
Huo Zhenglang sobbed harder. How was he supposed to do that? He thought he was good at everything! How was he supposed to fight ‘better’? Wasn’t he already the best? But Changying had beaten him. So he couldn’t be. Did that mean that his sister was the best now instead? Did that mean Lady Huo would ignore him and his flames would go away and he’d never be good at anything ever again?

With another gusty sigh Changying came over to him. She ignored the flames, and the rebukes of the servants who’d turned up, and slumped at his shoulder and hugged him.

Gradually Huo Zhenglang’s sobs eased into sniffles.

“What are you crying for?” she asked him.

He didn’t feel completely sure himself at that point.

“Nobody likes me,” he mumbled against his sister’s shoulder. Even as he said it, he knew it wasn’t right. Everyone liked him! The opposite was true, he was the very most likable! But… somehow, it felt like the truth anyway. “Nobody likes me except Jiejie.” The thought that his sister hated him - that she hated him enough to spit on him - felt like the whole world was abandoning him.

Changying patted his head.

“You’re crazy,” she muttered.

“I’m not!”

Huo Zhenglang’s flames had gone down by then, though, and so before they could argue more the servants hurried in to separate them and bundle him away.

Everyone fussed over him. Changying was scolded sharply for the spitting and had to kneel for marking up his face again. They were still separated for lessons, but life went back to normal anyway. Huo Zhenglang didn’t forget about the fight but he tried not to think about it too much either. He had other things to focus on. His birthday celebration came, and was a massive affair with lots of fireworks and feasting and gifts piled high. The Huo clan wasn’t mighty anymore, but they still had enough wealth to celebrate.
Every year since Lord Luo ascended, Huo Zhenglang’s mother had invited the demon sovereign to his birthday celebration - among a few others. But the sovereign always declined on the basis of having too much to do. It always made Lady Huo clench her teeth. Even as a child Huo Zhenglang knew that his lady mother wanted their clan to regain control of the south gate - one of the few stable portals that led to the Northern Desert. Their family had controlled the gate in Old Lord Huo’s day, but had lost it when Old Lord Huo demeaned Tianlang-Jun’s favourite nephew. When Heavenly Demons took offense, whole dynasties could collapse. Huo clan was lucky to get away with losing a lot of territory. Old Lord Huo was probably less lucky to get away with losing his head, but at least the entire family wasn’t wiped out.

Lord Luo was Tianlang-Jun’s son, but he had accepted Lady Huo’s fealty despite past offenses. Even so, the southern gate remained out of reach; instead Zhuzhi-Lang, Lord Luo’s cousin and the person whom Old Lord Huo had insulted in the past, was given control over the region. The Huo clan had to call upon him for help with their rivals if they wanted anything to arrive in a timely fashion. Lady Huo was eager to win over Lord Luo to the point where that wouldn’t be necessary and they were respected enough to appeal to him or to the Mobei-Jun instead, but there didn’t seem to be much opportunity.

Huo Zhenglang didn’t worry about it. Lord Luo was far away and he had never been to the Northern Desert anyway, and had no cares about Zhuzhi-Lang. Old Lord Huo had died before he was born. His statues looked mean, too. What bothered Huo Zhenglang most was the question of how he could become ‘better’.

It nagged at him a lot. Even though beating his older cousins was more challenging, he still managed it every time. In every lesson he seemed to learn things perfectly, and apart from the one fight with Changying, in his brawls, he always won. Mama called him the perfect scion and Lady Huo said he was destined for greatness, but in his heart Huo Zhenglang felt restless. He made fire more, even without reason. He climbed walls and statues, he snuck into the sealed segments of the old Huo Compound, the places that they had stopped being able to keep up when they fell from grace, and hunted vermin and picked through rotted furnishings and old boxes.

A few years after his epic brawl with Changying, Huo Zhenglang stumbled across a nest of acid spitting viper-rats. Not that he knew what they were at the time; it would be a while still before he recounted the incident to friends, and a fox-faced human would say ‘those sound like acid-spitting viper rats, they’re fairly common in your ancestral homelands, you should have reduced the temperature in the sealed spaces with cooling arrays in order to deter things like that from nesting there’ in a charmingly derisive tone.

But at the time he only knew they were strange-looking, and that when he lit a fire to try and see them better, they charged at him.

There were a lot of them. Their bites hurt, and the acid from their mouths burned him a way that
fire never had. The little monsters didn’t hold back and didn’t stop, and Huo Zhenglang struggled to get away from them; he lit them on fire but they still chased him, biting him bloody until he managed to flee to one of the gates and then climb up it.

He got stuck up there for a long while, throwing fireballs at the monsters and despairing when it only seemed to be enough to stop them from climbing up after him. Each time one was struck, it fell back down but it never stayed there for long, and his flames couldn’t burn through their thick, ugly scales.

One of his fighting instructors found him after an hour. With several precise attacks she flipped the monsters onto their backs and killed them, and then carried Huo Zhenglang back down and praised his intrepid spirit.

Huo Zhenglang, however, was not sure what to make of this development.

In fights with his instructors, he always won.

But against the viper-rats, he had clearly lost. Yet, his instructor - who he could beat - had won.

How did that make sense?

Huo Zhenglang had thought that the viper-rats were very strong to have bested him. Perhaps they were. But even if that was the case, then shouldn’t they still have been stronger than his instructor too? Clearly, there was a trick to beating them. His instructor told him their bellies were softer - less scales - but that answer just made him puff his cheeks in frustration.

He had hit their bellies! He knew he had! Of course he had tried that, he’d been stuck up there for an hour!

Since he’d had a harrowing ordeal, the servants prepared him a hot bath and some of his favourite foods for the evening. His Mama fussed and let him beg off practicing his fire techniques, but still made him practice the guzheng and take his calligraphy lessons before he could go play again.

With a lot of thoughts in his head, Huo Zhenglang kept aside one of his calligraphy sheets. His instructor praised it, as usual he heard that he was amazing and very good. But then he took the sheet with him and went all the way to Lady Huo's study. There were many written things there;
things which Lady Huo had written, and things which his aunts and uncles had written; things which the rival clans had, and even things which Lord Luo had.

He wasn’t sure of his thoughts, except that when he looked at his sheet, and the sheets he found in the study…

His writing was different.

In his heart… in his heart, he felt like… it wasn’t because it was better, either.

The restless feeling in him grew.

A few days later he sought out Changying.

“Jiejie,” he said. “Am I bad at things?”

Changying shook her head at him.

“Of course not,” she said neutrally. “Younger Brother is the scion our Huo clan has awaited for ages. He exemplifies the gift of fire.”

Huo Zhenglang knew that.

But…

“Really?” he asked.

His sister hesitated.

It was an answer in itself.
With a frustrated sound he tugged at her side.

“Jiejie, how can I get better at things?”

Changying sighed and pushed him off.

“By going to lessons, of course,” she said. She was exasperated, but that wasn’t important. It was easy to exasperate her.

“But in my lessons I’m already good, everyone says!” Huo Zhenglang whined. “If I’m already good then how do I get better? It’s got to be possible, right? If other people can do things better then how do I just do it like they do?”

“How should I know?” his sister huffed. “Didi shouldn’t worry, everyone thinks he’s so perfect no matter what he does!”

Huo Zhenglang thought about that.

“No matter what?” he asked.

Changying groaned.

“Obviously.”

Obviously. Huo Zhenglang let his sister hurry off to go to her dancing lessons while he pondered that. Everyone thought he was good no matter what. He had… noticed that, kind of. He was good. He was supposed to be. After all, he was the child his clan had waited for, the most important person! And he felt like it, too, he was the most important!

But.
If everyone thought he was perfect no matter what, then did that mean they ‘thought’ he was perfect even when he wasn’t?

This question, once it occurred to Huo Zhenglang, refused to leave his thoughts.

He was frightened of it. Or rather, he was frightened of what it implied about the state of his life. A demon lord could not be ‘unproven’. He read that in his history and philosophy lessons and heard it often enough all over the place. Weak lords died. They became like Old Lord Huo - they made mistakes and then bigger, stronger demons - like Lord Luo - ripped off their heads. If everyone was under a spell that made them think Huo Zhenglang was perfect, then nobody would tell him when he wasn’t.

If nobody told him when he wasn’t, then he wouldn’t know either. He would be bad at things but he wouldn’t know. Until someone who was way stronger ripped his head off, maybe. That seemed like a bad way to find out.

And also if everyone was under a spell and thought he was perfect, what if they woke up one day? What if they didn’t, but it didn’t matter because someone else wasn’t in the spell, and they saw Huo Zhenglang being a weak lord and took advantage of it?

Scary to think about.

But, no one was forcing him to think about it in the end, so Huo Zhenglang managed to put those thoughts away again. At least until Lady Huo took him and Changying on their first trip to the Underground Palace, way up in the Northern Desert.

A big conference was being held to discuss a redistribution of certain territories. Not the southern gate, unfortunately, but Lady Huo insisted that it was important to be part of the discussion whenever possible, and that it was a good opportunity for her children to begin making connections. Changying was still too young to be drawing interest in betrothals but there was a chance to at least get to know some nobles in their own generation, and one day Huo Zhenglang would need spouses too. Not to mention allies.

“Convince the scions of the other clans that the Huo strength will be worth backing one day,” Lady Huo instructed.

It was Huo Zhenglang’s first time away from home for any great length so he couldn’t bring
himself to focus too much on that. He was too excited. The north was cold, but it was also beautiful!

Beautiful and much richer than their old Huo Compound.

In the territories their clan had claim to, the compound and the temples were the only structures for miles. The nearest villages were small and desolate, so the compound seemed like a palace by comparison. But it paled next to the fortress which guarded the southern gate, and that, in turn, was nothing compared to the Underground Palace.

A true palace.

The front pavilion alone was bigger than both of the main yards of the Huo Compound put together. None of it was in disrepair, either. And even though much of the palace was buried, outside of the main entrance was a strange, walled off compound that seemed almost alien to the rest of it. Like something someone had picked up out of a dream and carefully placed in reality.

‘The Human Palace’, some of Lord Luo’s people called it. Or ‘the Bamboo Courtyard’ as well.

It was the home of Luo Binghe’s human husband, Shen Qingqiu.

Huo Zhenglang thought it was interesting, but the halls of the Underground Palace itself also fascinated him. He had never been so deep beneath the surface. He felt like he was on a treasure hunt. Changying seemed to like it as well, or at least she said as much until Lady Huo gave her a look that quieted her. Huo Zhenglang’s enthusiastic observations met with no such deterrents. His lady mother smiled and patted his cheek and then let some servants escort him back to the main pavilion to investigate some of the magnificent trophies there. Changying had to stay behind.

But when Huo Zhenglang came back the guest rooms a few hours later, he was met with an odd sight.

In the front chamber there was a man dressed in green and black. Something about him seemed strange, but Huo Zhenglang couldn’t tell what. He was graceful and handsome, carrying an artfully painted fan and wearing a silver hair ornament with a red symbol on it. The symbol matched a token on his belt, and managed not to clash with the pale green accents in his fine clothes. It was the sigil of the Heavenly Demon clan - Zhuzhi-Lang wore the same one.
The stranger’s free hand was gently settled on top of Changying’s head.

“Curiosity is to be expected from someone so young, of course,” the man was saying.

Lady Huo wore such a carefully polite expression that Huo Zhenglang felt immediately nervous.

“Lord Luo’s First Husband is generous. We are grateful for his patience with our Changying’s intrusions upon his privacy,” she said. Then she noticed his presence, and discreetly motioned him over.

First Husband…?

“Please permit me to introduce our Huo clan heir to Lord Luo’s First Husband. Changying is a less decorous child than our Zhenglang.”

Huo Zhenglang obediently went to her side.

“You’re him!” he excitedly blurted. “The human!”

Shen Qingqiu quirked an eyebrow and lazily moved his fan, obscuring part of his face. Huo Zhenglang could tell even so that he wasn’t ugly. Of course, it wouldn’t have made much sense if he was. There was a serpentine handsomeness to him but the sense of ‘difference’ lingered, too. It wasn’t any one trait that could be described. On the outside a human apparently was not that different from a demon. Or, a certain kind of demon anyway. It was just a vague sense of something else that clung to him. Or something missing? Hmm, not quite…

Huo Zhenglang felt a little disappointed regardless. He had imagined Lord Luo’s husband as something more strange. Like maybe his body would have been made of pure light or he’d have wings or maybe at least some neat patterns on his skin.

“Is this what you look like all the time?” he asked.

Lady Huo cleared her throat.
“Manners,” she said in a sharp undertone - the kind usually reserved for Changying or the servants. Huo Zhenglang froze up, uncertain of what to make of being addressed that way. He stopped talking altogether.

Shen Qingqiu, however, closed his fan and smiled.

“Lady Huo’s children are charming,” he pronounced.

Huo Zhenglang smiled back at him, accustomed to the compliment. His lady mother’s tense expression relaxed fractionally. She motioned at Huo Zhenglang and at Changying to leave. Despite the urge to insist on staying - he wanted to see the human more! - his mother’s expression put him off of the idea of objecting. He went with Changying instead. When they had gotten through the side door his sister grabbed his hand and tugged him along more quickly, deterring any eavesdropping he planned to attempt.

“What did you do?” Huo Zhenglang asked. Obviously she had done something in order for him to arrive to Lady Huo apologizing to Lord Luo’s husband.

Changying’s expression didn’t change but the way her grip tightened on him betrayed her nervousness.

“I went over,” she said.

“Over…?”

“...To the nice place. I went... I went over.”

Huo Zhenglang blinked and then stared at his sister in consternation. She went to Lord Luo’s husband’s home? His sister had really approached such a forbidden area of her own volition? Had she lost her mind?

“You got in?” he asked incredulously. Random people couldn’t even get into the spousal courtyards at the Huo compound, it wasn’t possible that the demon sovereign himself hadn’t made his own husband’s rooms undefended enough that a child could just sneak into them!
Changying sighed.

“No,” she said. “I was just outside, and I... knocked.”

“You knocked?” Huo Zhenglang repeated, confused. “Why did you knock?”

“Because I wanted to see inside!” his sister snapped.

“Well... why?”

He felt like he had to ask, even though it probably wasn’t such a big mystery. He thought that place was interesting too. Any place that was off-limits was bound to be. But Changying must have sneaked away to even get over there. If she knocked, she had to know she would also be caught. And even if someone answered, that place wasn’t one she would have just been allowed into. Right? Even if she asked politely or something, no servant should have ever actually let her in. Wouldn’t Lord Luo have their heads for something like that?

Changying only shrugged.

“It’s all green,” she muttered.

“You saw?” Huo Zhenglang asked, eyes nearly bulging out of his face.

She swiftly shook her head.

“Not really,” she insisted. “It was just a glimpse. I knocked and I wasn’t actually expecting an answer, or maybe a servant might come, but then - then, um. Lord Luo’s husband... opened the door.”

The two of them regarded one another in silence for a moment.

“He just opened it?” Huo Zhenglang checked, skeptically. “Himself?”
“Yes! Himself!” Changying insisted. Her tone assured him that she at least knew it sounded absurd.

“Well he does live there, maybe customs are different in the north…” he murmured, scratching at one pointed ear.

Changying shook her head and then put her face into her hands.

“What else happened?” he asked.

Again, Changying shook her head.

“He…” she started. Then she drew a breath and started over. “He said, ‘can I help you?’ and I… I didn’t know what to say, I thought maybe he was a servant because he couldn’t really be Shen Qingqiu, could he? Would Lord Luo’s husband open his own door? So I gave him my name and asked if I could see inside, and he told me it wasn’t allowed without special permission and then asked me a bunch of questions. And I answered them, and then I asked why he was asking me so many questions, and he said he was deciding if he was going to give me permission or not… and then, then I asked if he could really do that and he said it was his home after all, who else could? Apart from Lord Luo, he said, except he called Lord Luo by his name and I realized who he was and started apologizing…”

Huo Zhenglang tentatively poked her shoulder. She was really worked up. That wasn’t something that happened very often.

“Did he hit you?” he asked.

Changying shook her head ‘no’. She didn’t look like she’d taken a beating either.

“No!” she declared, obviously confused. “He was - he said it was alright, and then he patted me on the head, and I… I think, um. I just started talking about how nice his home looked and I… I couldn’t stop talking about the colour green?”

“The colour green? Why?”
“I don’t know!” his sister blurted, stomping a foot. “It’s a good colour! I’ve never seen a place decorated with it before, green dyes are hard to come by back home!”

Hou Zhenglang regarded her with morbid fascination.

“Did you panic?” he wondered.

She put her face back into her hands.

“Kill me,” she requested.

“I can’t. You haven’t finished telling me what happened.”

“I mostly have,” she assured him.

“How come he’s here?’ Hou Zhenglang prodded.

Changying waved a hand.

“When I stopped babbling he held my hand and walked me back here.”

“Himself?”

“Obviously!”

The two of them paused to think over the full picture of this development. Shen Qingqiu had answered Changying’s knocking in person, and then brought her back in person, and so Lady Huo must have been apologizing for disturbing him. Lord Luo’s husband was strange but he hadn’t seemed offended. But then again, a lot of people didn’t seem offended when they really were. Huo Zhenglang’s mama, First Wife, was like that. When she was the most angry she usually smiled. Sometimes Huo Zhenglang was like that too - he smiled because anger could bring out the fire, and
give him a rush and make him feel strong.

He didn’t think that was the case with Lord Luo’s husband, however.

For a few more minutes he pestered Changying for further details. They were still gossiping when Shen Qingqiu left - neither of them noticed the departure until Lady Huo appeared and snapped sharply for Changying. Huo Zhenglang was sent off to go play some more while his sister followed their lady mother’s servants to another room. Undoubtedly, she was going to be punished.

Sure enough, the next day Changying still had burn marks on her arms.

Huo Zhenglang poked one of the bandages. She smacked his hand away, sharply.

“Hurts?” he asked.

“No. It’s just annoying,” Changying snapped.

“Then why is Jiejie crying?” he asked, poking at the corner of her eye instead. She caught his hand, glared, and pointedly flung it away again.

“I’m not.”

“Are too!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“Shut up!”

“That’s rude, Jiejie!”
Huo Zhenglang poked one of the burn marks again. His sister hooked a foot behind his ankle and swept his leg out from under him and sent him pinwheeling to the ground. He recovered quickly however, hopping back up and resuming his task of pestering her until they noticed Lady Huo heading swiftly for the main chamber again. Curious, Huo Zhenglang made to follow. But she stopped partway and gestured at him to stay back. Then she narrowed her eyes at Changying.

“Lord Luo’s husband has come to call again,” she said. “Stay out of sight unless someone sends for you.”

Changying kept her head lowered.

“Do you think he’s mad after all?” Huo Zhenglang wondered.

His sister turned on her heel and ran back to her room. The scent of fear followed her, and he wasn’t sure what to think of it all.

~

Shen Qingqiu, it turned out, wasn’t angry.

Lady Huo didn’t say much more about the matter at first, no matter how Huo Zhenglang asked, and sometimes she even let his sister be in her presence but not him. Which wasn’t something that had ever happened before. He felt strangely nervous and confused about the matter, but Lady Huo also didn’t punish Changying again so it probably wasn’t bad? For some reason that notion made him feel a new, different kind of nervousness. A few weeks into their stay at the palace, Lord Luo also came to visit.

Again, despite the usual customs for visiting lords, Huo Zhenglang was instructed to keep out of sight unless sent for. He tried to listen in anyway, but spying on people was much harder than it looked. Luckily, he didn’t have to try for very long before one of Lady Huo’s personal servants came and herded himself and Changying into the room.
“Zhenglang has inherited our clan’s great propensity for fire manipulation. He has been instructed by many fine tutors in various forms of combat and artistry as well,” Lady Huo was saying. She motioned him over. When Changying hung back, she also directed his sister forward with an impatient hand.

Lord Luo looked at them both.

Huo Zhenglang had to fight back a blush.

Luo Binghe was a very handsome man, both like and unlike what Huo Zhenglang would have expected. The lord was tall and broad-shouldered, clad in expensive robes of black and sapphire blue - very official northern attire. The red mark on his brow, denoting his lineage, was a match for the red of his eyes. He had a full head of thick hair that spoke to some wind demon lineage in his roots; Huo Zhenglang had sat through many lessons on all the great demon clans and their various branches, and he knew that the wind demons claimed some familial connection to Tianlang-Jun. It seemed to fit, but Luo Binghe did not have an ‘airy’ or ‘playful’ sort of presence. Wind demons were known to be joyful, ever-smiling, over-curious, and even a bit foolish - Lord Luo’s gaze was calculating and sharp, belying the small smile on his face. He seemed to see right through Huo Zhenglang, and right through Changying as well.

Unfortunately, he also didn’t have any horns or scales or massive claws or pronounced fangs or a fur pelt or anything else like that. He was a demon without many interesting natural adornments. This was only a minor disappointment, however, and most of Huo Zhenglang’s attention was reserved for Lord Luo’s face. It was very beautiful.

His skin felt hot. He suddenly wasn’t sure what to do with his hands. The eyes on him made him want to fidget.

Changying managed to hold perfectly still, as though she was trying to blend in with the wall behind her.

She didn’t have that kind of ability so of course she remained completely visible.

“And the girl?” Lord Luo asked. It seemed he was finished looking at them. Lady Huo’s lips briefly twitched, the barest sign of displeasure, but then she smiled and smoothly summoned Changying to her side. She began explaining about Changying’s education. What sorts of instructors she’d had, what kinds of things she could do. Huo Zhenglang knew what sorts of things
his sister did already so he tuned it out and instead looked at Lord Luo some more. The lord was wearing a pair of silver earrings, and a silver crown set with rubies and sapphires. It could have looked silly, but the rich blue seemed to compliment him instead. Huo Zhenglang was fascinated by it. Only northern royalty was allowed to own blue sapphire gemstones or wear the sapphire shade of blue. As the Demon Sovereign, of course, Luo Binghe and his family more than qualified for such grandeur; but even despite coming to the north, Huo Zhenglang hadn’t seen many such gems being worn. So far he had only glimpsed a single sapphire hair pin on an elder who must have been from Mo clan.

Lord Luo’s crown had no less the three blue sapphires in it.

Huo Zhenglang, despite being the future Lord Huo, would never be permitted to wear such a thing. It was a strange realization that stole over him. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it. Some part of him thought that he should dislike it, but there were many people mightier than the Huo clan in this world. If Huo Zhenglang was supposed to lead them to glory, then he would have to face them, wouldn’t he? He would have to prove himself to them and protect his standing as well.

The thought… it filled him with indescribable agitation.

With fear.

Was he afraid of Lord Luo?

He wasn’t sure. He still found himself confused when his mother sent him out of the room. It was enough of a relief to leave and try to distance himself from that feeling that he didn’t even mind that Changying wasn’t sent out as well. Instead he hurried back to his room and stood in the middle of it, and finally let the confusing feelings burst out of him in flares and sparks. He drummed his fingers against the side of his thighs and paced, and then went through some martial arts movements to try and work out the feelings. It wasn’t until his flames had flickered out again that he finally realized what he’d felt.

Inadequacy.

In this place, in front of someone like Lord Luo, Huo Zhenglang had suddenly understood - he was like a joke.

He wanted to go home.
A month later he got his wish. Although it felt strange - Changying didn’t come with them.

Lord Luo had picked her to be his newest student.

The atmosphere on the return trip felt confused. Lady Huo wore a neutral expression, but there was a furrow in her brow; as if there was some puzzle she was still attempting to piece together. When they returned to the southern compound she summoned Huo Zhenglang to her and took his chin in her hand. Her long, sharp nails dug into his skin.

“Go to the temple,” she decided. “Take no servants, no supplies. Three months. When it’s finished, then First Wife will take her son back to the north. We will give our sovereign enough excellence to demand recognition.”

Huo Zhenglang’s stomach dropped.

“Three months?” he asked. The temple was fire and stone, it was an ancient place and he did not mind it in the least - his flames always burned strongest there. But it wasn’t precisely comfortable either, and with no servants and no supplies, would he even have food to eat?

Lady Huo slapped him in rebuke.

Then she affectionately patted over the sting. The look on her face didn’t make Huo Zhenglang feel any better.

“My son, you carry our Huo clan’s fire in you. If it is not enough to see you through this, then how can you call yourself our heir? How will you bring us any glory?” she asked him. “We have given you everything, and you balk at a simple trial. It is too unbecoming.”

Huo Zhenglang gulped.

These felt like words he had been waiting to hear for longer than he had let himself know.
You're not worthy.

You're not what we thought you were.

You're just a scared little child - not impressive at all.

He hung his head.

Lady Huo had him sent back out. First Wife visited not long after, and Huo Zhenglang didn’t know what they talked about. But he knew that his mama came to him afterwards and held him tightly to her. She wasn’t smiling. There was a strange look in her eye, of the sort that sometimes came over her and seemed to push her to some cold and distant place. It persisted even when she whispered that Huo Zhenglang was good enough to meet his trial.

“My little prodigy,” she said. Nails dug into him, hard enough to hurt. “Mama will be so lonely without you.”

Then she let go of him.

Huo Zhenglang went to the temple.

The sound of the doors sealing behind him echoed in his mind long after it had been done. He stood alone and turned in a slow circle, taking in the rivers of lava, and the ancient statuary. The ever-burning fires, the pillars of skulls, and bloodstained altars. He was supposed to cultivate, but for a while he just wandered. He’d never been in the temple alone before. In the main chamber the cavernous ceiling led up to a single point of light. Smoke obscured the sun. In the narrow, winding corridors, he found rooms with stone beds and pits of blackened bones, and wondered if the Huo chamber of the Holy Mausoleum resembled anything like this. He found plaques with names he recognized from his books. He found rooms that made him wonder which one Changying’s mother had died in.

A lot of people had died in the temple, in fact. A lot of the blood that had stained it belong to Huo Zhenglang’s own kin. To the ‘unworthy’.

Huo Zhenglang wasn’t among them. He hadn’t been unworthy. He tried to console himself with that thought - it probably would have made him less afraid if he could entirely believe it. He had
his flames, but so had many. Second Wife’s infant had been just as promising at the start, and Changying had survived even without fire to avail her. Meanwhile, from his studies Huo Zhenglang knew that plenty of his ancestors had met their death in the temple, fires or no. It was a place that could forge fire demons into something stronger and a place that could reduce them to ash and bone. One of the easiest ways for a powerful fire demon to die was to be consumed by their own flames. To lose track of their own power and inadvertently become fuel for it instead.

In one of the chambers lined with stone beds, Huo Zhenglang found words that someone had carved into the side of one. The marks were jagged, as though done with very strong claws.

*We are*

*All*

*The kindling*

*If we are*

*Not*

*The spark*

He left the room and didn’t go back to it.

The first few hours he wandered around with his heart in his throat, already feeling thirsty.

Then he just started to get *bored.*

The temple was big but he had, of course, been to it a few times before. He knew most of the layout, and there were only a few corridors and chambers that he’d never explored, either with permission or by sneaking off to do so. None of them had anything more interesting than bloodstains and bones. There were no creatures in the temple either. Nothing to hunt, nothing to play with, nothing to even really feel scared about. Not in the normal way, at least.
By evening Huo Zhenglang was dashing up and down different corridors in bare feet, testing how well he could slide down them.

The beds in the temple were far from comfortable. When he finally got tired of sliding down the halls, Huo Zhenglang didn’t even both with them. Instead he lay down near to some of the lava streams that were carved into the temple’s floors. It was very, very hot, but such things had never bothered him even on the level that they could sometimes bother other fire demons.

The next day, he cultivated. Until he got bored again. Then he found a pile of rocks in one of the dustier storage rooms and just chucked them into the lava rivers for a while, seeing how long they lasted before they dissolved and trying to get the smaller ones to land in the river mouths, which were carved to look like skulls.

After a week, he was calling up his flames for company. He shaped them into little flame imps and made them dance until he got too tired. Then he formed hand shadow puppets on the walls instead. His throat scratched as he made up voices for the random creatures his fingers could shape.

He cultivated more.

He was so thirsty.

When he finished his first month in the temple, he tried to drink the lava.

It didn’t go well. It didn’t kill him, but it left him rasping and gasping, his eyes streaming and his insides molten. It didn’t help with the thirst, but after he lay down for several hours and wondered if he was dying, it felt like it had definitely done something to him.

He wasn’t sure what though. Eventually his body finished healing and he went back to cultivating.

Of course, he also did try and escape a few times. He wasn’t supposed to and he knew it, but sometimes he felt so terrified that he didn’t know what else to do; that any punishment, even just running away, seemed better than staying put. He tested the walls and doors, and in the second month even tried to tunnel out. He didn’t know much about tunneling, however, and all of his efforts simply ended in the ground collapsing in on itself.

Still, at least trying to figure it out gave him something to do.
Halfway through the second month, Huo Zhenglang lay down in the middle of the central chamber of the temple, on top of a bloodstained altar, and stared up at the smoke disappearing through the hold that led out of the top of the volcano.

Then he started climbing.

He didn’t know climbing any better than digging, but he could jump. He scraped his hands raw and bloody trying to make his way to the top. It was a long, long way up. The rock began marked with the blood from his hands.

The blood marks were his check points. He knew when he had managed to get higher, to get closer to his goal, when he reached a point where there wasn’t any blood around yet.

Even though success still seemed far away, Huo Zhenglang’s heart always pounded and his cracked lips spread into an excited grin every time he got higher. It was a feeling he couldn’t describe, one he had felt before but never with such desperation. It was the feeling of progress, progress he could see, and it was the only thing that ever quieted the fear which had gnawed at his bones ever since the trip north.

Maybe even since before that.

Huo Zhenglang hated climbing like he’d never hated any other activity in his life. He hated falling. There was nothing soft in the temple, soft things would just burn, so he always hit the ground hard. He hated it, but the feeling when his hand clutched unmarked stone; when he braced his feet and launched himself up to a higher point, muscles straining, lungs fighting against the black air…

He became obsessed with reaching the opening. With grasping the moon that hung temptingly above, bright like the glint of a silver earring.

His cultivation seemed to improve much more with a goal in mind.

The worst times were definitely when he managed to fall into the lava rivers, though. It wasn’t a huge problem for his body but it left his skin too sensitive to touch things for a few hours, and also it burned off any clothing he was wearing.
By the end of the third month Huo Zhenglang was naked, repeatedly bloodied, covered in soot, and grinning like a mad thing as he ignored the sounds of the temple doors opening in favour of standing atop the volcano’s peak and staring upwards.

The moon was wondrous to behold.

~

After the temple, Huo Zhenglang’s mama began taking him on regular trips to the Underground Palace in the north.

Huo clan didn’t have the honour of an actual set of rooms kept aside for them at the palace, but Sha clan did, and his mother managed to negotiate them into renting some of their guest chambers. The Sha clan were southern demons, but much more powerful and influential than the Huo. Old Lady Sha had been the sworn sister of the Mobei-Jun’s grandmother, so even when many other southern clans began to fall into trouble in the wake of Tianlang-Jun’s defeat, they had held onto a lot of their wealth and influence.

Overall they were very pretty demons. Sharp-tongued and boastful, with fearlessness apparent in their refusal to wear armour. Huo Zhenglang scrapped with a few of them and almost always had to use his flames to get them to back off; his claws could barely leave red marks across their flawless skin.

The fights also left him feeling something… else. A different kind of excitement. The sort that reminded him of the same heated agitation he’d felt while looking at Lord Luo’s beautiful face. A few times he’d get one of his new Sha friends pinned in a fight and feel and urge come over him to bite them. Except he wasn’t trying to draw blood or anything. When his mama caught him at it, she took him aside and gave him a set of books to read.

Hou Zhenglang had a cursory understanding of sex, of course. He was very well-read, even somewhat voracious about it if he was bored, so naturally he had run across references he didn’t understand and then asked for clarifications on certain things. The books his mama gave him, however, were much more comprehensive and also had illustrations.
His fights with his Sha friends got a lot more interesting.

But there were limits, he learned. As a future lord he had to be careful about who he expressed ‘interest’ towards, or else he could make trouble for his Huo clan. He also couldn’t risk getting anyone pregnant. Fooling around was one things, but getting into serious trouble was another. When two of his new Sha clan friends tried to pin him down and humiliate them, Huo Zhenglang decided not to play such games with them any more. He didn’t like how it had felt when they’d laughed and jeered and refused to let him go, touching him through his clothes until he called up his fire to make them run away instead.

Hou Zhenglang decided he would find some more well-mannered friends. Changying had been busy with Lord Luo and her new studies, but it wasn’t too long after that incident that he finally managed to meet up with her again.

His sister looked very different.

She had her hair slicked straight and tied back into a simple ponytail. Her clothes were white and pristine, and for some reason she had painted a single black dot underneath one of her eyes. There was a sword at her belt, very simple-looking but Huo Zhenglang supposed it was probably meant for a student and not some kind of masterwork weapon or anything.

“Hey Jiejie, want to fight?” he asked.

Changying replied by sending a shock of black qi towards him that knocked him back a step.

She did!

Even in a short time, Huo Zhenglang immediately realized that his sister’s moves had changed. She was quicker and a lot more agile, and she didn’t bother to draw her sword. Not that it was needed for a brawl between siblings or anything, but it still stood out in his mind. The way she moved wasn’t like how she used to. It also wasn’t like how the Sha demons fought either.

Huo Zhenglang felt something twinge in his chest. Lord Luo, the demon sovereign, had been teaching her.

Someone like that… someone who was so obviously strong… could be a really good teacher,
right? He thought of bloody marks on stone and felt his chest ache with longing. It distracted him badly enough that when Changying somehow got around behind him he didn’t even realize until she struck his back. The blow was enough to make a small impact crater in the dirt of the underground practice yard, and easily knocked all the breath out of him. Huo Zhenglang bit his lip by accident, hard enough that his fangs drew blood.

He sniffed.

“Argh,” Changying growled in irritation.

“Jiejie beat me,” Huo Zhenglang noted with a waver in his voice.

“Don’t cry.”

“I won’t cry!”

“You’re crying already. How are you this old and still crying every time you lose?”

“It’s not because of that!”

“Of course. The Future Lord Huo wouldn’t cry because he lost. How foolish would that be?”

Huo Zhenglang blinked at Changying. She had a straight face on, but he could hear something almost like… like teasing in her voice.

With a cry he tackled her.

“I missed Jiejie so much!” he exclaimed.

Changying went stiff as a board, stunned, and hit the ground with his full weight on her. She didn’t move for a solid minute while Huo Zhenglang hugged her. The fact that she’d beaten him bothered him still, of course, but he felt like he was beginning to understand something. Why Lady Huo had locked him in the temple. Why it was important to come back here. Why he’d felt, once upon a
time - and maybe still felt, in some way - that his sister was the only person in the world who liked him.

He couldn’t really put words to it. But he was very happy to be reunited.

After a few minutes Changying awkwardly punched his shoulder.

“Didi has a thousand friends, why does he have to be so sticky towards me?” she asked. She didn’t actually sound mad about it. Huo Zhenglang rolled away and lay down in the dirt, aching from his bruises. The strain of exertion felt good. He grinned at Changying and got a reluctant, very tiny smile back.

Then she tossed some dirt at his face.

Huo Zhenglang complained about the affront while he dusted himself off. Then he dragged his sister back to he and his mother’s rooms and had her make tea for them while he pestered her with questions about her teacher, and her training, and the Underground Palace, and all the people in it as well.

He also poked the weird painted dot under her eye.

“What’s this?” he asked.

Changying froze and then leaned back, frowning until he withdrew his hand.

“What’s what?”

“The spot. Why’d Jiejie draw a spot on her face?”

“...It’s a beauty mark.”

“It’s a what?”
“A beauty mark. It’s a human thing.”

“Oh! A human thing?” Huo Zhenglang blinked and tapped at his chin. “Like Lord Luo’s husband? Did he teach you that?”

Oddly, Changying’s cheeks turned pink. She glared at the table.

“No,” she said. “He didn’t have to. It’s just a thing in human culture. I know a lot about humans now, I even went to the human world with Lord Luo.”

“What?! No fair!” Huo Zhenglang protested. He hadn’t ever been to the human world! How come Changying got to go first?

“It was interesting. There were human cultivators there. I even saw Lord Luo train with one of them,” his sister explained, even verging on gloating.

“What’s it like?” he demanded. He thought of the human palace attached to the underground structure. Changying had seen in there, too, and he hadn’t. For all that he knew a lot about the workings of the demon realms, he didn’t know very much at all about humans. On the one hand, they seemed somewhat dull and lackluster overall anyway. But on the other hand, he knew that couldn’t always be true - Lord Luo and Mobei-Jun had both married humans, and everyone knew it was suicide to speak an ill word about Shen Qingqiu or Shang Qinghua.

Changying folded her arms.

“Most humans are very weak and fragile,” she said. “It’s no good to hit them or fight with most of them, it’s too easy to break them. But the strong ones are very strong by comparison. It’s a big contrast! The servants in the human world might die from a single punch, but one of their warriors managed to keep up with Lord Luo. His sword answered him like an extension of his spirit, and he flew through the air while balancing on it! Lord Luo says that if I keep up my practicing, then Master Liu has agreed to help procure me a special human sword. Humans make really good swords. This one I have is human-make as well, it’s nearly as long as Liu Qingge’s sword, which is named Cheng Luan. All important human swords have names. If I get one then I will have to give it a name as well, this one I have now is good for practice but it’s no the special kind, those ones have spirits that come from mountains and the wielder has to bond with the spirit in order to get it work. Lord Luo’s never heard of a demon doing such a thing before apart from himself, but it could work for me as well as long as I find a spirit that is willing…”
Huo Zhenglang blinked, taken aback, as his sister began rambling off what sounded like random trivia about human swords and sword-makers at that point. Somehow he found himself listening to accounts of what Shen Qingqiu’s sword, Xiu Ya, was like, and something about a special reforging of Lord Luo’s Zheng Yang, and then even more details about Cheng Luan.

He got bored very quickly.

“Okay, okay, enough about swords!” he interrupted. “Since when are you so interested in those things?”

Changying pursed her lips and then sipped her tea.

“So what if I’m interested?” she countered. It was a low grumble, however, and after a minute Huo Zhenglang decided to just disregard it.

“What’s interesting now is sex,” he assured her instead.

She wrinkled her nose.

“Ew,” she countered.

“What’s ‘ew’? It’s really interesting! Jiejie, has your teacher given you any books about it?” he asked. Less because he was concerned over her education, it should be said, and more because he’d developed an interest in sneaking away whatever literature he could find on the subject.

“No. No need,” Changying told him.

“Eh? Why not?”

She shrugged.
“I won’t bother with it yet. Also, Lord Luo goes into the human world a lot, and I may go with him. I can’t have sex with humans.”

Hou Zhenglang took a moment to try and do the math on that one and came up blank.

“Because they’re so weak…?” he hazarded. Obviously, the exceptions wouldn’t be, but how rare were strong humans? He didn’t know. Changying nodded at him with all the worldliness of a young person who has discovered half a fact about something new.

“If humans have sex outside of marriage, they die,” she explained.

He frowned.

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“It’s true!” Changying insisted. “I overheard about it. Lord Luo didn’t take Master Shen to his bed until after they were married, even though Master Shen was afflicted with a deadly poison. Why would he wait if it wasn’t dangerous otherwise? And, some of the human servants were talking about how dangerous it would be for Senior Shen to be sexually preyed upon.”

“Senior Shen?” Huo Zhenglang asked.

“En, Shen Jiu. Master Shen’s human kin,” his sister explained.

Right. He’d heard some talk about that, a human boy from Shen Qingqiu’s family who had been rescued by Lord Luo somehow or another. It was interesting stuff; expanding the sovereign’s family was always bound to be.

“…It’s really deadly for them?” he nevertheless checked again.

“Maybe not in all cases, but it must certainly be dangerous to them in the extreme. When you know some things it’s not much of a surprise,” Changying said. “Without a lot of deliberate cultivating most humans are really fragile. I think they must need special training before they wed in order to strengthen themselves enough to handle sex.”
“Huh.”

How strange would it be to be a human, he wondered? It seemed like a miracle that any of them survived long enough to become strong at all.

Talking about humans was slightly more interesting than talking about swords, but somehow Changying managed to steer the conversation back towards that ‘Master Liu’ person, and then she started talking about swords again. When Huo Zhenglang couldn’t handle it anymore - which didn’t take long - he let out some aggrieved sighs and poked at Changying until she stopped listing random sword facts and promised to show him some interesting things the following day.

Then his sister went back to her own rooms in the interior palace, and Huo Zhenglang took some free time to read his sex books again.

Naturally, of course, the following morning his sister made good on her promise.

The Underground Palace was a big place. The northern central hub for demonic nobility and diplomacy, more or less. In the south things were more spread out. While it would be sketchy to claim that the south was more ‘hospitable’ a location - every corner of the demonic realms held its fair share of natural dangers and nowhere was good to live without protection - it had been the region where the Heavenly Demons first rose to prominence.

A lot of records had been lost thanks to warfare, but Huo clan had always taken great care to preserve certain things. Mostly that was because it was so easy for them to burn records, so their general attitude towards keeping them was necessarily more secure than most to begin with. Huo clan recalled histories that most others had long buried, burned, or forgotten. Despite their lack of prominence, Huo Zhenglang could trace his ancestry back much further than most nobles - and could probably also trace the ancestry of those nobles back further than they could, too.

When the first Heavenly Demons started rising to prominence, the southern realms were little more than a collection of disparate tribes. Among those tribes there were three who stood out, and would eventually become Huo, Sha, and Wang clans. The fiends of the south. Back in those days most demons did not formally recognize bloodlines with surnames or anything like that, but eventually they would come to; and naturally, wherever groups formed for protection, families would also come into the picture. Leaders too.

As well as innovations.
Wang clan were the great builders of the south. Most demonic architecture owed at least several favours to their inventors, and they were the first demons to begin to craft such things as teleportation amulets, trapping arrays, and illusion materials. The oldest war records Huo Zhenglang had laid eyes upon told of their early attempts to claim fealty from the rest of the south, and their ventures to the east as well. The Holy Mausoleum was first established by them - although the first mausoleum was eventually destroyed by the Heavens, and later rebuilt in a more secretive location. It was still not until later that the first Heavenly Demon lords started to come into the picture. The Heavenly Demons secured the fealty of the Sha and Huo clans, among others - the dream demons, and the beast tamers, the poisoners, and the eastern herbalists with their qingse spores.

The subsequent battles for dominance shook the realms. Wang clan allied with the Jin to create phenomenal weapons capable of killing the Heavenly Demons. In turn the Heavenly Demons used their sheer regenerative power to adapt to anything that only ‘almost’ killed them, and adapted remarkable ways of controlling their blood parasites. At the height of the conflict the Wang clan had created a sword ‘worthy’ of their enemies, a false peace offering - a weapon of infinite hunger. The Heavenly Demon ranks were nearly wiped out by the temptation and costliness of wielding the weapon, up until it was lost in battle and all records of its whereabouts destroyed.

Of course, there was a lot of interest in finding a weapon specifically designed to lure and kill Heavenly Demons, but no one even knew where to look. Conventional wisdom was that it had been destroyed with its last wielder; or possibly that only the Heavenly Demons themselves could ever find it again, as a failsafe to keep such a devastating object from inadvertently seducing and destroying every other demon tribe out there too.

It was after that particular cataclysm that the first Mobei-Jun claimed dominion of the north.

The ice demons were, historically, relentless.

It was enough that a few centuries after the fact, the formerly irreconcilable rivals of the south banded together to stave off invasion from the north. That was how it often seemed to go in history, however. Everyone hated their neighbour the most until someone new and all the more frightening for it came into the picture. Even old grudges could be set aside for such things, if only because old grudges were also grudges which their keepers had already been living with for a while. Demons were ageless. Revenge could always be put off for another day, just so long as one lived to claim it.

So war turned back towards the north, and many of the strongholds and fortresses build by the Mo clan were wholly destroyed by the golden demons and their weapons, many of their forces killed by the innovator tribe and their traps, their Generals poisoned, their dreams invaded, and their own retainers widely killed. The winged sky clan and the beast-tamers were the first to turn against the
ice lords. Others followed.

However, when the fifth Mobei-Jun finally bent their knee to the Heavenly Demon Queen, the demons of the south had not completely forgotten their old vendettas. The Wang clan was sent into one of their own traps, and never properly recovered their numbers again. The last demon of that tribe to bear the surname Wang was Wang Xiu, the current Mobei-Jun’s maternal grandfather. His daughter had reportedly been a reluctant bride to the Mo clan, disinterested in their efforts to pry old builders’ secrets from her and resentful of both her fiancées to the point of near-hatred. After the birth of her son she had vanished, and with her had gone the last of the knowledge of the old southern kings.

Of course, there were still others with ties to that lineage. Huo Zhenglang himself could trace some ancestry to this or that relative who had married in from the Wang clan, as could many others. But the line of inheritance was gone, and so too were the secrets and methods tied in with that inheritance. Wang clan had kept many things reserved for the knowledge of their clan leaders and no one else. All that remained was what had become widely shared knowledge anyway, and that didn’t include a great number of the ancient marvels of building for which that tribe had been famed. Most relics of that time period were, of course, in the south; meaning the southern temples, compounds, strongholds, and palaces could all - by demonic standards - house many and do so to a fine standard. In the north, however, only a few such structures could be found. The Underground Palace of the Northern Deserts was one; once a crude ancestral shelter to the Mo clan, it had been seized and changed hands many times over the course of many conflicts. A great number of the structural additions were the work of Wang clan, which was part of what made it so versatile and just about as hospitable as a frozen hole in the ground could be.

Which was a good thing, because most of the structures Mo clan built sounded utterly unlivable to Huo Zhenglang. Palaces of ice? Weird little huts built into the snow? How was anyone other than an ice demon supposed to live in that?

The Underground Palace was probably as far north as Huo Zhenglang would ever want to go without a knife to his throat.

But he kept all of the historical and political context in mind as Changying took him to the places where demons their own age tended to congregate to practice and play and get into scraps with one another. He wasn’t shy but he also knew it was a bad idea to make the wrong impressions - he didn’t want something like what had happened the first time, with Changying drawing Shen Qingqiu’s attention, to happen by accident again.

He really was trying! He was an educated nobleman! He knew a lot of things, he knew proper conduct and everything, he was good at it. Well, he was supposed to be good at it.
Somehow, though, he still got into trouble before it was even noon time.

Changying had taken him to one of the external courtyards, to where some of the best fights could happen. There hadn’t been too many people there but by then she insisted that she needed to some daily practices, and no amount of whining dissuaded her. Huo Zhenglang wandered off, and was relieved when he spotted a fox demon youth digging in some dirt.

He waited for the little fox to finish. The youth was very pretty, if on the ‘boring’ end of things - he didn’t have the ears or tails that some foxes did, but he had sharp features and fine clothes, and something about the look in his eyes just seemed interesting. He seemed like he was pent up and looking for a fight, so after a few minutes of watching, Huo Zhenglang decided to introduce himself.

He’d scarcely launched his friendly attack when something collided into him sideways and slammed him into a nearby wall.

Ambush?

Huo Zhenglang was surprised on many levels. He hadn’t even realized there was anyone else around, hadn’t been expecting the tackle, and was totally unprepared to be hit hard enough to have his ribs bruise. The figure who’d caught him off-guard kept him pressed against the wall and projected an angry, warning wave of spiritual energy.

Rude, he thought. Rude! Why so much hostility?!

But then he looked at what had attacked him and his brain screeched to a tremendous halt.

This new boy was a little shorter than him, but he hardly seemed to know it. He was dressed in pale blue and white, with his hair done up in a tight bun. A pair of small, blue sapphires dangled from the lone ornament he was wearing. His gaze was flinty, his hands were strong, but the really amazing thing was his skin. Fragments of iridescent blue shell, like the prettiest of scales or perhaps beetle shells, decorated his scowling face.

A bug demon?!

Huo Zhenglang had never actually met one before. He had wanted to. They supposedly
looked terrifying.

Terror wasn’t what he felt at the moment, however. His heart sped up with sheer excitement. He tried to break the hold on him to accept this offered tussle, but the newcomer wasn’t letting up. Accustomed to running into such problems by then - despite himself - Huo Zhenglang nevertheless diverted to the tried and true and called up his flames.

The bug demon startled, but only for a second. He released just one of Huo Zhenglang’s hands in order to motion sharply.

The temperature plummeted, and the flames went out.

Huo Zhenglang’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. He shivered violently. Real fear struck him for a moment. Never, in his life, had he actually felt cold like that. Like it could sink into his bones and freeze his lungs and snuff out all of his fires so thoroughly that they wouldn’t ever light again…

This wasn’t an ordinary bug demon. The blue sapphires glinted in condemnation.

This had to be a scion of Mo clan. An ice demon with mixed lineage; the sort that could either go horribly awry or else really, really work out.

Huo Zhenglang felt, even at first impression, that in this person’s case it was certainly the latter situation.

“Wow;” he sighed. His breath fogged in the cold air in front of him.

Changying ran up, her footsteps light but her brow furrowed.

“Senior Mo, please forgive my brother,” she said.

Forgive? For what?
“I didn’t do anything,” Huo Zhenglang protested.

Flinty eyes narrowed at him.

“It’s forbidden to attack Young Master Shen,” the Mo scion informed him. His voice was very rich, even when it seemed to also be heavy with disapproval.

To his credit, it didn’t take Huo Zhenglang long to realize what his mistake was. There was only one person at the palace who might be referred to as ‘Young Master Shen’, and that was Shen Jiu; Shen Qingqiu’s human kin. After just so recently listening to Changying explain the general fragility of humans to him, it wasn’t hard to see why a human target would be a bad choice for roughhousing, even if they were spoiling for a fight.

“Was that Young Master Shen? Oh! That’s embarrassing for me, I mistook his delicate features for a fox demon,” he explained, truthfully. “I just thought he might like to scrap. Please do forgive the misunderstanding, Senior Mo. How about we tussle instead?”

He grinned, giddy and excited, and wondered if this ice demon would be willing to ‘tussle’ as well.

But the other boy just tsk’d and finally let him go, and then it seemed like he was standing a million miles away. Closer to the not-fox-demon-after-all, Shen Jiu; who had headed through a nearby archway and didn’t even appear to have paid their scrap any mind at all.

“Just don’t do it again,” the Mo scion snapped.

Huo Zhenglang stared a little dumbly after him as he strode away.

Changying walked over and nudged him with the toe of her boot.

“Injured?” she asked.

Shaking his head, Huo Zhenglang managed to get to his feet. He still felt cold.
He still felt excited.

Wow.

Wow.

“Jiejie, what’s his name?” he demanded.

“Who? Mo Hongwen?”

Mo Hongwen. A person who was cold, but made him think of the time when he had been most consumed with heat. It struck him with the same feeling he had gotten when he had tried to climb the inside of a volcano, and his hands had struck up unbloodied stone.

Mo Hongwen…

Huo Zhenglang was filled with an urgent desire to be close to that person again.

~

Being invited to sit at Shang Qinghua’s strategy tables was something that seemed to bring Huo Zhenglang’s mama an inexpressible amount of relief, and brought Huo Zhenglang himself nothing but excitement.

Strategy was not something he had taken specific lessons for yet, and Shang Qinghua’s tutelage was widely considered to be some of the most exclusive and desirable to be found. So that was good. However, more importantly, Mo Hongwen was almost always in attendance at such lessons, and Shen Jiu very frequently was as well. Huo Zhenglang entertained vivid daydreams of impressing everyone at the elite table with his prodigal skills until Mo Hongwen and Shen Jiu both
decided to test him. He had found out everything he possibly could about them, had enjoyed a few more short encounters, and only found his interest growing.

While Mo Hongwen was the most immediately fascinating of the pair, Shen Jiu was also a very compelling figure. Huo Zhenglang was less sure on what to do with those thoughts, however. The person Mo Hongwen affectionately referred to as ‘Little Da-ge’ was simultaneously quite highly-placed and favoured, but also sheltered and protected. Anyone who made a wrong move towards him risked the ire of Mo Hongwen or, even worse, that of Shen Qingqiu or Luo Binghe. So there were no typical ways to approach Shen Jiu. On the other hand, treating him like a weakling was also out of the question - having seen the human practice with Changying a few times, Huo Zhenglang could easily see that he was capable. He was not a ‘weakling’ human even if he was still training, and his sister confirmed it.

At least when it came to Mo Hongwen, Huo Zhenglang knew how to approach him.

Just pick a fight!

Mo Hongwen was strong. He was strong in a way that made Huo Zhenglang feel the same gut-clenching inadequacy he had first encountered before Lord Luo. Even though, of the three of them, Huo Zhenglang was the only future lord - it didn’t matter. He wasn’t the right class of lord.

He wasn’t enough.

It made him taste smoke at the back of his throat.

But luckily, luckily, he had learned the answer to the question he had asked his sister years ago.

“Jiejie, how can I get better at things?”

How to get better?

Find the highest point, and climb for it until you taste moonlight.

Or in other words, pick a challenge and set a goal and do not stop until it was met. At the very
least, if Huo Zhenglang wanted to be closer to people like Mo Hongwen and Shen Jiu, then he needed to be strong enough to impress them as well. He needed to be the kind of clan heir whose attention was worth having. Thus, with great determination, he had formed a strategy to spend more time with Mo Hongwen and with Shen Jiu while also learning how to become strong enough to beat them.

It involved money.

Huo clan wasn’t *obscene*ly rich, but they were more wealthy than not. For Huo Zhenglang to get money all he generally needed to do was ask for it. To a point, at least - he couldn’t afford to drown people in fine ornaments or silk, not just on a whim, but paying tutors was well within the budget. And Huo Zhenglang felt that Mo Hongwen and Shen Jiu, as the very people he was most interested in and as people who had dashed all of his fantasies by routinely annihilating him at the strategy table, were better tutors than most of his usual ones anyway.

It turned out to be a brilliant idea. Worthy of his reputation.

The latest private strategy session was happening at the rare locale of Shen Qingqiu’s courtyard, no less. It was Huo Zhenglang’s first time inside. Shen Jiu had decided they should have the meeting there because his master was away, and so the burden of looking after his ‘pet’ fell to Shen Jiu.

The strange little animal had settled into the human’s lap. Every so often its head would peak up at the board and it would attempt to capture and maul one of Huo Zhenglang’s carved figurines. Shen Jiu would always either block the beast’s mouth or else rescue the figurines, however; usually with a very delicate bop to the dog’s nose and a firm ‘no’ that did not convey an ounce of gravitas. The dog just greedily soaked up his attention and started licking him.

“My Huo family has been firming up some alliances with the beast-tamer clans in the past few years. When I’m Lord Huo, I’ll get Da-ge a demonic beast to bond with,” he promised.


“Even if it’s possible, anything Huo-di bought would probably just try and eat Da-ge,” Mo Hongwen said.

Shen Jiu narrowed his eyes.
“That wouldn’t be a problem. I can defeat any stupid beast,” he asserted.

“Surely anything cheap enough for Huo-di to buy.”

“It wouldn’t have to be a cheap beast, what do you think I do on nighthunts? What are all the expert bestiaries my family keeps for if not to make us experts at handling demonic beasts?”

“Reading books is not the same as being able to fight everything you read about-”

Shen Jiu scowled and interrupted Mo Hongwen by flicking a pebble up from the ground and hurling it at his face. Mo Hongwen smirked back, provocative and pleased.

Huo Zhenglang watched them bicker with a mingled sense of envy and delight. The atmosphere between those two was so good. Not for the first time he wondered what it might be like for all three of them to fight. If such a thing were to ever really happen, he’d need to get stronger himself first. But if he did, he could just see it in his mind’s eye - Da-ge sharp and relentless with his brightly silver qi attacks, his body artful, lithe and quick as he dodged attacks and sent them back tenfold. Mo Hongwen resolute and unstoppable, radiating deathly cold but balanced for perfect economy of effectiveness with his physical movements, his keen mind turning over strategies even on the fly.

And Huo Zhenglang, with his fire and his enthusiasm, watching them fight and then fighting them too. Getting lost in the heat and movements, the sheer intensity, the moments of contact between them burning bright with excitement until finally, finally, they ended up exhausted and entangled. Who would he kiss first, he wondered? Maybe Da-ge’s soft pink lips, or Hongwen’s frosty scowl. Or maybe he would watch them kiss each other first. And then they would have sex, or at least he and Hongwen would; Da-ge would probably have to wait a while for the formalities. He felt heated just thinking about it, and before he could realize, he’d ignited another tiny flame over the practice table.

“Dammit!” Mo Hongwen swore and snuffed it out.

Huo Zhenglang shivered at the cold snap.

“Aha, sorry!” he said.
“Don’t light the table on fire!”

“At least it's not Master Shang's special table…”

“This is Master Shen’s tea table, if you light it on fire, I will beat your face in,” Shen Jiu warned. Crude language abounded at the strategy meetings. That was true even of the official ones; Master Shang was not really gifted at decorum, and Huo Zhenglang had learned many new curses as well as other things from his lessons. But Shen Jiu managed to make crass words sound like flirtatious promises fit to have any demon blushing.

Mo Hongwen glowered fiercely.

“Let’s just get back to it,” he said. “Is Chang-mei coming or not?”

“Not this time,” Huo Zhenglang explained. Sometimes his sister played with them as well. She was willing to back him up in his efforts to impress the two other boys, so he agreed to it. “She’s watching Lord Luo’s practice with Master Liu in the eastward dunes.”

Shen Jiu grunted in acknowledgement.

“Master Shen’s there too,” he said.

Mo Hongwen frowned.

“Should we have gone to watch as well?” he wondered.

But Da-ge just snorted and shook his head.

“It’s just a bunch of fancy swordsmanship, none of us are that invested in such techniques,” he pointed out. “If there’s anything worth imparting then Master Shen will do so later. I’ll manage Changying’s character…”

Since Shen Jiu was currently holding the role of Head Strategist, that was to be expected.
Hou Zhenglang tried to focus on the scenario after that. It was a pretty good one. Master Shang’s scenarios were by far the most complex, but Shen Jiu was very skilled at handling Human World scenarios, and Mo Hongwen’s dungeons got really bizarre sometimes. As the student of both of them, Hou Zhenglang hadn’t been able to try his hand as Head Strategist yet; but he had saved up many ideas for it when the time might come. Like the one where there was this cursed volcano dungeon with no exits…

Shen Jiu cleared his throat.

“You exit the portal to find that it has, as warned, directed you to an inaccurate location. Instead of opening in Lord Wen’s estate, you have landed in the woods to the east of it. Outside of the main walls.”

Mo Hongwen frowned and checked the board.

“What side of the estate are the princess’s chambers on?” he asked.

“East,” Shen Jiu confirmed. “But they are in the inner section, of course.”

“What if we light the forest on fire?” Huo Zhenglang asked. “Trees burn well…”

Mo Hongwen thumped his head against the table for some reason.

“Fucking - no,” he said.

“We’ll draw out people from the estate to come put out the fire! It’s a distraction!”

“Our only advantage here is the element of surprise-”

Shen Jiu smirked ominously at them from behind his partition. Hou Zhenglang’s stomach did a flip.
“Wait, *do* we have the element of surprise?” he asked.

“Yes,” Mo Hongwen said. “No one is expecting us tonight, we established that last round when we fed bad intelligence to that spy—”

“But *do* we?”

“Are you asking me?” Shen Jiu wondered. “Do you want to investigate it somehow?”

Mo Hongwen hesitated for just a moment. Clearly, they did *not* have the element of surprise, so this was no longer an issue. That meant his plan was actually viable! Hou Zhenglang slammed a resolute hand down onto the table.

“I light the forest on fire!” he declared, reaching for the dice to make sure it would catch. It probably would, though, unless Shen Jiu had randomly set up anti-fire stuff in the environment again. Mo Hongwen lunged across the table at the same time and tried to snatch the dice cup away from him, cursing under his breath.

Cold hands closed around his wrists.

Huo Zhenglang’s smile widened.

Winning, after all, didn’t always look like succeeding at the table scenarios.

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