CHAPTER 56: LICK THE SWEETEST ARROGANCE OFF YOUR FINGERS

Qian Shanyi had agreed to meet up with Wang Yonghao at the central square of Reflection Ridge once she was finished, and she headed there, keeping her eyes open for anything notable, and putting on her leather cloak on the way. When she reached the square, she took her time, casually leaning against a column that supported the second storey of some fabric store, partly obscured from sight by a small crowd of outer disciples of one of the sects that were loading some new purchase onto a cart. She was done earlier than they expected, and would have to wait for Yonghao in any case.

The square itself was something to behold. The edge of the world here curled down into a funnel, falling down in a column of pure blue sky right into the middle of the square. It was only midday, so the suns were still quite high in the sky - but as the evening came, some of them would descend down into the middle of the square, spiraling around the funnel, before vanishing below the ground.

The square itself was glittering in the daylight, glass crushed down into sand, and was wide open - nobody wanted to build their house too close to one of the scorching fires of the suns, after all. The only thing of note on the square itself was a wooden platform built close to the center, no doubt treated to resist the heat, where half a dozen body fundamentalists were wrestling with each other, busy training their throws and body locks.

She spotted Wang Yonghao as soon as he arrived, all the way on the opposite side of the square, his pure white scholarly robes sticking out like a sore thumb in the crowd of the townsfolk. She stayed hidden, watching him head into a restaurant - an opportunity to see how he behaved without her around was precious, and not to be wasted.

The restaurant was a two-storey building, with the second floor forming an open space, encircled by a balcony railing, the wide roof above it only supported by columns. Tables were set up on both floors, with a cooking area in front of the building, where the chef and his underlings were cooking meat using an enormous array of lenses pointed straight at one of the suns. A couple waitresses were running between the tables, and when Wang Yonghao walked in, one of them made a beeline for him.

After a couple words, the waitress excitedly led Wang Yonghao upstairs, and towards one of the tables at the very edge of the balcony. After seating him, she hovered around, talking for a long time, and Qian Shanyi regretted that she had never learned to read lips. It was far too much to be merely a list of dishes.

All throughout, Wang Yonghao barely even glanced at the woman, his answers curt, and finally just waved her off entirely. She left, but soon returned, carrying a pot of tea. The waitress tried to

get him to talk again, but he was just as stone-faced, merely looking out onto the square as if searching for someone, and soon the waitress left entirely, looking a bit dejected.

Qian Shanyi watched the restaurant for a while longer, making mental notes. This waitress didn't seem to be doing her job - she stuck mostly to the second floor, and spent entirely too much time talking to the customers, though her talk with Yonghao seemed the longest by far, and she seemed to avoid couples. Her counterpart had to work twice as hard to compensate, and Qian Shanyi wondered why she even went along with it.

Qian Shanyi smiled. This confirmed some of her suspicions about Wang Yonghao - they'd have plenty to talk about. But first…

With a playful smirk on her lips, she turned away from the square, and circled around it through side alleys until she came out right next to the restaurant, from a direction Wang Yonghao couldn't see. Closing her spiritual pores to hide her presence, she headed inside, and straight towards the stairs leading up to the second floor.

"Miss? Miss!" a voice called out behind her as she stepped onto the first step.

"Hm?" she said quietly, turning around. She wanted to surprise Wang Yonghao, and didn't want him to hear her prematurely.

Behind her was the same waitress she observed from afar, her hand stretched out, ready to grab her by the hand. Qian Shanyi casually stepped around, moving neither too fast nor too slow, letting the fingers of the waitress close on empty air.

As the gaze of the waitress swept over her, falling on the scarlet silk robes beneath her cloak and the sword at her waist, her eyes widened. "Oh!" the waitress said, covering her mouth with one hand. "Ah, honorable immortal, I didn't realize…"

Up close, Qian Shanyi could tell that the waitress was quite young - not even twenty. Her face was cute, though not exceptional, with a button nose and wide eyes, and her robes matched her well - equally cute, soft-colored silk, with decorations around the waist and wrists. Her hair was pinned into a bun, with two hair sticks poking out from the top left side. In her hands, she carried a wax tablet, orders noted down in clean handwriting.

"It's nothing," Qian Shanyi said, patting the waitress on her shoulder with a smile. "You haven't done anything wrong. Now what did you want to say?"

"Oh thank you." The waitress sighed. "It's just, usually you need a reservation, and I thought you didn't know. We get travelers who simply walk in sometimes, and it's so hard to keep track of everything…"

“Don’t worry about it,” Qian Shanyi said, “My partner should have already gotten a table. White robes, arrogant face?”

A strange, displeased look passed over the face of the waitress, with just a hint of a blush on her cheeks, gone as fast as it appeared. “Oh, yes,” she said flatly, “he is on the second floor. Should I show you the way?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Qian Shanyi said, shaking her head. “I would like to surprise him, so I will go up alone. Thank you for the offer.”

The waitress bowed again, and turned toward the room, tapping the wax tablet against her shoulder in thought. Her lips were curved a bit downwards, and on impulse, Qian Shanyi put a hand on her shoulder. The waitress turned back to her with surprise.

“You seem to be a bit down on yourself,” Qian Shanyi said, “I am an immortal chef myself - I know this work can get a bit chaotic. You noticed me right away, so you can’t be that bad, can you?”

The waitress grimaced slightly, rubbing her face. She had an open, pleasant attitude - one that appealed to Shanyi, even if the professional pride in the back of her mind whispered that the waitress should be keeping her eyes on the customers, not chatting with her. “I have been working here since I was a child,” the waitress said, “I think I just don’t have any talent for it.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Qian Shanyi spotted the other waitress glance at the two of them from across the hall, her eyes full of concern. The two women looked almost identical - if she wasn’t a cultivator, she wasn’t sure she could distinguish the two. Even their robes were the same, though the other waitress had her hair sticks in a cross. Twins?

“What’s your name?” Qian Shanyi smiled.

“Chu Lin, honorable immortal,” Chu Lin said, giving her a short bow.

“Please just call me Shanyi. Fellow restaurant disciple Chu, not even a phoenix can ascend into the Heavens in a single flap of its wings. ‘Talent’ is simply what years of hard work look like from the outside. I am sure you’ll get there in time.”

A sad look passed over Chu Lin’s eyes. Perhaps she read her wrong?

“I don’t want to take up more of your time,” Qian Shanyi said instead of trying to puzzle her out, “but there may be some disciples from the Nine Singing Vessels sect looking for me later today. Could you tell me when they arrive?”

Chu Lin nodded readily, and Qian Shanyi headed upstairs.

The second floor was wide open, and she had kept track of where Wang Yonghao was, so her eyes snapped to him right away. He had his back turned to the rest of the restaurant, looking out onto the square and the cooking area down below, and Qian Shanyi quietly approached him, stepping carefully to keep her sandals from tapping on the wooden roof.

When she was right next to him, she brought her lips up to his ear. “How was your day?” she said, opening all of her spiritual pores at once, and reconstituting her spiritual shield.

Wang Yonghao all but lept out of his seat, clutching his heart with one hand and the pommel of his sword with another. She cackled as she took the seat opposite him.

Wang Yonghao grimaced, forcing his heartbeat back down. “Why did you have to scare me like that?!”

“Because it amuses me,” she said, lounging back in her chair, and glancing over the edge of the balcony. The cooking area was down below, and she watched curiously as one of the cooks adjusted the massive lens array to keep it pointed at a sun traveling across the sky. “Great news: Nine Singing Vessels took my offer.”

“And where’s the money?” Wang Yonghao said, bringing her attention back to the table. He sat back down, and was pouring her a cup of tea. She nodded to him in gratitude.

“I didn’t want to wait for it,” she said, “and so I told them to find me here once they were done moving the goods to their own warehouse. Four hundred and thirty six spirit stones right away, and easily ten times that over the next several months, once the sales start coming in.”

“If they even pay us,” Wang Yonghao grumbled.

She rolled her eyes. There were reasons to be concerned about the deal, but this wasn’t one of them. “I have an agreement with their stamp on it, and they have no reason to cheat us. Unless the warehouse catches fire right this moment, I don’t see them backing out.”

She cackled again as Wang Yonghao winced. The Heavens didn’t need her help to make their plans.

She picked up her cup of tea and took a sip. It was black tea, brewed quite strongly, and with herbs added for taste - not what she preferred, but she could still appreciate the quality.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Wang Yonghao frown at her. “I kept meaning to ask. Why do you *do* that?” he asked.

She blinked in surprise. “Do what? Drink tea?”

“No, with your pinkie finger,” he said, making a hooking motion with his own. “Whenever you pick up a new cup, you flick a drop into your mouth before taking a full sip.”

“Oh, that,” she said, curiously looking down at her hand. There was a bit of tea on her pinkie where she dipped the tip into the cup, and she quickly put it into her mouth. “It’s an old habit. I barely even realize I am doing it at this point. Is it that noticeable?”

“Not very,” he said, “It took me a long time. But why do you do it? Testing for poison?”

“Something like that,” she said slowly, “Not…poison, exactly.”

“But you don’t do it when we are together. At least, not anymore - you did it back in the forest, and then you stopped.”

“There’s no reason to do it when we are together,” she said, “But back to today -” she quickly continued, before Wang Yonghao could ask another question she wasn’t in the mood to discuss, “How was your shopping trip? All went well, I hope?”

“Well, I didn’t buy anything,” Wang Yongao said with a sigh, thankfully letting the topic go, “just in case you couldn’t get the money. Just looked.”

“Sensible,” she said, looking over the railing again. The chef had caught her eye - a big man, with broad shoulders. There was some family resemblance there to the two waitresses - a family business, perhaps?
“See anything interesting?”

“A couple things, yeah. There’s a blackout formation, and some decent formation ink. Some of the tools you mentioned too. I’ve actually been thinking… Well.” She made a motion with one finger in the air, prompting him to continue. “Would you mind if I get some bone and wood carving tools?”

She looked back at him, and raised an eyebrow. “Why are you even asking me? Half of this money is yours in the first place. If you want to buy them, then buy them.”

“Well, we don’t really need them for anything,” he mumbled.

“So?” Her eyebrow rose higher. “We have plenty of money and, at least for now, aren’t under any direct pressure. Please, enjoy yourself while we can. I intend to do so as well.”

“I was thinking of how we’d carry them,” he said, no doubt meaning his inner world, and the need to conceal its existence.

She shrugged. “So buy another bag to carry them. You are a big man, I trust you to manage. Still, aside from this - no problems?”

Wang Yonghao looked directly in her eyes. “No,” he said simply.

Very interesting.

“Let’s talk about this back in the tavern,” she said casually, noticing Chu Lin heading their way with a plate full of steaming ribs. “Our food is almost here.”

Chu Lin engaged the two of them in conversation while she set the plates down - a big one with the ribs, and the empty personal plates for each of them. At least, she tried to engage both of them, because Wang Yonghao mostly looked bored, content to let Qian Shanyi lead. Shanyi didn’t mind it too much, and made up a salacious story about how she'd met Wang Yonghao. When Chu Lin heard that they were merely business partners, her eyes sparked.

After a minute, she thanked Chu Lin, saying they had something private to discuss, and the waitress left to one of the other tables.

Wang Yonghao dug into the ribs as soon as Chu Lin was gone, and Qian Shanyi stared at him curiously. When he raised his head, his eyes met hers and he froze. “What?” he asked with a mouth full of meat.

“I didn’t say anything,” she said.

“You are looking at me like I am a bug you want to pin to an exhibition wall,” he grumbled, but slowly went back to eating. “It’s very creepy.”

“That’s not fair at all.” She frowned. “Why would I pin a bug? I’d put it in a terrarium.”

“That makes it sound even creepier.”

“I was just wondering if you really were mostly attracted to men,” Qian Shanyi said, finally reaching for a spare plate and pulling a couple ribs onto it from the common one.

Wang Yonghao choked while she ate calmly. “What?!” he finally said, when he was done coughing.

Some of the other tables were giving them curious looks, but they were speaking quietly enough they shouldn’t have heard anything specific. She shrugged. “It’s a simple question, I think.”

He scowled at her. She winked back. “The question is not the point! How does that *at all* relate to what we were talking about before?”

“Oh.” She bit into a rib, and moaned in surprise. This was some of the juiciest meat she had ever eaten. ”Well, let me put it like this: what’s the name of the waitress?”

“What does that have to do -” Wang Yonghao closed his eyes, breathing out sharply. “You are just messing with me again.”

“I am,” she admitted easily, “but I also have a point. How to put this…” She tapped her cheek, thinking it over. There were several ways to phrase it, some gentler than others - but if she wanted her point to stick… “It seems to me that unless you are in the mood to talk, you treat most people as if they are barely there. Closer to furniture than human beings.”

“What?” He sat up straighter. “No I don’t!”

“Hm. I wonder.” She tapped her cheek, before glancing around. None of this should be *too* secretive, but still… Better safe than sorry. “Would you mind putting up the sound muffling formation?”

He glared at her a bit, but got the five talismans out of their bag, and handed her a couple. She put them on her side of the table while he handled his side, eyeballing the distances - the formation had to be laid out in a circle, but it didn’t have to be precise down to a millimeter. The first talisman she placed was off by a whole hand’s width though, and when she shifted it with her foot, the noise of the restaurant around them quieted down to barely above a murmur.

“So what was the point behind insulting me again?” Wang Yonghao said, leaning on the table.

“I did nothing of the sort. I know this may be hard to hear,” she said patiently, “and of course, it’s only a hypothesis - but it’s what makes the most sense to me, taking all I know about you into account.”

“Because I don’t know the name of some waitress?”

“No, I was actually thinking about this for quite a while,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s also about how you talk about your adventures, what you focus on. You almost never mention any individual people, their lives, their troubles. It’s all… beautiful vistas, danger, demon beasts. It’s also how you met me - why was your first, instinctual reaction to pick me up like yet another sword and run away, instead of finding a healer together with other people in the restaurant? Your interaction with Chu Lin and how you’ve brushed her off only put the last brush stroke on the overall picture.”

Wang Yonghao narrowed his eyes at her in suspicion. “You haven’t seen me brush her off. Were you hiding somewhere?”

Qian Shanyi nodded easily. “I arrived before you did.”

Wang Yonghao rubbed his face. “Of course you did. Why couldn’t you just tell me?”

“I wanted to see how you behave without me around - telling you would have defeated the purpose.”

“And how would you feel if I did this to you?”

Qian Shanyi tilted her head curiously to the side. “What do you mean? You already do this for me. It’s hard to notice all the errors you make on your own, and you point out when I rush ahead too much. I am annoyed, but mostly grateful.”

“I don’t mean that part. I mean stalking me like this.”

She shrugged. “If you think it would help, go ahead. It would be far from the first time.”

Wang Yonghao snorted. “Oh, what, you had someone following you around before to ‘point out your mistakes’?”

Qian Shanyi sighed in exasperation. How could he be so oblivious? “I’ve been a jade beauty from birth, Yonghao,” she said, “sometimes men would follow me around town, when I went about my business. I am used to it.”

Wang Yonghao gave her a long, shocked look while she chomped down on a rib. “Um.” He swallowed. ”Following you around… to do what?”

“Who can say?” She shrugged performatively. ”I’ve never had the misfortune to find out. Perhaps they just wanted to say hello. But somehow it stopped once I became a cultivator and started wearing a sword.”

Wang Yonghao shifted around uncomfortably, and she waved him off. This wasn’t something she particularly enjoyed talking about either. “Let’s move on,” she said. “What do you think about my theory?”

He sighed, glad to get off the topic. “That it doesn’t make any sense?” He said, “I didn’t want to talk to her because she was asking me strange questions and I was on edge, not because of… What you said.”

“It’s polite to reciprocate.”

“So? It’s not like she’ll challenge me to a duel over it. Why would I talk to some waitress?””

“Well, for one, it’d make her less likely to spit in your tea,” she said, just as Wang Yonghao was about to bring his tea cup to his lips. He pulled his hand away, his eyes darting between the tea kettle and his cup in concern.

She sipped her own tea casually. Chu Lin didn't seem like the type, and besides, spit was just spit. "But also, it makes you seem like an arrogant bastard. I suspect it's one of the reasons you have so many problems with other people - you are just not very likable."

In all fairness, it wasn't just his attitude. Wang Yonghao's lips tended to be stuck in this unpleasant curl, as if he could barely tolerate the sight of his surroundings. She knew it was because his thoughts were spinning around like rats in a cage, imagining the worst in every situation - but other people couldn't read his mind. Together with his innate confidence, built upon close to two decades of getting out alive from every scrap, and his advanced cultivation, the image of an arrogant young master was hard to shake.

"*You* are telling me *I* am not likable?" Yonhgao raised both eyebrows at her. "Have you looked in the mirror? First time we've met you tricked and drugged me."

She shook her head. "No, that was the second time. The first time I insulted you for being a penniless bastard and spilling soup on my robes."

"That doesn't make it any better."

She shrugged. "I am likable when I want to be, Yonghao - which I had little interest in at the time. I don't mean this in some inherent sense - just that the way you are used to approaching people is unlikable. If you get different habits, that could change."

Wang Yonghao's face twisted into a grimace. "Because I didn't want to talk to some waitress?"

She sighed. "That you keep calling her 'some waitress' rather proves my point. Her name is Chu Lin."

"Fine, Chu Lin, whatever." He waved her off casually. She frowned, but let it go, for now. "What would we even have to talk about? We have *nothing* in common, and there is no way she could help me with anything whatsoever."

"But that is just your assumption. One that's based on nothing."

"What do you mean, 'assumption'? She is a waitress and I am a cultivator! What, do you think she just happens to know some secret technique that could help me at a crucial moment?" Wang Yonghao shuddered. "Never mind, perhaps she does."

"Hm." Qian Shanyi leaned back in her chair, gesturing with a beef rib. "No, likely not, but let's think about this carefully. Set aside everything that relates to the food. First way she could have helped you was to warn you that I was coming up the stairs, and then I wouldn't have been able to surprise you."

Wang Yonghao frowned. "Okay, I mean - maybe that's fair, but it's not like it mattered."

Next time, she'd be sure to scare him more. "But it's not just about Chu Lin, now is it?" she said out loud instead. "It's about the principle. How many times were you surprised by some young master appearing when you didn't expect it?"

Wang Yonghao froze for a moment, and she grinned at him.

"Second way she could have helped you," she continued, "was by telling you about the town. How long did you spend here before I arrived, three days?"

"Two."

"Fine, two days. Yet you still didn't know that Jian Shizhe was just one spark away from a challenge to a duel." She pointed her rib bone at him accusatorily, before discarding it onto the plate they were using for the bones. The common plate was almost half empty now. "Are you saying that in those two days, you had no way to learn this?"

"Hey, now," Wang Yonghao tried to foolishly defend himself, "I didn't know about the cultivator almanac - "

Qian Shanyi wagged a finger at him, cutting him off. "That's a separate thing entirely - the people around you already had all the information you needed. I was told about Jian Shizhe by pretty much the first person I talked to - the only way you could have missed hearing about him *in two whole days* was if you just didn't talk to *anyone*."

Wang Yonghao blushed, and she knew she was right. "I mean - look, I was busy," he said quickly, "And even if I didn't - so what? That means it's *my* fault I almost got challenged to a duel?"

"Of course it's not your fault - it's his." She scoffed. "His pretext for it was clearly ridiculous. But busy with *what?* Shizhe's hunts? All day long, with not even five minutes left out? You are just looking for excuses - ones you don't even need, since I am not *blaming* you for anything."

Wang Yonghao folded his hands on his chest, food forgotten almost entirely. "You are still putting me on the spot," he said.

The fool would walk away hungry at this rate - for all that she was talking more, she was also eating faster. She capitalized on his distraction by stealing another couple ribs.

"You put yourself there," she said, mirroring his dismissiveness of Chu Lin, "You asked me why you should have taken the time to talk to 'some waitress', so I am explaining why. Many cultivators think that ordinary people are worthless to them, and all of them are morons for it - we are all rebelling against the Heavens together. My point is that it'd be better *for you* if you took more of an interest in other people."

“And how do you imagine this? It’s not like I can tell them about what is happening to me.” Wang Yonghao’s lips turned sharply downwards. “Nor would they even *understand* if I *did*.”

She gave him a long, contemplative look, and flicked the fat off her fingers with a burst of spiritual energy, leaning back in her chair. “You don’t think there could be anything in common between you and Chu Lin?”

“Oh what, are you about to tell me she is also on the run from the Heavens?”

“No, I was actually going to say that she seemed to be into you.”

She timed her response perfectly, and Wang Yonghao choked on his tea once again. “What?”

“Well, perhaps not you *specifically*.” She waved her hand in the air vaguely, looking out into the square. The body fundamentalists were still there, and she watched in fascination as one of them tossed another a good ten meters up in the air. ”I think that she resents her father and wants out of the house, and away from the restaurant business - and a woman in her position does not have too many good options. The easiest by far would be marriage, and if she could score a young, attractive cultivator, she’d be set for life. If only this hypothetical cultivator wasn’t so arrogant he couldn’t even notice it.”

“That’s…” Wang Yonghao rubbed his forehead in shock, before narrowing his eyes at her suspiciously. “How could you possibly know this? Did you spy on her too?”

“Not particularly. We barely even spoke.”

“Then how -”

“By taking an interest in the people around me.” She shrugged. “None of it is new to me. Look, it’s quite simple. Did you see her hair pins?”

Wang Yonghao gave her a blank look. “She was wearing hair pins?”

Qian Shanyi rolled her eyes. “*Yes*, Yonghao, she was wearing hair pins. Two of them, on the left side of her head - that’s a sign that a woman is actively looking for a partner. If she was wearing them in a cross, it’d mean she was taken, or at least not looking. Vertical cross would mean she’s into women instead, but that is a little less known.”

“Hair sticks?”

“Yes, hair sticks.”

“And what does *that* mean?” he said, gesturing to her head. She had a pair of her own, worn horizontally, one inserted from the left and one from the right into a knot at the base of her long hair, keeping most of it away from her face.

She grinned widely. “That I am a cultivator and I do what I want.”

Wang Yonghao rolled his eyes at her. “Hair pins, really? That is *so* stupid. Why couldn’t she just say it?”

Qian Shanyi snorted. Yes, that also was her question, way back in the day. “Because she’d get called a slut for being so open about it,” she said, “Anyways - that, and how much time she spent with you, is how I know she was interested. But a waitress isn’t supposed to seek a partner at work - it’d distract from her duties. Nor is she supposed to talk up every single man on the floor. This means she is doing this against the orders of the chef - and if you glance over the railing,” she nodded her head in that direction, “you’d see the family resemblance. That’s how I know there is a conflict at home.”

Wang Yonghao glanced where she indicated, and scratched his head. “Maybe he’s fine with her looking for a husband?”

She shook her head. Conveniently enough, Chu Lin walked out of the doors at that exact moment, to pick up some plates from the kitchen. “She shifts her hair sticks into a cross whenever she goes outside,” she said, “The other waitress is her twin, and wears the same clothes - that’s why her father doesn’t know she’s spending so much time upstairs. It’s not too surprising that two sisters would help each other, now is it?”

“No, I guess not.”

”On top of this, she told me herself that she has no talent for being a waitress. So, her father is the chef, and doesn’t want - or doesn’t let - her quit this job. Now tell me: do you think you might have anything in common with someone who is forced to live against the wishes of their own heart? Someone who doesn’t have a good way out?”

Wang Yonghao groaned, covering up his face with his hands. “Fine. Okay, I get it. I’m sorry.”

Qian Shanyi raised an eyebrow at him. “For what? You are the one who suffers from your own ignorance.”

“I mean… I’ll try to talk to people more.” He sighed. “This is a lot to take in.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a group of disciples from the Nine Singing Vessels sect circling the square, and got their attention with a wave of her hand. “You say that a lot,” she said lazily.

“You do that a lot.”

“Why thank you.” She grinned. “Now, I’ll admit that the theory is a bit of a stretch - it’s built on too many assumptions. But that’s the thing with assumptions - until you clarify them, anything is possible. Look at the body fundamentalists -”

She gestured towards the middle of the square, where they were still wrestling out in the open.

“Sects used to think you had to keep all the training in house,” she explained, ”Show nothing, lest someone steal even the most insignificant secret. But that this was a good way to do things was just an assumption - one that nobody tested, until the imperial pugilism school decided to do most things out in the open. I think they even trade drug regimens by mail. They had very little to start with, no secret techniques, no divinely inspired recipes. On top of that, pugilism always had a bad reputation among cultivators - after all, a sword is so much more dangerous and versatile. But nowadays, I think that it’s the fastest growing style in the empire, *becaus*e it’s so open to all the loose cultivators, ones who have no sect to speak of.” She shrugged performatively. “It seems that the original assumption turned out to be quite mistaken.”

She turned back to the table, and went after the remaining ribs. She gave Wang Yonghao long enough - if he missed his opportunity now, it was his own fault for going hungry.

He was still struggling with what she told him, even blushing slightly, clearly wanting to say something - but too awkward to go through with it. She gave him time, focusing on the ribs. “So…” he finally said, his blush deepening. “Do you think I should, um. Ask her out?... I mean, I don’t want her to get hurt…”

His voice was conflicted. She knew his attitude towards romance already, but it seemed that talking about it in the abstract was different from a concrete possibility being put in front of him.

She thought about it for a moment, before shaking her head sadly. “Probably not. I doubt she’d be in too much danger, especially since we are already going to be moving on shortly, but… Well, if my assumption is right - and like I said, it’s just an assumption - then she’d be looking for marriage, something you can’t really give her. But a conversation can’t hurt anyone, right? As long as you are open about your intentions and don’t lead her on, at least.”

To speak of the demon beast.

Chu Lin was heading towards them from the stairs, and Qian Shanyi shifted one of the formation talismans on the floor with her foot, letting the noise around them flood back in. Chu Lin approached the table, and bowed to the two of them. “Honorable Shanyi, the disciples from the Nine Singing Vessels sect you mentioned are here.”

Qian Shanyi gave Wang Yonghao a significant look, and then nodded to Chu Lin, rising up from her chair. “Thank you,” she said, “I’ll go talk to them. In the meantime, would you mind keeping my partner company?”

As she passed by Chu Lin, she leaned close to her ear. “He is far too shy to ever admit it,” she whispered, “but he regrets his earlier coldness. You are actually his type.”

Chu Lin’s eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed slightly. Qian Shanyi winked at her, and walked past, leaving the two of them alone.

She gave Wang Yonghao and Chu Lin a lot of time to talk - after she was done counting the spirit stones delivered by the Nine Singing Vessels sect, she took a long walk around the square, and even went to talk to the body fundamentalists. Half of them seemed to be employees of the Thrifty Bat Bank - apparently the head of their branch here in town was an advocate of the style. It was something to think about - pugilism had always seemed far too brutish for her tastes, but her recent experiences had changed her attitude somewhat.

After she returned to their table in the restaurant, a good twenty minutes had passed, and Chu Lin was already gone. Wang Yonghao stayed quiet for the rest of the day, while they went through a dozen different shops in town, and visited the post office again to grab her copy of the cultivator almanac. He didn’t tell her what the two of them spoke about, and when she tried to prod, he just blushed and his lips twitched slightly upwards - so it couldn’t have gone too badly. Good for him - the man desperately needed to get laid.

By the time they returned to the tavern, loaded up with several bags after a small shopping spree, the sun was already setting. She was humming a little tune as they headed to the main doors, when Wang Yonghao suddenly froze, his eyes going wide. Qian Shanyi raised an eyebrow at him, and looked around, reaching out with her spiritual energy senses to try and find whatever had alarmed him.

She found it easily enough. A trio of cultivators, walking down a corridor of the tavern from one room to another. Spiritual energy roiled angrily around the three of them, but especially around the one in the middle. She could feel a dozen active amulets shining around him to her spiritual energy senses - and that meant only one thing.

A spirit hunter, ready for battle.