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109. ATDSVT: A Tale of Cannon Fodder: The G Side

Perhaps it would be safer to say that being in Qing Jing Peak, the sense of luxury of the younger students had been distorted. After all, they had entered the Peak at very young ages. Many of them had come from the streets or poor households. How then could they pay attention to things like trade or luxury goods pricing?

The rare wood incense and rare wood furniture in their master's home, the spices and fine fabric, how could street rats at the age of six, seven or even ten, know how much such things would cost on the black market or on the normal markets after being separated from the dark underbelly of society for so long?

Even the older students had their own confusion about the subject and most immortal cultivators didn't really pay attention to pricing unless the pricing in question was for demonic, mythical, magical or mystical plants, fungi, herbs, beasts or anything used in cultivation.

Here was a fact. Many luxuries came from plants, ranging from food, medicines, dyes, scents, spices. Those luxuries were worth valuable money in the outside, noncultivating world.

I, Qing Jing's Peak Lord, being a master of mokuton, could afford to simply use my garden to grow whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, and frankly, being from a world with high technology, I was very much the kind of person to never deny myself anything.

As a result, I had drowned the little buns and big meatbuns in relatively luxurious living that would make their fellow Cang Qiong students from other Peaks combust with envy. Actually, Bai Zhan's students looked at our peak with the utter envious hatred of people who had to go in the damn woods all the time and had to beware of poison ivy to boot.

I had also basically been an asshole to my students, by keeping much more of the loot than they had been expecting and taking advantage of their ignorance of the conversion rates of

mythical, mystical, demonic beasts, herbs, fungi and other cultivator's resources to cold, hard, taels of gold and silver.

Look. silks cost money, okay?! It's not like they understand it anyway, and the money went to their ungrateful bums anyhow, in one form or the other. Mostly in other goddamn cultivation resources that I cannot grow out of the ground or pressurize into shiny existence with sufficient channeling of ambient mana.

Don't get me started on the prices of Qi-bearing metals for making weapons, amulets, status boosting equips with, man. *You will not win this. I will end you.*

So. Yeah. Apparently finding out the same wood I grew furniture out of was considered stupidly expensive out in the 'real, noncultivating world' was an eye opener for them. I could already tell Shang Bo was bursting at the seams with avarice and curiosity as was Liu Cheung.

Ah, yes, the awakening of the realization that yes, you little brats are being cosseted.

Hah, you idiots. I made all your goddamn relatives' and friends' properties out of cedar, lakewood and rosewood. Our freaking furniture is made out of rare and scented woods. I bet your relatives have no idea how expensive that would fucking be on the market. I even threw in spices that normally have to be imported from India's equivalent for stupidly large amounts of taels in your families' and friends' gardens. Don't give me those shifty looks, man. I am not a sudden, walking mountain of money!

Okay, maybe I am, but so what? You have to keep the market stable, you know!

It's expensive to raise 13 buns and 3 meatbuns, you know!

I'M A SINGLE PARENT.

Of course I will keep your allowance's actual value secret from you and then invest it for your ~~college~~ cultivation funds! And your future marriages! So many things to prepare for!

I can't let you buns and meatbuns go down the road of hookers and blow! Particularly not this early!

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Shang Bo practically plasters himself to my side like a clingy baby koala and whines, "Shifuuuuuu~"

I cover my face with one palm. Massage my temples. "Let me guess, you want your friends to get an upgrade? You ridiculous brat. Of course I have taken your wishes and the needs of all your fellow students into account and prepared settlements for everyone. Rest assured, everyone will get a fair share."

There. Appropriately obscure.

Hopefully the little brats will not push me. We need to set up a united front to deal with these people.

Ah, fortunately Shang Bo gets the point and silences himself, seating himself again while agitation thrums through his body.

Goddamn ADHD. It makes things so much harder to keep under wraps.

Fortunately the menfolk and bright eyed concubines (other than the poor victim and his concubines who have been painted as possible villains of the piece) have more important things to keep in their consideration.

Like the house or houses, funds or materials they might get in the settlement options.

"But Shifu, why do we have to do extra studies and talisman work in exchange for your help with this, if you have so much money?" Shang Bo asks sulkily.

"Ridiculous brat, how are you to be motivated to learn faster and work harder if you assume I will handle everything for you?"

Am I a nursemaid?!

Do you little apprentices want to be carried around for the rest of your life, riding on my coat tails like some silly young peacock who never amounts to anything and only realizes his errors when he is broke on the streets?

Or do you want to actually be competent immortals, capable of providing for and protecting families of your own?

All of you should take responsibility for yourself and your friends, working to repay the grace I lent you, instead of assuming you can lay it all on me!"

At least Liu Cheung gets the point and doesn't ask stupid questions.

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111. ATDSVT- An Interlude

There are many things Qing Jing Peak has become famed for, in the past few years.

There is the infamously good cooking that has gotten Xian Shu Peak's maidens as well as several other students from various other peaks to loiter around the now famous Qing Jing Peak kitchens with their almost mythical perpetually frozen metal food chest- a result of their Peak Lord's capricious ways, rumored to hold delicacies beyond imagining.

There is their peacock-like, exquisitely fine outer robes, fit to put imperial princes of the lower ranks to shame, which all students have been issued in the green and blue that fit the character.

Then there is their students' famous intoxicating scents and startling beauty.

Indeed, visitors to the Peak find themselves quite beguiled and feeling somewhat confused and amorously conflicted as Qing Jing peak's students pass them by.

One visitor to the peak famously exclaimed, "Ah, so this is Xian Shu Peak, truly, the rumors were correct, for I see many fresh beauties!"

He had apparently mistaken the young male students to be young female students.

His disgruntled guide, Heiyang had frowned at him. "No, this is Qing Jing Peak. Those are our students."

Qing Jing Peak? Was that not the literati peak?! The bookworm peak?

And yet it had so many young lovelies...

When the esteemed guest was shown to Xian Shu peak, he committed the now legendary faux pass of looking slightly disappointed and commenting that, "...Qing Jing Peak had more fragrant beauties."

This poor man was never forgiven by the Xian Shu Peak's lord.

Tales are told of the way she had him unceremoniously ejected from her Peak and then went to complain to Shen Qingqiu about his refusal to share his fine robes and finely scented soaps.

A complaint which Shen Qingqiu infamously replied to with, "Well, if you're willing to spend the next five months getting your best disciples to help mine cultivate, then by all means, I'll make you all the scented soaps and hair rinses you could use in a year. But if you want robes of that caliber, you're going to have to do a lot more than that for us."

This is probably the reason why Xian Shu Peak's disciples have become so familiar with the Qing Jing Peak's disciples that the little ones have taken to calling them 'elder sisters!'

Well, that and the glorious food. There are no leftovers in Qing Jing Peak, because anything in excess of what the students and their master can consume is quickly devoured by any guests lucky enough to loiter around its kitchens at just the right time.

As can be expected, the maidens of Xian Shu have somewhat of a great rivalry between them and the students of Qing Jing. This rivalry expresses itself in the form of their ongoing one-upmanship in terms of dress, as well as perfume and incense blending.

Meanwhile, it is rumored that Bai Zhan Peak's lord has a never ending feud of one-upmanship with Qing Jing's Peak lord in who trains their students more vigorously in the martial arts. There is also a rumor, rarely repeated, that there is also a more private reason for the vicious rivalry between these Peaks. Both Peak lords are apparently dueling over the favor and affection of the Sect Master, Yue Qingyuan.

This has caused no end of odd glances at both the Sect Master and Bai Zhan Peak's lord whenever they meet people from different sects.

Peak Lord Liu Qingge is not taking this well.

His students' laments grow louder.

Ah, heaven has eyes, but the question is, aren't those eyes watering from laughter?

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All three options would get them the courtyard house they needed. That was the sticking point that mattered most to these remnants of the House of Yun.

Without the high walls of their courtyard mansion, all six remaining males of the family and their concubines were sitting ducks, ready for a slaughter.

True, each of the men had a retinue. To be precise, all of them had manservants, valets, grooms for their horses, all of them had personal bodyguards and personal funds- which had been intended for their stay in another city, for months.

The point was, their stays in another city had always been predicated on the idea they were only renting. That was why their lost home was such a serious issue. They didn't have the money to both rebuild their lost courtyard house and also pay for their servants and bodyguards and concubines. They had plenty of money to play with, if it was only playing. That is, in terms of regular jaunts to the red light district. But in terms of an actual budget to rebuild their House after this catastrophe, what they did have was pitifully low.

Thus the information that in all three offers they were offered a courtyard house was quickly latched on to, like a drowning man clutches at a floating log.

Now there was obvious dissension in the ranks.

Yun Chenglei for one, was all for the girl marrying in. If the cultivators feared the girl would be in danger from the concubines, then beat the concubines. Just think of it, two courtyard houses! And in the same town!

Yun Xuanyuan was for marrying his cousin out. This was naturally because, given that the rest of the main line was dead, that meant that he and his fellow shu could profit off of the remaining family profits in all extant cargoes in ships, ferries, caravans and normal trade routes. Plus, there would be more goods to sell for money. And also, because his di cousin would have a courtyard house of his own anyway, and the wife's family had risen up in estate and property and could easily support him, so he was depriving his di cousin of nothing other than the concubines.

Yun Guisheng was all for marrying the boy out. After all, he was not as sensible nor skilled with money as his father or elder brother, marrying him out of the family would keep him from getting his hands on the remaining family funds, the family's assets and the future profits once everything else in cargoes and in caravans was sold. It was not as if the boy would lose anything other than concubines.

Yun Shoushan had been slightly mollified but he was still of the mind that the girl should marry in. Firstly, it would mean that his nephew would lose nothing and gain much, in the form of a

courtyard house. The concubines could be taught submission and obedience or if not, they may be beaten. Or newer ones that would appropriately flatter and loyally serve the new wife could be bought.

Given that the cultivator was willing to do the hiring for house staff anyway, he would not put it past the man to choose the kind of women and manservants who would cold-bloodedly beat disobedient, scheming concubines to death anyway and anything hired by a cultivator would be free additional manpower for the defense of the estates anyway. Surely they could keep the girl safe and thus be kept safe in turn. Plus the boy would never have to be bereft of family. He expressed this opinion.

Yun Haoxuan was all for selling the girl's contract out. The settlement was originally generous, they might be able to negotiate higher.

Plus the cultivators didn't want her to stay here and the boy or girl would be another mouth to feed.

While he didn't begrudge the child that, he did know that given that his younger cousin was the son of the original head of the House, it was likely there would soon be a power conflict because one shu uncle wanted to be in charge, the other uncle obviously favored his di cousin and the shu cousins would be unwilling to let his di cousin start leading them any time in the future.

More to the point, his di-cousin was a spendthrift and they didn't need that kind of family head in their current straits. And the last thing they needed was meddling cultivators taking sides. Failing that, marrying him out would be best. He expressed this opinion.

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113. ATDSVT: A Tale of Three Concubines

Ruan Daiyu was beautiful, there was no doubt about it. Ethereally delicate, willowy graceful, exquisitely small. Named after black jade, her skin was as pale as mutton fat jade and as smooth, her hair was the black of polished black gemstones, sleek and shining soft. Her lips were crimson, her eyes were wide and glimmering dark, framed by long lashes, peach blossom eyes.

She had been born as a shu daughter into a small and lowly family of farmer scholars, and learned dancing, singing, poetry and the playing of musical instruments, calligraphy and painting in hopes of marrying into a more financially stable family.

Alas for her deep sensitivities, hopes and dreams of being a man's principal wife, she had been sold as a concubine instead because the family she belonged to needed the funds for her elder brother to study for the exams in hopes of attaining a civil service post.

She had come into the rich Yun household as a deeply valued commodity, but could not attain the red sedan and red decorations or formal wedding ceremony of a wife.

Naturally she was bitter about it. She had learned to coax her profligate husband into being doting to an extent, and been pampered with many good things, even unto being able to avoid the purge because she had been one of his three favored concubines, one chosen by his mother in hopes of her educating him in preparations for the exams.

How could she accept that the position she felt should have been hers was to be given to another?! And a mere concubine maid at that!

For the girl to have attained it because of her sudden good fortune in having her brother attain rank and prosperity as an immortal cultivator, ah, heaven had no eyes!

Melancholic and fragile, hearing her spouse being negotiated for, she fell to weeping bitterly while clutching his thigh.

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114. ATDSVT: A Tale of Three Concubines

Zhu Feiyan's real name was something she had long forgotten. When she had first met Yun Shengtian, she had actually been called Lotus. She had been a dancing girl, sold to a pleasure boat's madam by poor peasant farmer parents.

The madam, seeing the signs that she would flower into a great beauty, had trained her in singing, dancing and musical instruments. Tall and willowy, graceful and elegant, Lotus had become a treasured attraction to the boat, bringing in many customers with her lovely voice, exquisite music on multiple instruments and her dances that made her seem to be a fairy.

Her virginity had sold for a very nice price, paying the madam back more than what she had spent on the dancing girl's actual purchase and upkeep to that point.

It was on that treasure boat that Yun Shengtian had met her, she had been clad in brightly colored gauzy robes created to entice, and despite his mother's disapproval, he had purchased her for himself with his saved up allowance.

He had purchased her at eighteen. Now she was twenty two years old and still had no children- a terrible detriment to her position in the household.

A veteran of the pleasure boat, Feiyan had learned the best ways to cajole and keep a man and how to cajole and undermine her fellow women, having bent her mind to learning such things

because her entire goal had been to leave the pleasure boat in such a manner that she had left her fellow dancers rabidly envious.

Well, she had certainly achieved it when the young master had straightforwardly bought her and brought her home to lavish lovely things on her.

Alas, that had ended.

Still, there had been hope that with the legitimate wives gone, she might be the next legitimate wife instead.

Sadly that too had been dashed.

Temperamental and jealous, she had not been pleased to learn that a former concubine maid of much lower rank and favor than herself had the good fortune to be chosen to be the new wife, because she was pregnant and her family had gone up in the world to be wealthy landowner farmers.

Not much discomfited, Zhu Feiyan had been adaptable. She had changed her an immediately.

She had thought to compliment the maid and to lavish the maid with cheap pretty gifts until she was gulled into believing that she really did care for her.

It would have allowed her to secretly poison the former maid to ensure she would always get a stillborn or defective child and maybe die from blood loss in a pregnancy.

As for that child that was the reason the maid would be the legitimate wife, she had thought to feed the child excessive doses of salt or oleander honey to cause organ failure and death, as such things would not have been traceable.

She had also had thought to ask for small, expensive things all the time and give back those occasionally, slowly increasing what she took but not what she gave back until all the best things were in her possession instead of the wife's.

Alas, how was she to know that the in-law cultivator would bring in his master?

How was she to know the cultivator peak lord would be so tyrannical and set against their interference as to advocate having her and the others beaten by the family into submission and loyalty, or expelled from the household?! Or worse, slain by the angry in laws in case the di wife died?!

Her plans had not covered this!

How was she to make her way in the world now, without support?! Without a man to protect her, she would be taken and used by any with the strength to claim her.

Without her stash of jewels, most of which had been lost to the bandits, how was she to attract a man?!

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115. ATDSVT: A Tale of Three Concubines

Wen Shishi was the shu daughter of a small traveling merchant family with pretensions to scholarship, since one of their forebears had actually passed the examinations.

Upon falling upon hard times, troubled with debts, naturally the merchant's leader had seized upon the idea of getting a shu daughter sold off to enjoy life as a valuable concubine with pretensions of literary skill and perhaps a bit of music and painting in a wealthy family.

If Zhu Feiyan had been willowy, elegant, graceful, long legged as a gazelle... and if Ruan Daiyu had the fragile, exquisite beauty and air of a small maiden made by the gods out of the finest polished porcelain, then Wen Shishi was their foil and contrast. With hair that floated like a cloud and a voluptuous body, she was a lush, lazy, sensuously curved object of desire.

Wen Shishi was a pragmatic soul. She understood quite well that no matter what she or the others wanted, there was literally nothing they could do. The Yun family would taste poverty if their master and husband thought to flee; this was not the kind of marriage anyone could flout or defy.

Attempting to get in the new wife or in-laws way or trying to stab her in the back or undermine her by any means? Stupid.

Pragmatic Shishi could see fate clearly enough. Causing that wife any injury would undoubtedly result in her death, constant beatings or expelling.

Naturally, being lazy, Shishi had decided not to even try. After all, as long as she was on the right side, she would get out of this unharmed. And it was not as if she would not be compensated when her master had a new home of his own.

Besides, of the three concubines, she had always been the least demanding and most good natured, having no reason to throw tantrums. What has she to fear from a former concubine maid when she had never caused the girl harm?

She had already decided to befriend the new wife to to get all the pretty jewelry and expensive clothing her in laws could feel like sparing for an obedient concubine.

She had also thought to complement the former concubine maid, coax her into assuming they were not rivals, after all, to be on the side of the legitimate wife and be considered an ally meant that she would have more influence on the household.

Plus, the woman had a child on the way, don't think that Wen Shishi was not relieved her own enjoyable life would not have to be turned topsy turvy by a pregnancy.

Indeed, all Wen Shishi was planning to do with her life was enjoy her master's attentions if any could be spared, wear pretty things, eat well, drink good wine, listen to tales, look at art, enjoy perfumes and incense, listen to good music.

Given the cultivator was rich, surely there would be many little luxuries. Musicians might be hired, paintings and picture books bought, fine clothing!

Unlike her counterparts, she was completely content with being a diversion instead of dreaming big.

Naturally she threw herself down at the feet of the startled future brother-in-law and started fervently promising her utmost devotion and loyalty to his sister.

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116. ATDSVT: A Tale of Three Concubines

Given that the crying husband's thigh was taken by his sobbing literary concubine, the brother in law was looking confused as his legs were being hugged by a pleading woman, and the Peak Lord was about as welcoming as an ice block, Zhu Feiyan was forced to admit defeat.

Kneeling down on the ground she prepared to say bitter words, lowering herself to try to coax out some kind of severance pay, because if the looks the cousins and uncles' concubines were giving her was any indication, she would never have a place in their households because the entrenched women would stab her to death in their sleep- just as she would have done had the circumstances been flipped- she arranged her skirts beautifully to look like a flower ready to wilt at the slightest hint of displeasure and then started on her pleading for money. Or something.

"For four years, this concubine has served in this household, sadly have not conceived nor carried a child, it is my ill fortune. Begging husband to be kind and remember our years together, to settle this concubine even a little so that the future days will not be full of suffering...Can even marry a servant as commanded or burn candles to the buddha for life if master desires to abandon the feelings of four years, only please do not leave this concubine with nothing!"

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117. ATDSVT: A Tale of Three Concubines

Zhu Feiyan had originally been priced at a thousand silver taels by the cunning madam of the pleasure boat.

She had been capable of coaxing men into spending large amounts upon her for long periods of time, even managing to beguile a scholar who was a yamen- that is to say a private secretary to a governing official- into spending an entire hundred taels upon her.

When she had been bought from the pleasure boat, she had gone out with her own wardrobe and belongings and several gifts from affluent patrons.

Over the years she had gotten fine silk and gauze dresses, lovely jewelry, beautiful musical instruments and a lovely room furnished to her discriminating tastes.

Now her room was wrecked, her stash of jewelry left in the house had been stolen, her clothing had been stolen, her instruments were either broken or stolen.

And her husband was being sold off for a ludicrously large sum. While she herself was not being compensated for the loss. While the man could not hope to attain scholar rank, he was gentle and doted on all his concubines, lavishing them with lovely things. She could well understand Ruan Daiyu's bitterness though as she was only using him, she could not share it.

However, now the House was in shambles, the menfolk were desperate, the womenfolk were eager to get rid of her as a threat. Surely despite the fact she had once owned fine silk and gauze clothes worth one hundred and thirty taels before and exquisite jewelry worth one hundred and eighty taels, now she had only what jewelry, silk and gauze clothes she had brought with her on what should have been a long pleasure trip.

Granted, those were her sturdiest silks and most favored jewels, that was not the point. The point was, she was sore and upset and desperate.

A woman who could do bookkeeping could be sold for 500 taels. A woman who could cook, sew and embroider well sold for at least 200 taels.

She did not want to be captured and sold again. Also she could not stomach the idea of meeting her former companions in the pleasure boats with less than a thousand taels as her severance pay, otherwise she would lose immense face.

Thus, she could only hope her husband had some kind of severance package that was worth it. Bitterly she thought of the scholar who had desired her- should she have taken him instead?

Ah, but who knew what fates came to mortal men? Only the gods knew, and they were fickle.

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Having left the boy to handle the woman clinging to his leg, I simply stood up and walked over to the two uncles, who seemed to be quite apprehensive at my approach.

Apparently, as the more voluble uncle and the eldest cousin assured me, the consensus was that Yun Shengtian would be sold off to us.

Good. It will do him good to be a kept man for a while. If all he has to work with to earn his way is a pretty face and a body good for fucking he may as well be used for it.

Okay, I'm bitter, callous and hypocritical. I don't care. I'm scheduled to have another goddamn nightmare and I would certainly be happier if the brats were safe at home. Besides I cannot stay out here to the point of collapsing from exhaustion, I may be buried in the punishment zone if I crash and this place is way too unsafe for that.

"Do you have a draftsman's sketch of your past home or maybe an architectural plan?" I demanded, deliberately being rude. "I wish to get the down payment over with."

Ah, the face of incomprehension, followed by quick obedience.

Yes, these schematics will be useful.

The floating boats will be of use to get the girl here, but there is still the wedding feast, the entrance into the house, the red wedding clothing, wedding gifts and the dowry itself. or take us all to Liu's family. I mean, traditionally... yeah. That sounds like a good idea. I shall make a floating sedan chair set and a floating palanquin set. Because reasons.

But first I am going to doton and mokuton their garden with its pavilions and bridges over water, their courtyard house with all its walkways, buildings and rooms, kang beds, excellent toilets, the bath house, and a massive stone external wall.

I shall get this done and over with because a petty, vicious part of me wants to throw it into their faces that Liu Cheung *made good*.

What? I'm a single parent too, you know, so I'm naturally petty when it comes to rubbing people's faces into their mistakes when they look down upon my kids.

Plumbing, cistern, water tank, well, done. A composting system built into foundations. Bath house and toilets, kitchen and heating systems come first, the rest of the buildings' rooms next molded from stone and strong sturdy, thick wood, beams, false carvings grown from wood, walls, floors, everything else needed in a massive courtyard house. There are many rooms, walkways, pavilions.

Fake mountains and ponds, myriad plants ranging from decorative to extremely useful, gardens that grow food, rare fruits, normal fruits, herbs, normal spices, terrifying high priced spices, the whole shebang including a miniature waterway wending its way decoratively and a fishpond.

Everything must be built in such a way that it may last a thousand years.

At least the menfolk and womenfolk of this Yun house have taken to gaping in a most satisfying manner.

Good. The more impressed they are, the less trouble Liu Fen will have from them.

Also on the bright side, the crying that the groom and his concubines were doing has already stopped.

Excellent.

To the stunned eldest uncle, I say caustically, after the entire courtyard house and its garden are finished, a task that took me all of the amount of time normally used in the mokuton four pillared house jutsu, "Now give me the papers necessary to record the wedding, as all that is left is the formalities."

The man rushes to assist.

Good.

Now all that is left to do is figure out what furniture to make.

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In general, watching an entire set of massive gardens complete with bodies of water, a fine gate and even a huge courtyard house made of stone and fine, strong hardwood with solid stone

exterior walls grow from the ground with extreme rapidity, perfect in every single architectural detail, was awe-inspiring.

The way it grew also told Yun Haoxuan plenty about the Cang Qiong Qing Jing peak lord. Solid stone instead of brick and rammed earth, stable solid woods that grew in the shapes the lord dictated, rather than needing to be carved. Plants of myriad kinds grew in the landscape as directed, to provide an exquisite view.

Some of those plants he even recognized as valuable, bearing spices or such that they could later sell once these trees and plants were bearing heavily.

There was such craftsmanship in the details of the house that one would have guessed it to have cost months and months or years of work by artisans, masons and builders rather than grown with terrifying speed.

Truly, Cang Qiong Mountain sect had an incredible asset on their hands. If a mansion could be grown so quickly, an entire massive park and palace buildings would not take the man much longer than a day to make.

Palace complexes cost millions of taels. Anywhere from thirty million to eight hundred million taels would be easily attained before the end of a day with such a builder.

No wonder this Shen Qingqiu had so easily offered them agarwood and rare incense woods in exchange for the girl's marriage or freedom. To him, this must have been ludicrously easy.

It also explained how valuable the student was to him, given most sect members abandoned their families and never returned, while this teacher had instead come this far and even negotiated on behalf of his student.

The travel might have been more difficult than the actual crafting?

Ah, no, that was certainly a master craftsman's absorption in creating a masterpiece that he saw on the man's face.

That quickness, surety and creation was surely the action of a god. If the boy became anything like his master, it would behoove him to remain on the boy's good side. He may have to visit his nephew or niece when they are born to cement ties.

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I had already taken it into my mind that what I gave to my students' families and friends would have to be better than what compensation I was giving out to those who I was buying their precious people *from*.

Fairness demanded it, after all.

From the dazed look on the faces of the Yun Family members including the intended husband, on their concubines, their retainers and servants, I could hazard the guess that I had impressed them thoroughly with Cang Qiong's prominence.

Good.

Very good.

I shrugged off their gazes with the insolent words to the two uncles, "I will expect that you two will have Yun Shengtian in his crimson robes ready for his marriage tomorrow, and if he keeps any concubines at all, I suggest you straighten them out *thoroughly* to the point that they know better than to try to harm or undermine the bride to be.

I shall prepare the rest of the dowry by tomorrow, as soon as I speak to his intended of her wishes in terms of what kind of household and items she wishes for them to have."

Also I was going to upgrade both Shang Bo's friends' cottage to a courtyard house and then upgrade Liu Cheung's family and in-laws' courtyard houses and all their wooden belongings too. And set up the courtyard house for the newlyweds. And all their belongings made of wood. Because reasons. It wouldn't take me long to do so anyway, and I could probably get the cart of sellable items as well as the floating palanquin and sedan chair tomorrow.

Why? Because I live for crafting and this is a good excuse to *make things*.

Also it would be best to fly home and then get the damn nightmare over with. Where Yue Qingyuan could pick up my pieces afterwards.

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121. ATDSVT: The G Side

Let me tell you that I am ludicrously glad to be away from the Yun household.

Let me tell you I am ludicrously glad the higher ranked elder sisters of Xian Shu Peak were kind enough to indeed help all my buns to cultivate and have volunteered to indeed help them do so while I will likely be vomiting my poor guts out.

Let me tell you I showered them all with butterballs and various nut and fruit cookies and sent them off with a bar of scented soap each. The dears.

Let me tell you that upgrading every last goddamn household on our side, right down to their furniture and the household goods belonging to the startled Lius, the amazed Lins and the disbelieving friends of Shang Bo did not really take that long.

I mean, it was just enlargements and additions and waterways and walkways and bridges and little groves... uh.. Okay I admit it.

I went a bit overboard to make their territory all equal.

Now Xian Shu Peak's maidens who were helping my buns, want to profit off of me. I may have a list as long as the central ceiling beam of our roof for wooden items to be made for the other Peaks at this rate.

All of the furniture of my students' families and friends' households including benches, drawers, chests, beds, tables, the whole shebang... is now made of ludicrously expensive ebony, rosewoods, cedar, huanghuali, zitan and sandalwood.

That includes the furniture of the new courtyard house with gardens, bathhouse and fish ponds for the newlyweds to come.

Liu Fen wasn't enthused about marrying Yun Shengtian but she had to admit, he was attractive and not violent or intentionally cruel. Not the brightest lamp in the street, but not so bad as men went.

I was right in that it was the women she was worried about. To be precise, two women- Feiyan and Daiyu, were fiercely, viciously competitive over Yun Shengtian and as a result, more than one concubine maid had been used as pawns, scapegoats or fodder by those two. The third, Wen Shishi was apparently too lazy and good-natured to compete in anything.

He could keep that Shishi, Liu Cheung and I both decided.

Everyone else may have freaked out even further after I finished setting up their extensive gardens when the Lins, stunned by the expensive woods, ended up telling them what those were actually worth on the market. Along with the actual worth of the plants I put in their gardens to breed both fruits, foreign fruits, spices, foreign spices, herbs, foreign herbs, and all kinds of edible plants and vegetables.

And the fishponds too.

Heh.

Well, at least now you little brats know what I meant when I said I would be preparing to each an equal share.

You can stop wibbling at me now. Really. I do not need to see your teary little fat faces.

Shush.

I do what I want!

***pg.202

122. ATDSVT: Punishment Zone- The G Side

I'll be frank. The moment I entered punishment zone, I was ill at ease, practically cringing. Utterly terrified.

Thanks be to whatever benevolent beings exist out there, what came into existence within my sight range was that child, and what seemed to be a wet cavern, filled with screaming, broken stone statues, and what looked like a nest full of eggs.

Gorgon eggs. Ah. I see.

Hallelujah! An escort mission. I love these things, really. I mean, yes I have a high chance of being eaten or mauled or slain, but at least for the love of all that is good and just, it *isn't* the crazy bastard with a quadruple amputee rape fetish.

Finally a mission I can get behind!

Naturally, I am relieved and I smile at him before scooping him up and holding him close.

He clings to me, buries his face in my chest, clutches my robe lapels.

There, there. It will be alright.

I hear the sounds of dry rustling snake scales and hide the child in my robe.

All that needs to be done is to get him out of this alive. If this gorgon cave is anything like that person intended it to be, then locking gazes with the beast is going to petrify me over time. There will, however, be a teleport formation here to a safe floor.

That means my goal is to avoid the creature long enough to get this child to safety.

I can kill it, of course, but it would be a lot easier if I had a mirror or shield.

I simply run, with the child in my arms, trying to find the way out of this labyrinth and all the way to the teleport formation without coming across the gorgon itself.

The gorgon itself has a snake lower body of gold, copper and umber, skin pale as ivory, the face and upper body of a greek goddess, verdigris green nails and yellow green slit pupiled eyes. Her head is crowned by a hundred thousand tiny snakes of copper and gold, each of which spits poison like a projectile.

The cave itself has only one entrance that leads to the creature's feeding maze which also has the only exit.

That maze is called a viper pit. It is full of poisonous snakes.

I shall have to find my way out without the creature getting its hands on either of us.

Naturally, I tell the child not to look, no matter what happens.

***pg.203

123. ATDSVT: The B Side

The haunted, hunted look on Shizun's face made Luo Binghe feel upset and worried that anyone or anything might be attempting to take Shizun from him or harm him.

That figment was his, after all. No one should make his figment feel like that.

He carefully avoided remembering that look was mostly caused by him.

It was much easier to be derailed from that train of thought as Shizun smiled at him, a look of relief and joy fit to make flowers bloom and stars fade, on his face.

Luo Binghe felt his heart skip a beat and fill with that sweet, melting warmth that caused him to light up in return before he was quickly picked up.

Ah, so warm again.

Luo Binghe was going to have this person as soon as he could force their creator to hand him over, permanently.

Shizun had told him not to look. Luo Binghe had interpreted that to mean that he had to hide his face against his former master's smooth chest, but that didn't mean he didn't want to see what was going on. He just had to be more careful of it.

Luo Binghe did not like what he saw.

To be fair, anyone else faced with myriad snakes would be disconcerted and in most cases, terrified. In addition right now, the creatures were on a warpath, right out of the walls, trying to bite the two of them to death with their poisonous fangs.

***pg.203

124. ATDSVT: The B Side

Explosive rocks being thrown into the path of what sounded like a massive demon snake. The creature screaming in an inhumanly high pitch, that hurt and made the ears ache or bleed.

"Do not look."

Rock spears tearing apart snakes that hissed their rage. Their fangs missed the mark most of the time but even Shizun's wide sleeves could not fend the creatures all off when they were in such profusion to the point that they were attacking everywhere.

Small red flowers began to bloom on white silk.

"Do not look."

Plants tore smaller snakes apart only to be crushed by subsequently larger snakes. Some snakes were big enough to be struck down only by a sword or spear.

Decapitation was good. Watching Shizun protect him while killing every beast in sight was oddly satisfying.

Ah. A hand covering his eyes.

"Do not look."

The hand was turning the cold grey of stone. Luo Binghe clutched at it, terrified as now he knew how dangerous the snakes really were.

More running. More infuriated hisses. More explosions. More dead corpses.

Shizun pushing him gently forward into a large room with nothing but a glowing teleport formation in an alcove quite a distance from his position.

"Keep walking." A moment's pause. "Don't look back."

Luo Binghe looked back...only to see his teacher, left hand now turning to stone, face a giant snake woman who was wondrously fair, before the woman was attacking his teacher who was fighting with that handicap of having one arm incapable of movement.

His teacher thrust that arm right inside the creature's chest.

Its death throes brought the cavern down, even as Luo Binghe woke up.

***pg.204

125. ATDSVT

The routine is normal. Wake up, get rid of waste, get cleaned up, wash everything, cling to Yue.

As for the rest of it, this time... it was not so bad. There are worse things.

So. Dying by cave in.

Not as bad as I imagined.

My head pretty much got crushed by a nice, large chunk of rubble.

Definitely better than the perverted fucker getting his hands on me.

Dying over and over again tends to have side effects on one's psyche.

If nothing else, after a certain pervert got his hands on me last time, I have pretty much given up on hesitation.

"Senior Apprentice brother, I've decided that after this next week I intend to take up cultivation again. May I please rely on you to help me with that?"

I am almost done helping my students. Soon it will be time to help myself.

Yue Qingyuan smiles widely in relief.

"I thought you'd never ask. Of course I would love to help you, Junior apprentice brother Qingqiu."

Apparently he thinks I died because of cultivation gone wrong.

Well. He may or may not be right, but his Peak has the best environment for cultivating in by the methods used by most righteous cultivators.

Still, given my fear of impending death revolves around a crazy fucker who likes to rip limbs off, this is as good an excuse as any to take advantage of.

I move in closer to him. He turns pink and moves backward. I move in closer still, keeping our position. He moves backwards again.

"Qingqiu, I don't think I understand why-"

"If I'm going to be in danger of dying due to backlash, Qingyuan, there's one thing I *really* want to do before I die."

Yue Qingyuan's eyes go wide.

"Qingqiu," he says, quickly forgetting titles and honorifics, "you don't have to worry about that. I'll look after you, I *promise*."

Ah, Yue Qingyuan, you really are a sweet sweet custard bun of perfection, made of the milk of human kindness. I'm not sorry I'm taking advantage of you.

"I regret nothing."

I pin him to the wall with a katedon, textbook perfect. Then I pull him down to my level for a steaming hot kiss.

Mmm, his lips are soft and the feel of him, the taste of him is warm and sweet and perfect.

My dear. My precious one.

I am not letting you get away.

***pg.205

126. ATDSVT

I hate Liu Qingge.

I hate him with the burning hatred of a million suns.

I swear, that goddamn bastard exists *specifically* because the universe made him to *fucking goddamn cockblock me!*

I had Yue, beautiful, gentle, sweet, perfect Yue in my arms. Against the wall.

I was kissing my way down his lovely neck, stroking his exquisitely soft skin, stroking those lovely muscles inside his inner robes, leaving the lapels widely open, leaving suckling kisses down the elegant lines of his throat and his adam's apple. I had my arms around his waist, pressed in between those lovely strong legs.

I was leaving a collar of hickeys along his elegant collarbones.

I was pressed into him so close I could feel his arousal! I would have had him, goddamn it! He was so warm, so sweetly responding to my kisses and touches and so close!

And then that abomination, that ruiner of hopes, that crusher of dreams, Liu Qingge, barges into the goddamn room complaining about some stupid, shitty trivial matter and screams in shock when he catches sight of us!

Yue snapped out of it and turned red like a rose so fast.. and then he coughed and murmured, that this was not the goddamn time and then he... he pulled away.

And I was left with Liu Qingge's useless, shitty lecture on respecting personal space and stop defiling our sect master, and do I have no shame?!

No, Liu Qingge. I have no shame.

That is it.

This is on.

I will make your fucking life a living hell!

***pg.205

127. ATDSVT: A Tale of Cannon Fodder

"You're telling me, the husband-to-be ran away."

The Peak Lord did not look amused.

Yun Shoushan had been the one who drew the short straw when the group of men from the Yun House had been forced to decide amongst themselves who was going to bring the bad news.

Right now everyone else had started off the groveling by kowtowing and were now prone on the ground, not moving in case of enraged lightning blasts.

Yun Shoushan felt this was unfair.

Simply because he had spoken up for the boy did not mean he should be the first to die!

The peak lord tapped his foot in visible impatience.

"He, ah... climbed the fence with a concubine and ran away. W-We are most assuredly having our men search for him! No one else was found to be colluding!"

To be brutally frank, no one else had been stupid enough to even think of colluding. The men at arms, valets, manservants, and maidservants had known better. Two of the boy's own concubines knew better and had stayed to have their fates decided on!

That brat! He had been wrong to speak for him! No one else would have abandoned their entire clan to die just to save themselves!

Yun Haoxuan had been right about the boy's unsteady, unreliable and fickle nature after all. He was definitely backing Haoxuan for the new family head if they could survive this.

The Peak Lord nodded. "If he is not back, clad in the red robes of marriage by dinner time, I will assume you and yours have instead chosen to give Liu's sister back to us in exchange for the original offer I made."

Well, that was... kind and considerate. Surprisingly less lethal. Wonderful!

Yun Shoushan bowed low in gratitude, "The Peak Lord is just and merciful!"

"The Peak Lord is somewhat annoyed." The immortal cultivator stated dryly. "But I *did* give you three options and that impetuous young man's decisions are not your fault. I assign no blame to you. Your people may stand."

The alacrity with which everyone stood up and brushed themselves off was probably a little funny but kindly enough, no one in the immortal cultivator's party sent to escort the groom back had laughed.

Or maybe they were just upset.

Yun Shoushan could not blame them. The gods knew that Chenglei, Xuanyuan, Haoxuan and Guisheng had cursed the boy roundly enough, and when it had been discovered that he had fled with his concubine and all the remaining taels he had been given by his father to cover his months of living in another city for his scholarship, leaving all his retinue behind him, the womenfolk of the household had set up a hue and cry, convinced that they would feel the brunt of the cultivator's displeasure.

Even now, they themselves were disgraced. The betrothal agreed to, the wedding clothing prepared, the bride's house prepared by her own kin, the wedding feast prepared, the house decorated to celebrate the wedding and most shameful of all, they had already accepted the price agreed on for the boy to marry out.

In fact they were already living in the house that was part of that price, and had brought in all their own remaining belongings to furnish it.

And the bridegroom had jumped the fence with a concubine!

Their face was mud if that brat didn't come home!

Worse, they had promised to beat the concubines into proper obedience and submission towards the wife if they were going to follow the boy at all, and according to the boy's other concubines, it was the boy's literati concubine that had talked him into taking the money, taking all her jewelry and their clothing and running off with her!

What kind of literati concubine was that, who would counsel the boy to act against his own clan and all filial piety?!

She was supposed to help him pass his exams, but this proves she knew nothing of Confucius!

Their clan was blighted the moment she set foot in their household!

***pg.207

128. ATDSVT: A Tale of Three Concubines

Zhu Feiyan was a very happy woman indeed.

Her former husband- may he remain luckily lost forever- had paid his entire household out for their previous services and severance pay yesterday, claiming that given he was moving to a new town to be married and the new wife would want to pick out the servants, he could not keep them.

Then he had given her and Wen Shishi each a thousand silver taels for their silence, took her aside, questioned her assiduously, added a hundred silver taels to her portion for her discreetly giving him information about the surrounding area, its available transportation and possible spaces for lodging, then taken the remaining money in gold and silver along with their luggages full of clothing and jewelry and fled with Daiyu.

On one hand, she had no idea where exactly he was now. He had given her no concrete plans. On the other hand, she had a very large amount of knowledge about where he might be hiding and how he could leave the surrounding area.

Plus, in addition to his settling the two of them with a thousand taels each and further, even getting an additional hundred taels for her knowledge, she and Wen Shishi staying meant they were both off the hook for his fleeing. It also meant that the rest of the menfolk had erroneously assumed that the two of them needed severance and settlement money.

Which notion neither Wen Shishi nor herself had disabused them of. Because the more money they had, the better off they would be.

She felt abstractedly sorry for the poor fools. His escaping with Daiyu had likely soured these people against him. In the future, no Yun family member would aid him if he was in danger because he had dishonored them all, and these cultivators would likely hunt him down like a hound for his insult to their honor.

He would have done better to stay and grovel before his bride to be, to be allowed to keep what he had.

And Daiyu, Daiyu who had made the supreme mistake of letting her jealousy and desire to be the only wife in the household rule her actions when she counseled him to flee... she would be the most hated culprit of the piece.

The Yun family would never admit their own culpability in the affair. They had needed a scapegoat and she was an easy pick.

***pg.207

129. ATDSVT- The Y Side

When Shen Qingqiu had first woken up with that puzzling case of amnesia, the first thing Yue Qingyuan had done was to covertly inspect him for signs of possession.

The weeping and catatonic thousand yard stares had frightened him.

The utter confusion by which Shen Qingqiu approached many things ranging from the people he had once known- he tended to hide behind Yue Qingyuan for the first few weeks.. The loss of all their memories together.

Also his unfamiliarity with the protocol of the Peaks, to how he now carried himself- everything was very different but there were also signs of familiarity sometimes.

Still, three times over the course of these years, he had been asked to go to Wan Jian Peak and under the full view of the other Peak Lords, he had been told to pull out the sword.

In honesty, that sword couldn't be pulled out by any cultivator, but it would only remove itself from the stone to attack demons or evil spirits.

All three times, Shen Qingqiu had always failed to pull it out and looked frustrated and aggrieved. It was all too clear he knew nothing about the sword or even why he had to pull it out or not.

Actually he had asked Yue if he was disappointed that he could not pull out the sword. Yue had wrapped an arm around him, pulling him against his side before telling him that no, he was not disappointed.

In truth Yue Qingyuan was relieved and overjoyed by his repeated failures.

The first time he had sent Shen there was when he had been amnesiac upon waking. The second and third times were when he had displayed skills the original Shen Qingqiu had never displayed before.

When asked how or why he had them, his response was to look back questioningly and ask, "Should I not have them?" as guilelessly as a child.

It was concerning but it didn't seem to be dangerous or bad, unlike those nightmare curses that continually caused damage to Shen Qingqiu's body.

Yue was still frustrated with that, because nothing they had tried had been able to stop those yet.

Shen Qingqiu or Shen Jiu, he could still be remarkably petty and he could still be rather thin skinned. The difference was that now he seemed... free-er. As if what had happened during his time with the Qiu Family had never existed.

Because to him it probably didn't.

Still, when rumors came to him that the former lady of the Qiu family had threatened a clueless Shen Qingqiu, claiming he had killed her family and she had proof, he had still been both upset and worried, taking it upon himself to look for more information on her allegations.

There seemed to be survivors from the Qiu household, people who claimed Shen Jiu...Qingqiu had spared them and slain everyone else.

However most of those had been children and their descriptions were warped by time. The aged were long gone.

The truth of the matter he did not know, but when Qiu Haitang had vanished after that bold pronouncement and not come back, despite the fact Qingqiu should have been informed first, as Qingqiu was witnessed in the opposite direction from where Qiu Haitang had been last seen, he had undertaken to look this up as well and cover something up with the influence of Cang Qiong Sect if necessary.

There was no sign of Haitang. No evidence of her passing. Nothing about her disciples, either. The only thing the detecting item pointed at was a nicely growing clump of wildflowers but not even bones or hair were under the roots when it was dug up.

Where in the world had she gone?!

***pg.208

130. ATDSVT: A Tale of Thirteen Buns

Liu Cheung was not a happy boy. He adored his sister, and she had been stood up on her wedding day. Granted, it was not over yet as the deadline was dinner, but yes. It was still being stood up.

His sister was naturally disgruntled, but as she was not in love with the man, nor was she truly interested in marrying him and he was just a name she wanted to use to ensure her child's future was not ruined by accusations of illegitimacy...

She was contented enough to take the fully furnished courtyard house, the extensive set of amber jewelry she had been given by her brother's master, as well as the other items she had been given by rather desperately placating, groveling and kowtowing Yun family members, and generously (in the public view) forgave them for this 'delay'

The Yun family's face would be mud for a long time to come even if the man was brought back at all.

Needless to say, when the paper crane talismans came flying in with the news that the concubine Daiyu and Yun Shengtian were both captured by bandits when they had been on their way out of the province with a hired set of guards in tow, Liu Cheung was not really enthused about rescuing them.

Actually, one could tell that most of his relatives didn't even want to have to go try to rescue him. They did, after all, feel betrayed, but as he was necessary to seal the deal as a sacrificial lamb...They were incredibly relieved when the Peak Lord made the decision to rescue the

reluctant bridegroom for them. Alas, by the time they heard him do so, the cranes came in with the information that, while Daiyu had been kept captive by the leader of the bandits who had ambushed their party with the aid of a turncoat among the guards, Yun Shengtian had been sold by the bandit leader.

To a gay brothel.

And if they didn't rescue him soon, someone would likely pay to *burst his chrysanthemum*.

Liu Cheung did his level best not to laugh, hiding his face with his fan as the other Yun family members looked as if they had bitten horribly bitter, sour fruit.

Well, the man should have known better and taken his guards at least. The question, as Shifu put it to Liu Cheung's sister in the most secretive, quiet voice he had, was as follows. Given that the couple had shamed her too, by fleeing the marriage, did she even *want* him and his other concubine rescued?

Looking as if she was regretful to even have to think about it, Liu Fen sighed. "I suppose you may as well," she stated grudgingly. "But given redeeming him is likely to cost us money, and it will cost you effort to get Daiyu back, I really think you should renegotiate the offer you originally made them."

Having put the question of renegotiation to the relatives, specifically because it would likely cost money to redeem the man in question, the eldest cousin looked pained as he agreed to renegotiate, eventually putting on the chopping board the sandalwood and incense-cedar, even the frankincense, myrrh and amber but apparently the amount of agarwood was a non-negotiable. They *really* wanted it. Not surprising in the least since it was the most expensive item of the offer. Of course, things were settled fairly quickly after that.

***pg.209

131. ATDSVT- The G Side

"Shifu, why do we have to rush to rescue him or that Daiyu woman?" Liu Cheung asked, sulkily. "They embarrassed my sister and me, and our family and their own family. They're not really worth it."

Shang Bo nodded. "Activities of that sort start at night, don't they? You can probably arrive late for that. In fact... Why not just buy him from the brothel after his chrysanthemum has been burst? It will mean the brothel has already made its money back from him and it should shave off his pride nicely."

"Why not just hire someone to pretend to be the buyer and pluck his flower? Have them bid at the auction for his virginity?" Liu Cheung said snidely. "The brothel will get him stripped down and prepared to be violated. It will kill his pride nicely."

Ah, I'm raising such mean and petty children. We're currently on a boat, by the way. On a flying boat. Everyone else is at Qing Jing Peak, safe and sound. And I know they're safe and sound because I tagged those buns and meatbuns. I certainly was not going to let them go unsupervised!

But back to the topic. I can hardly say that thanks to a certain bastard, the mere idea of ever being tied up, helpless and prepared for someone else to use makes me cringe, right?

Unless it's Yue. Everything is always going to be okay with Yue. Because Yue is a sweet custard bun of kindness.

[Is that compassion this terminal sees?]

No, it's mental trauma.

[That's an interesting idea though. The punishment zone can use that.]

My blood runs cold.

-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-

Don't you fucking goddamn dare!

-aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-

[Stop panicking. The self detonation function you purchased works just fine. So all you have to do is activate it.]

Oh. Yeah. Uh.

Relief floods me.

You might not be so bad. Thanks.

[You are welcome.]

Now how to put it to these little brats?

"Won't it cost more? You want to hire someone to pretend to buy him and deflower him. That costs additional money and auctions tend to run higher than you would like."

I should goddamn know. I was on VRONP once, years ago and buying items for my plushie, jewelry and pet hoard through the auctions was rage-inducing. I flipped a lot of tables because of auction-sniping and auctions going way too high for my budget.

Shang Bo has a point, though.

"I still think it would be easier on our pockets to simply arrive early and purchase him in advance from the madam, in case the brothel decides his price should cost more than what we are willing to offer.

Plus, if he ends up bought by a man with a sexually transmitted disease, he might end up passing it to Liu's sister."

I have a bright idea. Maybe if it is their money, they will not feel so petty, right?

"But fine, since you two brats want to be in charge of the purchasing end so badly, I'll put the money in your hands, Shang Bo and Liu Cheung. You two will have to account for it since that money will be taken out of your share of loot."

As I watch their eyes fill with unholy light and pure malevolence, I have the distinct feeling I have fucked up.

The brothel is like any other in the red light district of any of these larger towns- lit with red lamps, made of carved and brightly painted wood, the smell of sex and perfumes making its way through the air, wafting seductively.

With my enhanced senses just from being a cultivator, I can already hear the giggling of women, the laughter of men, the sound of sobs and the sound of discussions about sex, customers, food, the shiny things to be bought and gossip including gossip about who is pregnant or who is hoping to be redeemed by what customer.

I really don't want or need to know anything about the sexual preferences of this or that noble, okay?

The madam looks at myself and the two boys with interest. Fortunately we are not wearing the Qing Jing uniform. These outer robes are in red and blue and were intended for more casual purposes. Still lovely but also still quite deceiving.

The little brats talked to the madam. Apparently even the prospect of spending their own money is not enough to dissuade them from ruining that man's life.

They managed to talk her into selling the poor bastard's virgin ass in a secret auction among her healthy customers, with them buying the man after he has been deflowered, so the brothel profits twice without need to pay for his upkeep.

I'm staying out of this. For my own sanity. In fact, as soon as these brats are done talking to her and giggling evilly, why don't I just take them out to kill bandits?

I should have taken Enlai with me, he would have been able to curb their budding sadism!

***pg.212

132. ATDSVT: A Brothel Madam's Strange Tale

In general, when a young man who could be said to be 'beautiful as an immortal' comes into one's brothel, wearing exquisitely fine robes of striking blue ornamented with red, the main assumption is that the young man in question may be a successful prostitute and the two pretty boys with him clad in similarly colored clothing are his sing-song boys in training.

Mostly because no one else would probably enter such a place with two children in tow. Noble customers didn't do that, because they were concerned about the way society saw them.

Meng Lihua had been in this business a very long time. In fact, she had started in it. When she was younger, she had been a courtesan until she had ensnared a relatively wealthy older merchant, who had taken her home as a concubine.

When he was nearing the end of his life, as she had given him no children, he had released her with his thanks and a large sum of taels, fine clothing and jewelry. The jewelry and fine clothing she had kept as a memento, the taels she had invested in this garden of blossoms, to which she had recruited both males and females, purchasing them even from relatively unscrupulous sources.

She prided herself on her distinguishing eye, and when the man had said nothing but let the two boys, eyes lit up with petty glee, engage her in conversation about the purchase of a specific man, she had been certain. That man was a prostitute and one who was probably her counterpart.

The boys were maybe being trained as his successors of some sort, otherwise was there anyone so eccentric as to let children negotiate for them?

Well, he had certainly chosen fine seeds who would grow into lovely lotus flowers.

Amused despite herself, she had indulged the two boys, demanding first a high price for the man in question- a Yun Shengtian who claimed to be from the neighboring large town's Yun

family; which was preposterous for what man of that family would not have a large bodyguard retinue? If he was truly a Yun, he would never have been caught!- before letting the two boys coax and wheedle her down.

She had bought him for a negligible price from a bandit gang's leader anyway. It wasn't as if she was going to lose much and even more, the boy's double profit scheme was perverse enough to be amusing.

They wanted him deflowered by the highest bidder in an auction only attended by healthy men with no sign of any sexual disease. They didn't ask for the profits from this auction, only that she be certain the men who bid had no signs of illness.

Then, they, that is, the two boys, would purchase him from her and the brothel.

Were they doing it to please their master, or was this petty vengeance on their master's favorite? Was this man their master's love rival who he was punishing in this manner? Was the man formerly someone who their master had longed for and this was their way of teaching him a lesson for neglect or faithlessness?

Ah, the many pleasant puzzles of this affair!

Naturally, after having negotiated a reasonable price in taels for the purchase of the man once he had been broken in and assuming that the two boys might be in training, she offered to let them all watch, based on the assumption that if the man wasn't a prostitute, he was a pervert who found voyeurism enjoyable.

The speed with which the man declined amused her further.

The fact that the two boys complained about missing the spectacle only made her more certain that they considered this man, Yun Shengtian, to have done them or their master an injury.

This would be most amusing for her indeed.

***pg.220

133. ATDSVT: Yun Shengtian's No Good Very Bad Day

First he had been sold off to a woman, marrying out of the family in all but name, put under the thumb of her relatives who would no doubt treat him unjustly.

Perhaps had she married in, he might have had a bit more control, but even those relatives of his had betrayed him, offering to discipline his concubines, such was their eagerness to get money from the bride's family.

How was he to know that pretty maid had a cultivator for a brother?! Had he known, he would have avoided her!

He had been married before, but at least he had some control over the bride, his parents had taken his wishes into account for both of them.

He had been fond of his Fa Xiaohui, and his Yin Jiang who had been taken from him and they had properly observed the Three Obediences and Four Virtues!

Granted, he could not say he was in love with them, nor they with him, but there had been at least fondness and companionship.

At least he should have had some kind of mourning period! He hadn't even mourned his parents properly, much less reconciled himself to other losses!

He hadn't even been an orphan and a widower for a week much less a year and already the family was marrying him off?!

Marrying in as a son in law to a house that disapproved of him immediately, how could he uphold the male principle?!

So, he had made his mind up to take what he owned and leave. Daiyu had been a pillar of strength and comfort, though his other two concubines had refused to leave with him and he had reluctantly let them go, with severance pay.

He had let his family guards go, and then taken new ones in hope that they would not sell him out to the rest of the Yun, and then he had fled after picking one of the paths out of the county. How was he to know that he would lose his belongings and his concubine to a bandit king?!

The last time he had seen Daiyu was when she was pitifully clutching at the bandit king's thighs, begging him to have mercy on Shengtian, her husband, promising him that she would do anything if only he was to be returned to a civilized place, alive and unharmed.

If she hadn't begged for his life, the bandit would have killed him or thrown him to be used by his men.

As it was, the treacherous dog had gone behind Daiyu's back, stripped him naked, took all his clothing and had him sold to a brothel.

[R-18 content]

The owner's representative even had the gall to grab his... private parts... to fondle them, before he declared that he was good for sale, and no matter how hard he fought, it was worthless.

Then they force fed him laxatives, set him next to a privy and let nature take its course.

When he was weak and dizzy they gave him water laced with some kind of drug that left him helpless. They took him away again to have him washed thoroughly clean inside and out.

Against his will he could feel his body responding to being touched, even as his jade stalk and chrysanthemum were examined and cleaned carefully, the latter having fingers inserted carefully to wash within. He was patted and cooed at encouragingly as if he was some kind of obedient dog.

Then he was made to drink wine and his face was covered with a cloth and everything went black.

When he woke up, he was naked, helpless and incapable of movement, laid down in an enticing position on a brightly decorated bed and at the mercy of a very pleased, equally naked man.

The naked man in question was built like a soldier, features deeply chiseled and the sight of the muscles and the large tool on display only terrified Shengtian further.

Worse, his blood burned with helpless arousal. He had been forced to ingest an aphrodisiac with the wine, and in spite of himself, his skin felt too sensitive to touch in texture and temperature.

Despite his attempts to squirm away, he was unable to escape when the man got on the bed and then, with a proprietary air, began to run his hands over every inch of his body.

"Such a pretty thing." The man mused, parting his legs to see him better despite his abortive movements to try to conceal himself. "Nice pale skin, slim body, probably never saw a day's work. Did you grow up in someone's courtyard, pretty?"

Yun Shengtian attempted to speak but the fluid he had drunk made his tongue clumsy.

"No matter. You're mine for the time being, and you're definitely a virgin. That pretty chrysanthemum of yours will be worth every penny." The man said in dismissal, and then he went at Shengtian as if he was a prize dish at a feast, licking, nibbling and tasting, biting and even leaving bruise marks on his sensitive inner thighs, until the dazed, and teary eyed Shengtian was squirming under him because of the pleasure but clear headed enough to realize he was about to be taken against his will, begging incoherently, trying to get the man to let him

go. Half the time he succeeded in getting his message across but the man laughed at his pleas and clearly didn't care.

The man's hands slid down long elegant legs, hauling them up to rest over his shoulders. His fingers now soaked in some kind of lubricant, he began to stretch the petals open, so as to speak.

One finger. Two fingers. The sensation of being stretched and touched inside being unusual, Yun Shengtian redoubled his complaints, weeping, pleas to be released and squirming.

Then the man took his fingers out, slicked his own member with the lubricant, pressed the blunt head right against the pink little blossom and, looking Shengtian full in the face, forced it all the way in with one vicious thrust, causing his victim to scream in shock and pain, spasm around his invading tool and bleed, back arching from the sudden impact.

"Ah, bursting chrysanthemums are always so sweet." The man laughed and then probed around with the tool until he found a place that sent white hot sensation right up Shengtian's spine, causing an involuntary tightening of his inner muscles.

"There, then." The man sighed, eyes half lidded and dark with lust. "You'll like this," he laughed wickedly and then he went to town, pounding on that spot constantly until Shengtian's body shuddered, squirmed, spasming and tightening down on him, and Shengtian was too dazed and incoherent to do more than moan and mewl helplessly and incoherently, dripping tears.

The pounding continued, over and over.

His jade stalk was stroked and milked of its fluid over and over, the man seemingly finding it amusing to drink the fluid down, collect it in small cups or lick the drops that splurts and splashes up.

The man took Shengtian's defenseless pliable body in whatever positions he saw fit.

Sometimes he wanted to see his face and lick the tears off his cheeks, swallow his moans.

Other times he pushed him face down on the bed, and while Shengtian was scrabbling to get free, he fucked him hard and fast until the hapless man shook under him like an over ridden courier horse.

The man took his pleasure despite Shengtian's more coherent struggles and begging and at the last, after having his fill of orgasms deep inside Shengtian's body, the man sighed in pleasure as he inspected the opening which had been red and bleeding when he started, but was now dripping white fluid copiously even as it contracted under his gaze.

"I heard they plan to sell you soon." The man said, fondly stroking the pink 'petals' that had now deepened in color. "So I should make sure no one else will be able to use you for quite some time."

Warned by these ominous words, Shengtian tried to scrabble for freedom but was held steady and pressed down.

The man selected successively larger toys from the bedside table, forcing them in and out of the slick opening over and over again, grinding the heads of the toys against that spot deep inside him that made Shengtian spasm, not stopping until he was done milking his poor jade stalk of its liquid, until the slit opened and closed like a mouth but could not even manage transparent thin fluid.

Only when the man was done stretching Shengtian's hole obscenely wide was he released.

"There. Very nice."

[R-18 content end]

By the time the attendants came to pick Shengtian up to clean him for the people who had come to pick him up to take him home, he couldn't walk, his lower body ached, his body was bruised in many places and many patterns and he trembled, teary eyed, obviously used and spent in every single way.

They had to wash him clean, wrap his weak body in the expensive robe provided for him by his rescuers and carry him into the litter. He couldn't even stand.

All he could do was weep bitterly.

***pg.222

134. ATDSVT: A Tale of Thirteen Buns

"So." Shifu said, turning a gaze of unnerving intensity upon Liu Cheung, and hissing to him and Shang Bo quietly, in such a way that only the two of them heard him. "How exactly do you two intend to tell your sister that you sold her husband's virginity? And on her wedding day no less."

The bandit gang hunting expedition had gone quite well and a fainting, teary eyed Daiyu had been retrieved from her kidnapper, along with her jewelry and belongings, her husband's belongings, women and pretty men kept from previous raids, all the taels they had taken and all the loot taken from previous kills and robberies. Given there had been 36 bandits, that was still a hefty sum even were these victims to be settled.

There were stolen horses, cooking utensils, armor, weapons, clothing, previous victims' jewelry, previous victims' money, some medicine and money that may have come from sold loot.

One may guess that anything bulkier than jewelry and taels had been sold off or traded on a black market somewhere, as Yun Shengtian had been.

Apparently Daiyu had gone to the kidnapper's bed to get him to spare her husband. Commendable, but stupid. She should have obediently stayed at home instead.

Given Liu Cheung himself could not stand the woman in question, he knew he was being unfair but then again her literary allusions were getting on his nerves.

While he did have some grasp of important poems and the like, it wasn't really important unless you were cultivating in the way of those people who turned poems and songs into actual qi attacks and fighting techniques, after all.

So, he was annoyed when he responded quietly with, "Shifu, whatever do you mean? We simply arrived too late to rescue him before he was deflowered!"

"Uh huh." Shifu said skeptically in that same quiet, insistent tone. "And when he can barely perform the kowtows? Let alone please her on the wedding night."

"She's pregnant already," Liu Cheung grinned viciously. "Men who have sex with pregnant women are considered beasts. We can say he was being considerate of her needs. If worst comes to worst, Shifu, I'm sure she can buy a male concubine, after all, you and I will be providing the property to be inherited by the children."

"Just make sure to be that generous to my friend, Ling Mei," Shang Bo hissed back. "I want her to be provided for as generously, Shifu."

"Sure." Shifu replied, stopping to grow a wedding palanquin or rather an ornately decorated 'carved' litter all in solid red wood for the husband to be. That floated. Because Shifu made things float using writing. Just as he had grown the wagon and the carriage that was carrying the new batch of rescued people who he had healed.

He certainly could not leave them here to be sold to a whorehouse, now could he?

At least there was no shortage of fine clothing recovered from Yun Shengtian's baggage. That and they could get wedding robes for him on the way back to his soon to be former home town.

Soon they were entering the whorehouse to pick up the prospective bridegroom after having grown a massive wall of solid thorns hardened to wood around the carriage full of victims and wagon full of loot, both drawn by the bandits' stolen horses.

Needless to say, none of three cultivators were happy when any of them was propositioned.

There were three cases of such propositioning, the first was when a well dressed man propositioned Shang Bo of all people. Rather, he actually walked up to Shifu even as they were about to enter the brothel and asked if Shang Bo was for sale.

Shang Bo wanted to kill him.

Shifu's sharp, 'Not for sale!' had been ignored, and the man had tried to keep making offers in the face of their united rage until Shifu lost his temper, moved quickly to pin the man against a wall in a tight hold, pressing down vindictively with a large electrical discharge on a point on his back that caused the man's eyes to roll back and his knees to go weak, only supported by the wall, which couldn't hold his slightly smoking, twitching body, mewling body up after Shifu let go of him in disgust.

Had he wet his pants? That... okay there was the smell of urine and something else. Not blood. Oh. Eeewww. He was continuing to moan and twitch and his pants got wetter. Ewwwww.

"Not. For. Sale." He had hissed, leveling a truly baleful look at everyone else in range, including the now frightened brothel guards.

That had certainly taken the shine off someone's evening.

The second time it had been a woman. Rather lushly built, rather enraptured.

She had propositioned Shifu seductively in the corridor on their way to the now obsequiously bowing Madam's office, licking her lips at the sight of him, offering to make it worth his while.

Shifu had smiled at this, in obvious amusement and then stated that while her proposition was taken as the compliment she had intended to give, she had made a mistake. He was only here to retrieve someone.

She had blinked, looked again at his clothing. He had raised an eyebrow, taken the wrist of the hand she had daringly placed on his chest, and then pressed gently down on something with the gentlest flutter of qi that had her eyes glazing over, warm and liquid and utterly hazed, her knees going weak as a throaty moan left her lips.

Shifu?! What are you doing to that woman?!

The woman thus distracted. He had politely arranged her clothing to be less disheveled and then gently coaxed the weak kneed woman with more flutters of qi to sit on a nearby chair. She would be very distracted for hours.

Again that scent. Shifu was being really petty today!

With Shifu there, there was never a shortage of suddenly appearing nearby chairs. That show off!

The third time Shifu was approached by a swaggering, handsome man in the actual office, tall, well built, well dressed in rich satin robes, whose eyes lit up at the sight of him.

Probably the actual buyer of Shengtian's virginity.

"Beautiful heavenly fairy, come to grace us with your presence. Want to try taking a tumble with me in satin sheets and experience the mortal dust for a change of pace from the lofty heights of the heavens?"

He wiggled his eyebrows in what he felt was a seductive manner.

"No." Shifu said bluntly.

Surprised, the man tried again. "I'm sure you didn't mean that."

Shifu put a hand on his shoulder seemingly in a companionable manner. "I really, really did." Then pressed down on something and channeled that barest flutter of qi with more electricity into it, causing the man to flush, shudder, moan and his posture to go languid and loose, eyes hazed. Shifu then maneuvered him to the wall, pressing down subtly on his back and sending that discharge of electricity into him causing his body to spasm helplessly, eyes glazing over further. Then a third, leaving him a twitching, moaning mess on the floor. Just like the first man.

"That should keep you out of our business." Shifu stated, moving away from the man, nudging him with the tip of a shoe. He then retrieved the agreed upon price from a bag on his belt.

"The man we came to retrieve, please bring him out." Shifu stated brusquely, putting the bag of taels down on the table.

As the prospective bridegroom, still teary eyed and looking pathetically weak had to be practically poured into the palanquin/litter, the man who had been sent into a blissed out, messy (orgasmic) state clutched at Shizun's leg with a fervent, glazed look in his eye. "Wait! What is your name?! Where can I find you again?"

"Not interested and nowhere." Shifu stated flippantly, now discharging electrical energy and qi to a point on the man's torso through his clothes, which sent him into more moaning mess, loosening his grip which allowed Shifu to retrieve his leg.

"Right, we're leaving." Shifu stated. "Let us never do this again." He added as they went back with the floating palanquin in tow to retrieve the wagon and the carriage with the rest of the rescuees.

The thorn wall was reshaped into smooth polished wooden furniture and a wagon to carry it in.

And then they were off at the fastest speed the horses could give them, back to the town where the Yuns were waiting to see them off and have the wedding banquet.

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135. ATDSVT: A Tale of Thirteen Buns- Endings and Beginnings

The wedding was beautiful, though the pale groom tottered weakly through three kowtows, his eyes welling up with tears.

The wedding feast was delicious, though the in-laws were disgruntled.

The furnished home was a masterpiece, though settling in the concubines... or at least one concubine... might be challenging for the new bride.

After having dropped off back home those who could be sent back among the bandits' previous victims, the remaining rescuees who had nothing to return to, were moved into the dormitory where the rescuees from previous bandit groups had been settled in.

As for the three concubines, after seeing her new quarters, furniture and all, Wen Shishi was willing to return the severance pay and move in with the married couple, Daiyu was the one her husband believed he owed his life to, and she apparently wanted to parley that into becoming his second wife...

And Zhu Feiyan sensibly took her leave of everyone involved.

The fact that she had one thousand, four hundred taels, two hundred taels worth of jewelry and fifty taels worth of clothing with her when she went was most assuredly not something she allowed to come to anyone's notice.

Daiyu was a problem. On one hand it was now clear to Daiyu where she stood. She could not hope for first wife's position, for the Liu family held all control over resources. However she was

not willing to be a concubine and that was a problem for Liu Cheung's goal of letting his sister get a male concubine from a slave market to help keep her new hubby in line, so as to speak.

The fact he wanted someone completely subservient to his sister and willing to oppress his brother in law was something he didn't bother to hide from his mystified Shifu.

Worse, Yun Shengtian considered Daiyu to be the reason he was alive and therefore he owed her a debt of gratitude. The feelings were high.

Perhaps it would have been better to fake her death. However the look Shifu gave him was complex.

"You should have taken these things into account before thinking of getting your sister a male concubine." He simply pointed out. "All I can do is to surround them with ushabtis and golems- that is, servants made of animated wood, stone and clay."

Shifu used many strange terms. Shikigami was apparently a word for talisman creatures. Ushabtis and golems were apparently animated creatures made of wood and stone bound to perform a task. Shifu had made them before to do various tasks and the creatures were quite obedient. Trainable too.

"I can bind them to obey your sister, and kill anyone trying to kill her, putting Daiyu and Shishi under surveillance, as that was my original plan." Shifu stated.

Ah. That would be useful. Servants who could not be suborned with silver, gold or favors were always useful.

"You do that, then we rescue brother Shang Bo's Ling Mei." Liu Cheung agreed.

Soon the newlyweds were settled in and Daiyu would have to try to fit into the new household, knowing that her husband's new in-laws would hold all the leashes.

Time would tell the rest of the tale.

***pg.235

136. ATDSVT: A Handmaid's Tale

Ling Mei had been a street rat, a pickpocket, running with the gangs for years.

She may have been gentle and loving to the younger kids, including Shang Bo, but she was hardly a soft touch when it came to fighting for something she wanted.

As such, when the official had liked the look of her, she hadn't actually really been forced into coming. She had simply parlayed her looks and acted gentle, lost, weak and fragile to coax him into taking her out of the jail before she could be put in with more perverts.

That stated, the official was of a very low rank and he had still somewhat bullied the jailors and other people on the way out. She had played along, if only to leave herself some space to maneuver.

After all, reluctant, shy maidens had to be coaxed, right?

Well, for a minor official, he had certainly a large number of concubines aside from the legal wife.

Five concubines, concubine Chao-xing, concubine Huilang, concubine Cuifen, concubine Liqiu, concubine Jinghua, and now her.

He really was overreaching, but at least all the girls had come from poor families and had been recently raised up in circumstances despite the grand names he had given them all.

In fact, her new name according to him was Changying. Given that it was less commonly found than Ling Mei, who was she to refuse it?

The problem was, having been raised up from low circumstances, the women in question were both grateful and pitifully enough, bitterly jealous of his attentions. Given that he did take good care of them, was kind enough to give them trinkets, good food, nice clothing, it wasn't surprising to see them competing viciously over his nights and days.

They were not educated but they tried to learn poems. They were not intelligent, but they tried to lighten his burdens by enlivening his leisure time.

They relied so completely upon him that the idea he could go to another pained them deeply, causing them to try all kinds of feminine stratagems to keep him close by.

Therefore, when she had arrived, she had simply taken to laying low, and offering to do little trivial tasks for the other concubines, calling them ladies, and addressing them and particularly addressing the wife and husband with exaggerated respect, which sent all of them puffing up in happiness.

An easy little farce and in return, while they schemed against each other, she had a nice, quiet life in the very back of the rear courtyard.

When Shang Bo's cranes had come looking for her, she had been shocked and amused to see that the boy still remembered her. It had been years, right?

But he remembered her. And he wanted to see her again and take her home with him.

Ah, little Shang, little Shang, you will be my nice ticket out of here.

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137. ATDSVT: A Handmaid's Tale

Having ascertained that yes, Shang Bo was worried for her, and yes, Shang Bo wanted to take her home with him to live with the other kids who she considered to be her younger siblings, Ling Mei then started in on her plans to extricate herself from the household as painlessly as possible.

To do this, she portrayed the disposition and demeanor of a damsel who could be mistaken to be thoroughly in love or at least in some kind of deep relationship with the sender of the letters, smiling wistfully at each and every one, avidly replying with harmless minutiae that would soothe Shang Bo's nerves and hiding any letters that remained behind.

This demeanor was quickly noted by the husband and wife, as well as the non-intellectual concubines who she had taken to teaching how to read earlier so that they could learn poems on their own.

She had also taken to referring to the letters as from someone dear to her.

Naturally, curious little pitchers have big ears and one of the concubines managed to squirrel away a letter to show to the husband in question.

The letter read as follows.

[Start of letter]

"Dearest elder sister Ling Mei,

I worry for you night and day. Have they been treating you well? Have they been bullying you? You have always been kind and gentle and I worry that you are being taken advantage of.

My senior brothers all tell me that some concubines can be horrible and scheming and violent. Are you sure you are not in danger of being poisoned?

I am very worried for your sake and have been at my studies day and night to try to earn money to take you back home. I do not approve of your marriage.

The rest of our family is fine. I have undertaken to get them teachers, maybe more of them will be scholars!

Shifu has promised to settle them all richly and I will work hard to make you proud and until I can take you home. I promise I will be a good eldest brother and look after them.

I will be coming soon! Wait for me!

With love and expectation, your little brother, Shang Bo.

[End letter]

That put the fox among the chickens.

Who was this mysterious younger brother? Who was his mysterious Shifu? Why did all his senior brothers- likely elder students- think concubines were all violent and dangerous?

While this was the letter of a younger brother, it was also a letter insulting the running of the official's household.

Naturally, he was upset.

In general, finding out you have in-laws who assume your concubines are all scheming bitches and worse, do not intend to respect your uh... legal relationship with your concubine and do not consider her to be spilled water, tends to do that.

Naturally he confiscated the letter she had planned to send, read it and once he was reassured she had been defending his household... though her description of how deeply his other concubines loved him touched his heart deeply and he resolved to favor them all just that bit more... he wrote a letter back.

[Start of letter]

Good young sir.

While I, Dong Zhuo (the third), senior magistrate of this county, am pleased to see your deep love for your fair elder sister, I must complain that I am deeply saddened by your mistaken grudge against my household.

I can assure you that my concubines are all gentle, loving and loyal, my wife is kind, wise and just and they would never harm so much as a hair on her head.

In fact, I insist that we all come together to dispel such calumny and libel, as I feel impelled by your forceful words to protect my reputation as an upright scholar and righteous official

Your sister's husband, Dong Zhuo (the third)

138. ATDSVT: A Magistrate's Tale

Dong Zhuo (the third!) was the third man of that name in his family. He was also the third politician in his family who had reached senior magistrate.

There had been junior magistrates in his lineage and there had been lower ranking officials still. But he held a high position (in his family's estimation) and he was happy with it.

He could, actually, have chosen more intelligent, more cultured women from scholarly, scholar official, merchant or landowner farmer families for his concubines, but no.

Dong Zhuo (the third) did not want the disharmony in his family that could come from poisonings, suffocations or smart women's schemes.

That was why he had taken a fellow senior magistrate's well educated daughter as his primary wife, put the running of the household in her hands, and then sought his pleasures in maidens from poor, illiterate families, specifically families that didn't know sciences, commerce or mathematics of any kind.

The less likely they were to know anything dangerous, the less likely they were to be capable of meddling with the finances and the prettier they were, the more he liked them.

That was why he had taken in five women who were the prettiest daughters from poor families who were pathetically glad that he took the girls off their hands for money.

That was why he had taken Ling Mei in.

As a street rat, he thought she would be on par in terms of illiteracy as his other women, thus she would know nothing of poisons or finances, and he could handle her education by leaving it to his wife who ruled the hierarchy of women in his household with an iron fist in a velvet glove.

He liked the women's desperate gratitude. He liked their appreciation of petty things like trinkets, nice clothes, good food, sweet smelling soaps and pretty baubles. He liked the way they coveted his time and attention and he liked the fact he could please them easily.

Dong Zhuo (the third) was not a handsome man. He knew this well. He was heavysset, built much like a boulder. His face was square. His features were square and sharply chiseled. He did not in any way resemble a romantic lead from a folk tale or romantic picture scroll.

He was a kind man to his womenfolk, but he was not the man that educated women dreamed of. Those women only dreamed of men with the lean builds of swords, with beautiful faces and elegant long limbs.

Taking one of those women into his household would have been depressing beyond words.

That was why he had taken these girls under his wing. To them, he could be the ideal man.

That was probably why he was utterly dismayed by the appearance of Shen Qingqiu, Peak Lord of Qing Jing Peak with the fabled and remarkably attractive Shang Bo in tow.

It was rather demoralizing to see the boy bound towards his concubine, calling her, "Elder sister!" and practically radiating joy.

Well, no wonder she had been so eager to leave, he thought, looking at the graceful, elegant gentleman straight out of a romantic picture scroll that was the boy's Shifu.

Were all the people in that Peak romantic leads?! Curse you, stupid, sexy Qing Jing Peak!

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139. ATDSVT: A Handmaid's Tale

Wao.

So that was Shang Bo's Shifu? Damn fine man.

Also, the robes he and Shang Bo were wearing were high class, Ling Mei had seen rich young masters wear clothing of poorer quality.

This was looking better and better already.

Even more amusing to her was the worried gazes of the womenfolk, two of the concubines had all but plastered themselves against the side of their now currently pale master and another pair had hidden themselves close by, behind their mistress, his wife, who had also gone rather pale and wide eyed.

Ah, such an amusing farce this would be.

Ling Mei smiled as she embraced Shang Bo. "You are looking well, little rooster."

The boy turned red, cutely. Ah, she was so fond of teasing him! "Sister jests. I am but a lowly apprentice and disciple in Qing Jing Peak. Not even a senior disciple yet. Only a third year. Maybe in ten more years I will have a junior." He muttered, cheeks red.

"A-anyway, Shifu and I have come to bring you home with us! I will not take no for an answer! I have a-already gotten us a house and we will finish your wardrobe and you will have all the luxuries I wanted to get you in the city!"

Ah, this was perfect.

Now the man spoke, "She has been entered into this house as a concubine, since when does a brother bring his sister home when she has been married out?!"

Her husband of three years looked disappointed in her willingness to leave. Well, that was fine, she had cards to play yet.

"Master, I had thought of your circumstances as well." She pointed out, bowing low in his direction.

"Surely a senior magistrate might find his household somewhat strained by the addition of one more useless mouth to feed.

I have had no children these past years.." Because she had ceded her place in line to his bed to the other concubines happily... "...whereas your good Liqui, Huilang and Jinghua are now pregnant with children, your honored wife has given you two strong sons and a lovely daughter, and honored concubine Chao-xing and Cuifen have given you two fair daughters like pearls and jade in the past.

Surely keeping me here will only lessen the supplies better used for the dowries of those daughters."

Given that she had been inspecting the house and found all the furnishings to be sturdy, well worn, grand but old and weathered?

It was fairly clear that the furniture was all from his more prosperous ancestors' times as they had clearly bought goods to last at least ten generations or more down the line.

The wife's wedding silks and brocades were starting to show signs of wear. They had no gauzes nor embroidery for the concubines and only the sturdiest lower grade silks and brocades for them too.

The little trinkets were all cheap compared to what she had seen nobles wear, unsurprising, because he had so many mouths to feed.

Poor people bred many children and from her own looking into circumstances and gentle interrogation, she had ascertained that Chao-xing had six siblings, Jinghua had eight, Huilang had seven, Cuifen had six and Liqui had eight.

In terms of fertility, he had married well but the question was, could the house continue to stand on only one senior magistrate's shoulders unless he implicated himself with squeezing taels for court cases favorable to those open to bribery and misdemeanors?

She thought not.

And he was a nice man, really.

His concubines all really doted on him which meant they would likely keep pumping out children.

Which again his current household could not sustain as it was, lawfully.

"Master is a good official, a straightforward and just man, righteous and filial."

He had certainly pampered his aged parents lovingly and gotten the concubines to do the same to earn his favor, for they were well cared for even now, staring at this scene as they were from the balcony with the fifth concubine standing behind them.

"Honored elders of this great house also righteous and good. Honored madame is intelligent, skilled, most admirable."

Dong Zhuo puffed up happily only to deflate when she continued, "In wicked times like this with only one official in the family supporting it with hard work, two intelligent sons studying hard but not yet scholars, fair daughters who must eventually marry out to fine magistrates like their honorable father, how may this mere concubine bear to burden his shoulders further with her own petty concerns?

Surely the carrion eaters will come to try to bribe our good master to leave the way of justice. As sons and daughters grow, as family grows, vultures gather to lead one down the path of corruption."

Ah. That got to him as he turned slightly red, then white, then purple. "One more mouth to feed is not much." He hemmed and hawed.

"But one mouth that may be sold for dowries for many fine daughters and properties for many fine sons is a good bargain." Ling Mei said gently. "Good master, this concubine merely wishes to be of service.

Dear little daughters of my precious sisters and honored mistress, Baozhai, Lanying, Liling all are precious, please let this concubine help them get rich dowries. Good sons Bohai and Bolin, should they not get shops and lands?

Soon, my sister concubines will give you more fine and healthy sons and daughters, should they not get dowries, shops or lands?

Little brother Shang Bo offers much, surely this one mouth to feed can be traded away for benefit of master's upright and noble house."

Ah, that definitely hit the spot. The man was a doting father and the wellbeing of his children was dear to his heart. It had also hit the hearts of the wife and the concubines mentioned in question, that she had tried to gain them large benefits.

Even the old parents had been touched by this flattery.

Shang Bo on the other hand, looked shellshocked that she was arguing for benefits... for the other side!

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Ling Mei had thought everything over carefully.

Firstly, she wanted out of there, no arguments, no accusations, no complaints, no one trying to bring her back. No one picking fights.

No one bringing trouble back to where she would be living. In a house. Of her own. If Shang Bo had been telling her in other letters correctly, she now had a fine piece of property and enough dowry to snag a spouse of her wishes.

One specifically to follow her wishes. She could even buy one to be obedient.

The house was too stuffy for her though it was heaven for the other concubines.

The idea of following the people in here with their firm Confucian leanings for the rest of her life made her sick.

To achieve her goal, she needed to pick an angle of attack that made her leaving look filial, pious, generous, considerate.

That meant she had to sell her freedom in such a way that the master would be forced to accept its benefits, her fellow concubines would praise her to the skies, the master's children would look at her with gratitude and the master's parents would call her filial and praise her as an example to anyone who asked.

So she would *literally* sell her freedom then.

For dowries and lands and shops for the family's existing children and children to come.

That was the only way to be certain, because to be frank, taels would only be spent away eventually, possibly quickly, inspiring greed and fights, but preset dowries and shops and lands would be remembered fondly and would not be spent by concubines nor the man and his wife. Not when it was for future generations.

Ah, but Shang Bo didn't seem to understand why she would do this. That was okay.

She chose the best possible words for this situation as she patted his back. The ones he would associate with her care of him and his friends.

"Think of the children," she said beatifically, as pure as a white lotus.

That made him slump reluctantly in a most disgruntled manner. "Sister, you really care for this family?" He asked plaintively.

"They mean well, Shang Bo." She pointed out patiently, truthful yet misleading, pointing him at the idea that she really did care for their wellbeing.

Of course what she actually meant was, they meant well but they were stuffy so she didn't want to stay here any further, but please don't kill them.

Shang Bo sulked. "I really did come here to rescue you, you know. I really thought you were in danger." He muttered, poking his fingers.

"And you will forever be my hero, little rooster," she teased. "And I really will go home with you. But we have to be fair to everyone." Implying she liked them or owed them a debt when she actually meant be fair in terms of negotiations.

Ah, but at least the Shifu seemed to understand why she was doing it, as his lips quirked up in a smile. "And how many children did you say are in this family?"

"Two sons, three daughters. And more to come." She answered promptly.

"Ah. Do the wife and concubines have siblings?" He continued, raising both brows.

"The honored mistress of the household has two siblings, my sister-concubines have around six to eight." She said meaningfully.

He picked it up quickly. "So we must, needs negotiate well." He smiled thinly. "You sell your freedom highly."

"We all must do what we must to ensure a peaceful and happy future." She said beatifically. "I am certain the honorable wife will know more about the household needs. I am but a lowly concubine, after all and I know nothing of official dowries nor inheritances."

He nodded. Good. That man had a plan. Possibly it would match her own.

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