# CHAPTER 99: DIE IN DREAMS, YET KILL A SOUL WHEN WAKING

The food was, simply put, divine.

Whatever cooks the bathing complex had on staff were professionals - perhaps even fellow immortal chefs. Qian Shanyi and Linghui Mei ordered a hot pot, and some spirit wine to go with it - with extra raw meat, of course. A perfect meal to finish off the day.

True to her words, Linghui Mei seemed to forget all about that troublesome name on the list. She laughed, and she joked, and even sang a little - though without the dancing. She had a strong, beautiful voice - if not for the noise muffling talismans, someone would have surely heard them.

Qian Shanyi was not so fortunate. Even as the worry receded deeper into her mind, it was still there. Like a splinter stuck under her fingernail.

She very much doubted the Crimson Cliff Catacombs would act against them right this night. Some of the organisations on their list were imperial in nature - and if the catacombs really did belong to the kitsune lords, then plenty of other scholars would have already stumbled on a trail that led them to this city. Simply showing interest was not deserving of retaliation.

But the Crimson Cliff Catacombs were really the least of it.

Once they were done with the food and songs, they called a pair of maids for a massage. Back in Qian Shanyi's old sect, some cultivators swore by it, though she always felt it was a waste of money. Whatever minor improvement to muscle fatigue it offered, for a cultivator, was simply not worth it compared to additional spirit stones spent on purifying their meridians.

She still thought she was right, of course, but the feeling was simply incredible. She could understand how someone might confuse it for actual effectiveness.

Massaged by the strong hands of the maids, Qian Shanyi drifted off to sleep.

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"You are just a fly dancing in the palm of my hand!"

Qian Shanyi looked around her. A great beast - all scales and spikes and tooth and claw, taller than any house she had ever seen - was holding her in the palm of its hand, its acrid breath ruffling her hair as obscenities tore themselves out of its throat. Around them, the city was burning. Screams suffused the air. Even the sky had turned to blood.

*I am dreaming.*

“An anxiety dream. *Great,*” Qian Shanyi groaned. “Now that the Heavens have failed in everything else, I see that they are seeking to kill me through sheer annoyance.” She turned her gaze to the beast, meeting its glowing eyes without any hesitation. “Well, what fear of mine are you then? And will I have to beat you with a stick until you let me sleep in peace? Or could we, perhaps, *for once*, resolve this with a simple conversation?”

This wasn’t her first time. Not even the tenth, though this dream felt a bit more vivid than the ones that came before. Learning to lucid dream had its disadvantages.

“I am your *death*, little ensnared rabbit -”

“*You* are infuriating. Begone from my mind,” Qian Shanyi said, and snapped her fingers. A blade of metal twice the height of the beast fell from the sky, bisecting it in half. Qian Shanyi was thrown off by the impact, yet wings of light unfurled from her back, and she landed softly down on the ground.

Not that it mattered. If she could kill her anxieties with imagined force, they would have been infinitely more tolerable.

She focused on her surroundings. City on fire - this was frankly far too on the nose for her subconsciousness. Even if it was forcing her into this, she wasn’t going to spend the rest of her dream here. She needed a change.

*Blood and fire, fire and blood. Fire as in… fireplace? Blood of meat in the kitchen. Food being cooked. A pleasant restaurant.*

She let her strong imagination drift on the currents of free associations. The landscape shifted, transformed - rubble of the city replaced by walls of knives dripping with blood, boiling pots the size of riverships and burners that filled the sky with pillars of smoke as dark as the void itself.

“This seems somewhat less obnoxious,” Qian Shanyi muttered to herself grimly. The anxiety and fears have gone nowhere, but at least the screams have stopped. “Well, come on out. I know you are still there.”

Prompted by her own thoughts, the beast stepped out from behind one of the pots. It was, after all, a creation of her own mind.

It looked about the same as before, if shrunk down to her own size. Purple and white, two horns on its bony head - though as she watched, they split into three, and then four. Five long limbs, clawed and thick. It all shifted slightly, pulled by this or that thread of her own thinking. And a golden, shining wheel on its back.

It was joined by others. A bulbous creature, almost spherical, screaming faces appearing on its surface. A feral one, something between a worm, a raven and a hound, sniffing the ground. A

ridiculously tall rabbit - easily twice her height - yet unnaturally thin, as if its bones were made from strands of glass. All snarling and whaling, muttering about this or that.

And even a little puppy, one that quickly jogged over to Qian Shanyi's side, hugging her leg - looking almost pathetically cute. It whined, hiding itself behind her, almost making her stumble.

Qian Shanyi ignored the puppy. She had bigger problems to deal with. "Alright," she said grimly, looking over her collected fears. "Which one of you wants to be dismantled first?"

She snapped her fingers, wishing for a weapon. Instead, her own imagination supplied a simple hammer, and a sack of thick nails. "Good enough."

The beast sprung at her first. It bit her arm off, and Qian Shanyi smashed her hammer straight through its skull, refusing to even notice her self-imagined injury. She brought her hammer down again and again, until all that was left was bloody mulch.

Violence would do precisely nothing here, but it was certainly cathartic.

"You will fall, and you will die," the beast snarled with the mouth that snapped back together. "We will tear you limb from limb, grind you down in our mills of fate!"

"You are my fear of the Heavens," Qian Shanyi said, naming the beast. "Of the webs they spin. Of what is coming."

She pulled a nail out of her bag, her other hand already back at her side. In a dream, the forms were fluid. A lost arm would not stay lost.

"You are my fear of why *that name* found its way onto a list it had no reason to be on," she said, tossing the nail at the beast, and slamming it into place with her hammer.

The beast cried out, stumbling back. Its form shifted again, and yet, the nail had stuck in place, blood seeping from all around it.

A lost arm would not stay lost. But a *realisation* would. She simply had to nail these fears into place until they would *stay put*.

The rabbit slammed into her side before she could follow after the beast. "He fled, he fled, he FLED!" it screamed, buffeting her face with its limbs. They cracked and shattered from the impact, exploding into a shrapnel of glass that cut her across the face. "Won't come back, won't return, you FAILED, your ONLY CHANCE -"

Qian Shanyi laughed, seizing the rabbit by the neck. "What are you, a fear that Yonghao won't return?" she said, slamming a nail into its head. It stuck. "Pathetic. He has no reason not to."

“He fears he FEARS YOU KNOW -”

“Silence,” Qian Shanyi cut the rabbit off. To her amazement, it listened. “Yes, he fears. Yes, he fled me once. But we’ve resolved that contradiction. He will come back, because I’ve asked him to - and for all his faults, I cannot accuse him of dishonesty. The opposite, if anything.”

She hammered a second nail into the rabbit. It was awkward to hold it with one arm and work with the other, so she simply imagined herself as having two more, and it was so.

“He will get lost,” the rabbit whined. It felt so weak in her hands now, barely even holding itself together. “won’t find the way -”

“We have three separate backup plans in place,” Qian Shanyi said, snorting. “Unless either of us pierces straight through the edge of the world, we’ll find each other. Now *begone*.”

The last nail slammed into place, and the rabbit exploded, dissolving into nothingness.

She turned her attention back to the others. Only three left now, but that rabbit was clearly the weakest of the four. And the puppy, but the puppy could be safely ignored.

The beast came for her again, the first nail still stuck in its face. It circled her, looking for an opening - in her mindset, if not her footing.

“You think you know what I am?” the beast spoke, the words resonating all around the dream. “Perhaps you do. But so what? You are still, even now, *trapped in the palm of my hand.*”

The ground around Qian Shanyi rose, becoming fleshier, fingers forming around her like a cage. She slammed her hammer into the ground, and it all collapsed into whisps of the dream, the beast stumbling slightly.

“Why should I be afraid of being trapped in the palm of your hand? It merely brings me closer to your body. Close enough to kill you,” she taunted, twirling her weapon. “It’s true, I didn’t expect this connection. But so what?”

“Your plan, your schemes, your cunning,” the beast snarled. “We saw through them all. The only thing awaiting you in Solar Whirligig is your own demise!”

The beast sprung at her. Its long tail lashed out, seeking to spear her. She caught it with one hand, and swung the beast around, tossing it aside - and into a wall of knives.

“This pathetic excuse for logic doesn’t follow,” Qian Shanyi said calmly as she watched the beast rebound, not harmed in the slightest. “Wang Yonghao had decided to head to the Solar Whirligig after I made my vow. The Heavens would have been working on my side, back then. They would have had no reason to make a trap.”

She took a careful step back, but her foot caught on something. Something soft and squealing.

*Stupid puppy!*

The beast pounced at her just as she fell. It ripped off her leg and rammed its horns into her chest, reared back, and rammed them in again, and again, and again. “You came to this city in search of *answers*,” it laughed, “yet all you’ve gotten is a revelation, that all your plans are built on sand! How can you trust any of them? How can you even trust your own *thoughts?*”

Qian Shanyi hissed it in the face. Even if she knew it was a dream, it still hurt like a *motherfucker*. “The connection would have been there *regardless*,” she spoke, getting her hammer out again. “It was our cunning - *my* thoroughness - that let us find it in advance. Now we just need to figure out what it all *means*.”

She grabbed the beast by the head and pulled it *deeper* into her chest with one hand to hold it steady, then rammed a second nail into the back of its head. The beast wailed, the nail burning with black light as it burrowed deeper into its dreamed up flesh - until it all melted away into the shadows. Not banished yet - but retreating. For now.

Qian Shanyi turned over, stumbling onto her feet. Blood poured out of her body, black like ink, turning to smoke and rain once it left her body. She even *felt* weaker now - fighting her inner demons like this was truly exhausting.

What would happen if she passed out in a dream like this? Would it merely become a nightmare?

The other fears didn’t give her a chance to recover. The screaming sphere and the wormhound came after her, one from the front, one from the back. She had to dance between them, and even with her four arms, she was being pressured.

“You did this…” the sphere screamed, different faces pushing through its surface, as if they were spirits looking for a way out. Her father. Her mother. Even her grandmother, for all that she remembered her poorly. It screamed in their tortured voices.

The wormhound was not far behind. Its long body twisted like a ribbon, a hundred wings flapping on its back. “Stop moving, *prey!*”

“This pain… It is too much…”

“Fall down. *Stumble.*”

“How could you do this…”

“Little rabbit. Be caught in my jaws!”

Qian Shanyi snarled when her back slammed against one of the enormous pots. Overheated metal burned just as much as the real thing. Things needed to change - but this was, after all, *her* dream.

She focused on the pot behind her back. It cracked, a stream of boiling water blowing the sphere away - and leaving her alone with the wormhound. Two hands seized it by the tail and head, and the other two hammered a nail directly through its midsection. “Fang Jiugui,” she said, “Fear of the chase. Of being *caught*.”

*I wish I had four arms when I was awake. This would make things so much easier.*

She tossed the wormhound away and dived directly into the stream of boiling water, her skin already turning into scales of stone. It didn’t hurt her any - but the sphere was not so fortunate. “My family,” she said, aiming a nail directly into the forehead of a face that looked exactly like her father. “Fear for their lives.”

The nail slipped across the surface. Didn’t stick.

It *felt* false.

“Not quite their lives,” Qian Shanyi said, picking up another nail. “Their disappointment?”

This nail slipped too. The sphere’s scream blasted her away. “YOU did this!”

“Their *blame?”* she said, the sphere’s words finally clicking in her mind. *“*You think I fear being *blamed* for their deaths, if they have even died at all?”

“It’s all your fault… Your decision…”

“I was in their house!” The wolfhound joined in now, coming in behind her. “Their throats, so fresh and meaty!”

Qian Shanyi breathed out, scratching her head with one hand, her chin with another. Her other two tossed a nail into the air, and hit it on the back, sending it sailing through the air - and directly into the screaming sphere. “Perhaps I do fear it,” she said, seeing the nail finally sink in. “But why should I?”

“You evil daughter…”

“I know my filial piety is lacking compared to theirs,” Qian Shanyi continued, stalking over to the sphere. It began to retreat, perhaps feeling it’s quickly approaching demise - but on short and stubby legs, it was far too slow. “I’ve always known this. My father told me he would give his life

for me, and he never expected me to do the same. This had always been the case. It isn't a surprise. And that means I have *nothing* to fear from them."

"It was YOUR fault… Your letter… Your hubris…"

Qian Shanyi breathed in, and nodded. It hurt to admit it, but this was necessary. There was no other way to overcome this fear. "Yeah. In a way, it was," she said, "however…"

She stopped, breathing out again. "It's not my fault," she said quietly. Saying this hurt the most of all, frankly. "If Fang Jiugui *dared* hurt my parents over a little old me - if my old sect dared violate imperial law because I didn't give them face… That is not my fault. There is a limit, and this is far, far beyond it."

The sphere tried to scream again - but another nail pierced straight through it, sailing through the air like an arrow. It sank deep, nailing it to the ground - and yet the sphere still remained whole.

"But there is something else, you know?" Qian Shanyi said, strolling closer. The boiling water had spun into a whirlwind around her, keeping the wormhound at bay. "Fang Jiugui wrote me a letter, saying that my father was willing to sacrifice himself for me. That means he at least talked to the man. He also said they faced no further harassment. Now why would he do that?"

"The talisman. The trap!"

Qian Shanyi shook her head. "Sure, there was that trap in the letter, but I doubt he was counting on it working," she said, "It's too obvious, too *direct*. Why would he even expect me to bring the message with me, instead of tossing it into the trash? If he thought I cared *so deeply* about my family that I would keep his letter - well, then the logical thing to do would have been to claim they were in danger, wouldn't it? Bait me into rushing back to Golden Rabbit Bay to help them. And if he didn't think I would care - why bring the topic up at all?"

Qian Shanyi pulled out three nails at once, tossing them above her head. She already knew how they would fall. "I think he really *was* honest, when he wrote that he doesn't like to involve families," she mused. "I doubted it before, but I no longer do. *Thank you* for putting things into perspective for me. Now die."

She swung her hammer three times, and all three nails met their mark. The sphere exploded, vanishing into dust - and Qian Shanyi turned around just in time to seize the wormhound by the neck.

"Which brings me to *you,*" she said to the struggling monster, her hand squeezing tighter and tighter with every second. "Why should I fear being caught? I am a cultivator in the high refinement stage! I have an *excellent* spiritual energy recirculation law, one my sect entirely lacks! I am not defenceless. I have *leverage*. Far more importantly - I have *allies*. Even the

Heavens should tremble before me, and yet I fear one measly spirit hunter?! Pathetic. He is *nothing* but a frog in a well!"

The nail sank into the wormhound's skull, and it dropped dead, shriveling like an insect in the heat.

"But speaking of the Heavens," Qian Shanyi said, turning around. The final beast watched her emotionlessly, sitting on top of an enormous brazier, a pillar of flames surrounding its body. The glowing wheel on its back glinted through the smoke like the rays of the sun. "Now that I've dealt with the trash, you are all that is left."

"A trash is all you could have dealt with. I will be your undoing, *fool*," the beast echoed across the dream.

"Are words all that you have?"

The beast lept from its brazier, scattering coals all across the stone floor as it landed. "Once is happenstance," it said, "Twice is a coincidence. *Three times* is Heavenly action. You know this to be true!"

"It is."

Its form shifted, blades and spikes appearing all across its body. One tail changed into two, then three, all striking towards Qian Shanyi - probing, not yet striking.

"Wang Yonghao decided to head to Solar Whirligig - and then you found a jiuweihu," the beast continued. "You found Linghui Mei. You thought it was a coincidence. Merely one weapon out of many in their arsenal sent to kill you."

"That I did."

"Then Wang Yonghao said that he had seen a jiuweihu dance before, and that too, you thought, was merely coincidence," the beast said. It sprinted off in circles, seeking to throw Qian Shanyi off - yet she simply grew more eyes on the back of her head to keep it in her sight. "And now you learn it's *all connected*. Still you persist? You are walking into a trap, even knowing it is already set!"

"I am walking into nothing," Qian Shanyi cut back. She pulled out five nails, and sent them at the beast, probing strikes of her own. "We'll make a decision once Wang Yonghao comes back. I sent him a letter with our location - and it will be another week before he'd be in a position to read it. Until then, this is all just dust in the wind."

As the beast ran, it came back to the brazier. A swing of its tail toppled it, sending smoke and coals in Qian Shanyi's face - and letting it approach her directly. "Can you even trust your own

disciple?" it said, claws sinking into Qian Shanyi's shoulder. She barely raised her hammer in time to keep it from biting her head off. "Her people are right in the middle of this. Perhaps she is simply an agent of the Heavens!"

"Of course I can trust Mei," Qian Shanyi sneered. "This is ridiculous even by your pathetic standards. And more to the point, what is there to fear?"

She grabbed the claws that stabbed her through the shoulder, and *pulled*, throwing the beast overhead. She landed on top of it, a knee breaking the beast's own ribs. "Yeah, I didn't expect this," she said, punching it in the snarling jaws. Her own teeth split in a mad grin. "Yeah, it is troubling. But you know what? This is the first ever glance into how Wang Yonghao's luck *truly* works. This isn't something to fear. This is an *opportunity*."

"This will be *your undoing!*" the beast screamed with a hundred disjointed voices.

Qian Shanyi laughed in its face. "Who do you think I am?" she said, raising her hammer again, nails at the ready. It fell, and the beast screamed. "A scared little maiden confessing her first love? I already knew the risk of my so-called 'undoing' was on the table. This is not *new*. A gambler who folds as soon as a bit of danger rears its ugly head simply cannot gamble! A *cultivator* who bows before the Heavens is worth less than the dirt below their boots! So what is there to truly fear?"

The beast's struggles grew weaker and weaker. It tried to stab her with its tail, and yet, the bone spikes simply slid across her skin. It had already lost.

"You say it's a *trap?"* Qian Shanyi sneered, raising her hammer up one final time. "I say that if you want to catch the *hunter*, then there is no finer bait than springing one of their own snares."

The hammer fell, and so did the beast. Qian Shanyi rose onto her feet, triumphant, glancing all around her - and yet, the dream still held firm. Did not dissolve.

She frowned. The fears were done, she was certain of that much. "Anything else?" she called out to no one in particular. "Or are we finally done?"

The little squeak brought her attention to her feet, where wide, scared eyes met her own. "*You?*" the baffled Qian Shanyi asked the puppy. "What even are you?"

The puppy didn't answer, but then again, it was merely a puppy. Qian Shanyi reached down and picked it up, holding it by the collar.

"If you are a fear, you are a strange one," she said, turning it over. "Far too cute."

The puppy tried to lick her face, and Qian Shanyi tried to pull it away - but its tongue simply lengthened to match, slobbering all over her face. Qian Shanyi glared at it some, but it was unrepentant.

“Fine, let’s workshop this,” she said, hefting her hammer. She felt apprehensive about hurting this puppy, but then again, it wasn’t real. Was it’s appearance a hint as well? “You look cute and harmless, but get in the way. You are clearly attached to me. You *like* me, even. Yet you refuse to speak. What in the netherworld’s name are you?”

The puppy merely stared at her with wide, tearful eyes, whining slightly. It looked very ordinary. Orange-black fur, floppy ears, fluffy tail. Big eyes.

“Oh,” Qian Shanyi said, realisation finally coming across her mind. “Oh sweet mercy, I hope I am wrong about this.”

Her hammer vanished, replaced by a leash. She clipped it onto the puppy’s collar, and it hopped out of her arms, wagging its tail happily.

“Seventy tribulations upon my blind eyes,” Qian Shanyi said grimly, staring at the dreamed up puppy. “And another hundred upon this idiot’s head.”

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Qian Shanyi yawned, stretching her arms as she came back to reality. She was still laying down on the massage table, though someone had covered her up with a thin blanket. The maids were already gone - together with the second massage table. They must have left her to sleep where she was.

Linghui Mei was sitting on the edge of the pool, happily dangling her feet in the water. She was wearing a long bathrobe now, with a thick book open on her knees. Hearing Qian Shanyi stir, she looked up from it - and smiled joyfully.

“How long was I asleep?” Qian Shanyi asked, turning over to her side and supporting her head with one hand.

“Just a couple hours,” Linghui Mei said, with more than a little mirth.

Qian Shanyi hummed, closing her eyes. The memory of smashing her inner demons with a hammer came back to her, still very vivid. Despite the stress of it, she felt surprisingly relaxed. “Hmm. This was a good nap, I think. Very… meditative. Introspective, even.”

Even her soul felt a bit more solid now, though that was almost surely just her own imagination.

She stayed like that for a while, keeping her eyes closed. The realisations were useful, but that last one… She wasn’t looking forward to dealing with it.

Perhaps she should put it off for another day? This was such a beautiful day so far. She didn't want to ruin it, let alone for Linghui Mei.

*No, no… Putting it off is how I got here in the first place. If I wasn't trying to ignore the problem subconsciously, I would have already realised what was happening weeks ago.*

Qian Shanyi opened her eyes and rose up with a sigh, letting the thin blanket slide off her naked body. "Would you mind bringing my writing set?" she said, stretching. "I have some notes to make."

This time, she caught Linghui Mei staring. Noticed a little movement of her throat as the jiuweihu swallowed. It was all very discreet, and yet, she really should have noticed it a long time ago, but… ah, no matter.

Linghui Mei set her book aside, and rose with a slight bow. "Of course, master."

"How is the book?"

"It's complex, but… enlightening," Linghui Mei called back from the other room, rummaging around in their bags as she looked for the writing set. "At least, I think so. I have tried to follow the advice, and it seemed helpful so far."

*Serenades of the Soul*, it was called - a guide on spiritual energy sensing for those cultivators who happened to manifest theirs as a form of hearing. Much of it was dedicated to ways in which one could translate more traditional notes into a different form. No wonder, really - the vast majority of manuals would have been written that way, after all. Qian Shanyi borrowed it from a local library just before they headed to the sect.

"We'll have to rely on your notes in the future," Qian Shanyi said. "Make sure you write down as much as you need."

"I am, master."

"Excellent. Did you enjoy our little outing?"

Linghui Mei finally came back into the bathing room, carrying the writing set. Her smile had only grown wider, as brilliant as the sun. "I did. It was very fun."

"I am glad."

Qian Shanyi gestured towards a small table, and Linghui Mei set the writing set down on it, before going back to her book. She seemed… content. At peace, even.

Qian Shanyi sighed. Was she really going to ruin this?... The desire to simply ignore the problem further was *incredibly* strong.

But no, that would not be proper. She didn't get to where she was by avoiding her problems. Perhaps it wouldn't even be as bad as she imagined it.

The first step was to make her notes, in either case. She spent half an hour writing down all her revelations, all her theories and suppositions - with one notable exception, of course. "This should do," she finally said, once she realised any further additions had more to do with her stalling than actual insights. "Now it is time for me to finally take that bath."

She packed up her notes, poured herself a glass of wine, and stepped into the pool, sinking into the hot waters. They felt like the hands of a long-forgotten lover on her skin. She settled down in a corner, with her back to the wall, placing the glass on the edge - right across from Linghui Mei.

She caught another discreet glance in her direction. She could have covered herself up, of course. She chose not to.

How could she have missed this for so long?

*Enough stalling.*

"Oh, I seem to have forgotten my soap," Qian Shanyi lied, "Would you mind tossing me some?"

"Right away."

"And there is one more thing I wanted to ask you," Qian Shanyi said, once Linghui Mei safely put the incredibly delicate and *expensive* book down on a shelf far away from the pool, and headed over to the other side, to get the soap.

"What was it?"

"You are attracted to me."

She stated it plainly like a fact of the world, expecting a reaction - surprise, denial, embarrassment. Instead, Linghui Mei stumbled, slipped on the pool's edge, and fell in with a scream that was cut short by the water.

Qian Shanyi bemusedly watched her surface. She could have caught her, but she saw where her disciple was falling as soon as she tipped over, and there was no danger of her hitting her head. A bit of water might do her some good.

Besides, trying to touch her right now might be taken the wrong way entirely.

“I - me - *why would I* -” Linghui Mei stuttered, spitting out some water, deep blush already spreading across her cheeks. She tried to back away from Qian Shanyi, but the pool was only so large, and Linghui Mei seemed to be too terrified to turn her back on Qian Shanyi and climb out. Her bathrobe, completely soaked through, stuck to her lithe body like a second skin. “M-master, what are you talking about?”

“You aren’t a child, you know exactly what I am talking about,” Qian Shanyi said, taking a sip of her wine.

“I am afraid I -” Linghui Mei swallowed, shaking her head in a panic. Her blush only deepened. “I can’t, what -”

“I said that you are attracted to me. Sexually. Unless I am wrong?”

“This here Mei is a woman!” Linghui Mei burst out. She squeezed her eyes shut. “How could I -”

Qian Shanyi blinked twice. “So? What does that matter?” she said, gesturing towards her disciple with her glass. “I really wasn’t sure before, but this reaction of yours all but confirms it.”

A quiet whine had escaped Linghui Mei’s throat as she sank deeper into the pool, as if trying to hide among the transparent waters. Qian Shanyi sighed, and looked away from her. It’s not like she wanted to ambush her, but if there was a subtler way of dealing with this sort of problem, she had never learned of it.

Mostly because she never cared to, admittedly.

“Troublesome,” she muttered to herself. “This is very troublesome.”

“W-why is it troublesome?”

“I am your master, for one. It’s hardly all that appropriate.”

Qian Shanyi thought Linghui Mei was already as red as she could get, and yet somehow, her blush had deepened further. “I w-wouldn’t mind it.”

Qian Shanyi snorted. “Hm. How unusually open of you,” she said, before finally once again looking directly at her disciple. “In any case, if it was just that, I wouldn’t have cared. By far the bigger problem is that I am entirely unsuited for a relationship with you.”

Lingui Mei rose up from the water, leaning forward slightly. She bit her lips, and her features started to shift slightly, fox ears appearing on top of her head right away. “M-master, if you do not like how this body looks, I could -”

“Oh, shush, enough with that nonsense,” Qian Shanyi cut her off. “I said that *I* am unsuited for a relationship, not that you are. Never had been.” She made a vague gesture in the air, grimacing slightly. “All of that… candles, flowers, kissing in the dark *crap*. It’s simply not for me. Never had been.”

Linghui Mei hiccuped. “We c-could…” she whispered, “kiss in the light…”

“You do not seem like the type to stop at kissing. You would want children, and how do you imagine that working out?”

“Well… I could - that is to say, it’s possible - ”

“Could what? Use your words.”

Linghui Mei’s form blurred abruptly, dissolving into a cloud of ink in the air - until it pulled back together, in the shape of an attractive, muscular man, though her blush has not faded any. With hope in her eyes, she looked up at Qian Shanyi - and recoiled at seeing her disgusted grimace. Her eyes filled with tears, and she started to sob.

“Am I -” Linghui Mei cried. “I - I really so - such a - such a bad person that you - that you *won’t* -”

“This isn’t about *you*,” Qian Shanyi cut her off. She sighed in frustration, rubbing her eyes. This is *exactly* why she hated the whole enterprise. People got so emotional over absolutely *nothing*. “The idea of carrying children - *any* children - simply disgusts me. I would rather blow up my own heart dantian than go through that.”

She shuddered slightly. Thankfully at least her nightmares spared her that image. Small mercies.

Linghui Mei kept crying, though at least she stopped trying to speak. Tears rolled down her cheeks, hollow sobs tearing their way out of her throat. Seemingly without her noticing it, her feet changed into those of a fox, her twin tails curling themselves around her body - until she bit one of them on the end, like a baby might their comfort toy.

“Well, now you at least know what I meant,” Qian Shanyi said, feeling supremely uncomfortable. “I am sure you can see how that presents something of a problem.” She looked away, sighing wistfully. “See, if all you wanted was for me to just fuck your brains out, that would have been *so* much simpler.”

Somehow, that did not seem to help.

Qian Shanyi let Linghui Mei cry in peace, until her sobs have mostly quieted down. Now she simply looked defeated, still curling up in the pool, trying - and failing - to wipe tears from her eyes with her already wet tail.

“You really should have told me,” Qian Shanyi muttered under her breath.

“Told you?!” Linghui Mei burst out. “I thought you already knew!”

“If you thought I already knew, why did you react so strongly?”

“Because saying it out loud is - it’s *completely different!*” Linghui Mei shouted. “Except - except for you, apparently, because you - *you* - you aren’t normal!”

Qian Shanyi raised an eyebrow at that, but Linghui Mei simply scowled deeply and didn’t elaborate any further. “Well, fortunately for you, this here cultivator had foreseen some of your reaction,” Qian Shanyi said, “If you’d like to save some face, you can simply eat my memories of this conversation, and it would be as if it never happened.”

“What?”

“Feast on my soul?” Qian Shanyi said, “We are in a bathhouse, it’s only appropriate. You haven’t done so in five days. You must be getting hungry. You see, your master is a blind woman - she had only realised what was going on just now, while I was asleep. If you eat my last day, I’d be none the wiser - and then you could tell me about your feelings, or not, whenever you feel comfortable, already knowing my position.”

Linghui Mei gaped at her, blinking furiously, before her scowl returned - only a dozen times more furious now. “This isn’t about *me,”* she said, springing up on her feet. “Not even slightly! You just want to escape any responsibility!”

Qian Shanyi raised her hands defensively. “Alright, very well, you caught me,” she said with a smile she thought was roguish, but one that seemed to only infuriate Linghui Mei further. “I do not particularly want to remember making my disciple cry. However, that doesn’t change the facts.”

“*You!* You are so - so *heartless!!*”

“Heart meridian is of the fire type, and my constitution is metal. If I had any heart, would my cultivation not deviate?”

Linghui Mei snarled, positively vibrating with tension. The pool was only so wide, and standing tall, she could have bent down and tickled Qian Shanyi by her feet, if she wished to. Or sprung and strangled her by the neck.

Qian Shanyi rolled her eyes at her. “So are you going to do this or -”

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Their path back to the village was a little subdued. Something must have happened between the two of them in that bathhouse - something that Qian Shanyi could no longer remember - but whatever it was, Linghui Mei refused to speak of it. In fact, she seemed so incensed at the mere idea that Qian Shanyi decided to never bring it up again. If her past self decided to avoid writing it down, then perhaps there was a reason for it - though Qian Shanyi didn't trust that devious scoundrel. Mostly it made Qian Shanyi *infinitely* more curious.

They made a shop in Sickle Springs, a town just an hour away from their temporary home. It was a quiet town of only several thousand, nestled into the crook of its namesake river - but every week on the Rootday it came alive, as farmers from all the local villagers brought their produce to sell, and suppliers from the larger cities came to make their purchases. They sold their herbs here many times over the past weeks, and though they never stayed, they knew the layout of the market quite well.

The market was set out right alongside the river, where the boats could simply be dragged ashore. A hundred different stalls were spread all around the area, poultry traded alongside rice, spices and vegetables, and of course, tea and hot food. This was where Qian Shanyi and Linghui Mei stopped to have lunch and a delicious cup of tea.

They talked for a bit while the cook poured their drinks, of what to do next, now that they've returned from their trip, though Linghui Mei seemed too depressed to really share in conversation. In Qian Shanyi's eyes, their little excursion would only officially end once they returned to the Green Leaf village - and that meant they could still have a bit of guiltless fun. Somewhere out there, hidden among the stalls, was supposed to be a small theater troupe, and she was hoping they could catch a performance, once they were done eating.

Then screams shattered these idyllic plans like a hammer tossed through glass, right in the middle of their first cup of tea.

A ghost had attacked the market.