

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU



REMNANTS
of FILTH 6

YUWU

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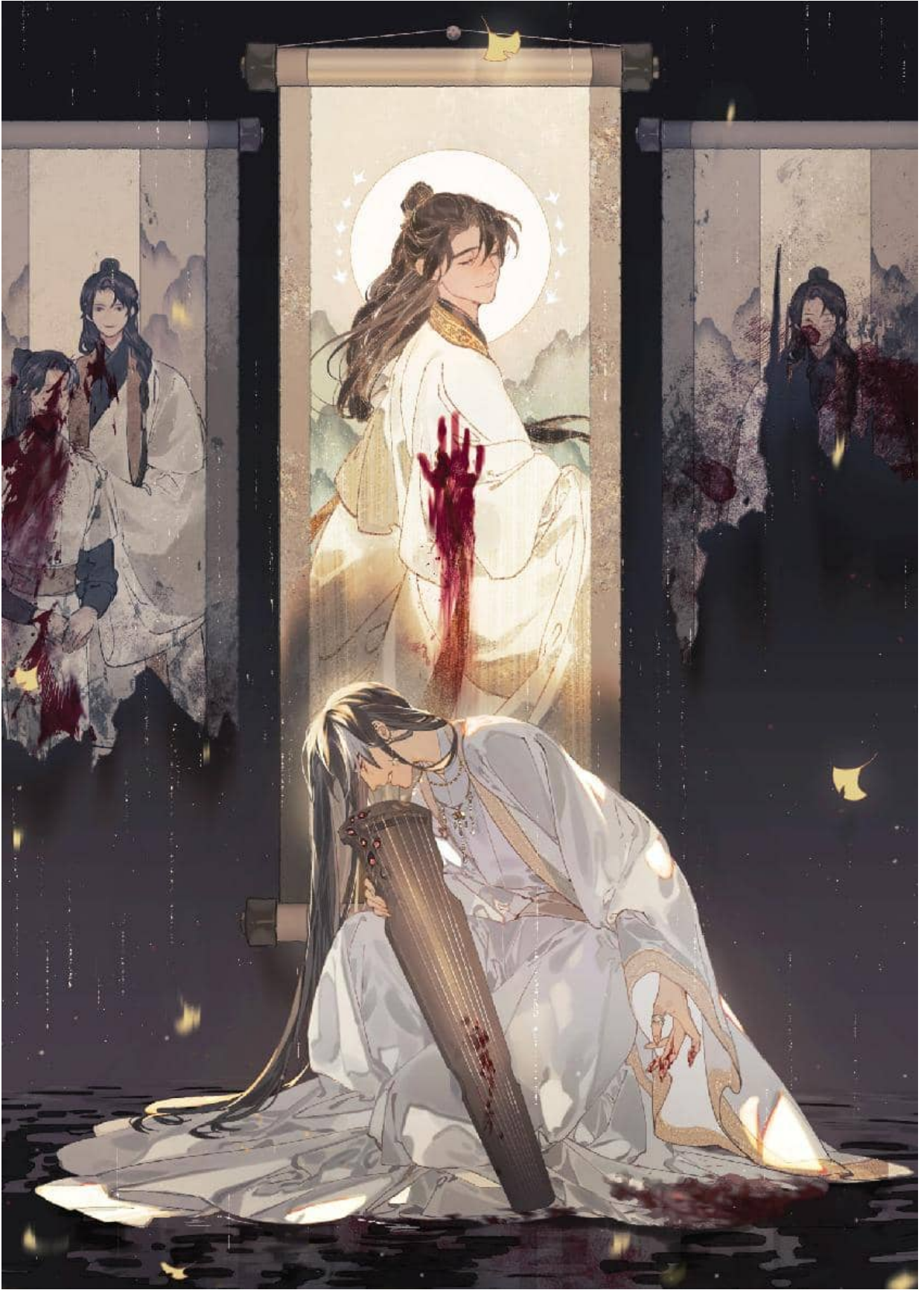


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Chapter 160: The Legend of the Soul-Summoner

MO XI BROUGHT Gu Mang out of the treatment room.

A secret kept by one person would always be a secret. Between two, it would be an agreement. By the time a third became involved, it was a liability.

More than ten people had seen Mo Xi rescue Gu Mang. These were shadow guards who had undergone strict training within the palace, but they were just human in the end. No secret could be successfully kept by more than ten people. The matter of Xihe-jun risking his life to rescue a traitor rapidly spread throughout the entirety of Chonghua.

After the incident at Da'ze City, the streets were already rife with salacious rumors about Mo Xi and Gu Mang; when this news broke, many of those who had remained cautious or skeptical sank into suspicion, one after another.

“Has Xihe-jun gone insane? Why would he go so far for a traitor?”

“Ah, didn't you know? Their relationship's never been so simple.”

“I know they used to be the very best of friends, but—”

“Brothers who'd follow each other into death? You should hear what Murong Lie is saying. He's a relative of the imperial family, he probably got

the inside story. Your jaw's going to drop when you hear the truth!"

The entire city was abuzz, but Mo Xi had neither energy nor attention to spare for such trivialities. Although he'd reached Gu Mang in time to drag him back from the brink of becoming a demon, that mysterious assassin had managed to tell Gu Mang about the Vow of Calamity. Gu Mang, already hovering on the knife edge of insanity, had been dealt another great psychological blow—his mind was destroyed at last.

Just as Jiang Fuli had warned, Gu Mang's mind now was in worse condition than when the Liao Kingdom had returned him. Back then, Gu Mang had believed he was a wild wolf, but his thoughts had at least remained human in nature. After these injuries, Gu Mang, upon waking, seemed to have lost all his humanity.

"When the Liao Kingdom tempered him, they wanted to turn him into a flesh-and-blood weapon. He didn't need to think; he just needed to follow orders." Mengze, having finished examining Gu Mang, stood beneath the colonnade that ran along the edge of Xihe Manor's garden, speaking to a visibly exhausted Mo Xi.

"It was most likely the Liao Kingdom's first attempt at such magic. They didn't have a good grasp of it. At first, Gu Mang's spiritual energy fluctuated, and his demonic qi became stronger, but there were no other obvious mutations. Later, he began to show signs of losing control, and became increasingly difficult for the Liao Kingdom to handle. In order to minimize their risk, the Liao Kingdom cut out the two souls containing his memories and sent him back to Chonghua.

"You can see there's very little left of his mind. He hasn't been devoured totally yet, but he's more or less a mindless..."

Mengze paused, the word *monster* held between her scarlet lips. Mo Xi's expression was beyond exhausted and agonized. She had grown up with Mo Xi; in all the years she had known him, she'd rarely seen such an expression on his face.

Beyond the corridor, a light drizzle was falling, and the pool's red lotuses swayed with the wind. A golden carp swam beneath a wide lotus leaf, leaving glimmering ripples in its wake.

"But he remembers me," Mo Xi whispered into the silence. He hesitated. "After I brought him out of the treatment room, he slept for almost two days. When he woke, he didn't react to anyone else's voice, but he remembered me." Mo Xi lowered his gaze, as if, in speaking the words to Mengze, he was also consoling himself. "When I talk to him, he always responds."

"He hasn't yet been fully devoured by black magic. But in his current condition, virtually all of his memories have been destroyed." Mengze sighed. "To be honest, I don't really know how much longer he can hold out. Mo-dage, Medicine Master Jiang's already told you this. After suffering a breakdown like that, the only way to recover would be finding those two lost souls."

Mo Xi closed his eyes. Rain drummed on the tiles of the roof and streamed down the Taihu stones. Mo Xi's pitch-black brows were drawn low, and beneath his straight nose, his thin, pale lips were tightly compressed.

If it was just Mengze who said she couldn't save him, he might still have a wisp of hope. But Chonghua's foremost healer, Jiang Fuli, had long since warned him in the same words: *Unless you find his two souls, even an immortal from the highest of heavens couldn't save him.*

Mo Xi's fingernails sank deep into his palms. "How many healers in all of the Nine Provinces are capable of summoning souls?"

Mengze froze. "Mo-dage, surely you don't mean..."

Mo Xi turned toward her. "I want to summon those souls for him."

An expression of disbelief rippled across Mengze's face. "That's... That would be like fishing for a needle in the ocean," she murmured. "If the souls scattered, they could be anywhere. Even if you knew how to summon souls, the world is vast; it might take ten or twenty years to find them, and then only after untold difficulties. It would be an impossibly arduous undertaking."

"I know." Mo Xi stood with his hands clasped behind his back, gazing into the screen of rain that fell before the eaves like a beaded veil. "Of course it won't be easy to find those two souls." After a pause, he continued, voice steadier. "But it would be much harder to abandon him. In the past, everyone believed my family had fallen from grace, that I was doomed to fail," said Mo Xi. "No one would spare me a second glance. When I first enlisted, I did everything on my own. I stood guard alone, scouted alone, and ate my meals alone. Once, I was trapped by a pack of demon wolves and drenched in venomous blood—I thought no one would risk themselves to save me. I had no one I could rely on in all of Chonghua."

Mengze looked down, a little awkward. Mo Xi had been young back then, and they hadn't interacted much. She didn't know how to console him as he spoke of those past events, and only made a soft noise of agreement.

"He was the one who came to save me," Mo Xi told her. "With no consideration for whether he would be harmed, with no consideration for whether he could dispel the demonic qi afterward, with no consideration for

my identity or my circumstances. Now that it's my turn, Mengze, it's the same. No matter how hard it will be, no matter how it will end, no matter how long it takes," Mo Xi said, "I will not turn back. As long as he's still alive, as long as I'm still alive. Not until one of us departs this world."

Jade-green bamboo swayed against the white walls of the courtyard, rustling wetly in the wind and rain. "Or he returns to health," Mo Xi finished.

Mengze looked at the man before her. She'd heard plenty of the murmurs spreading within the city over the past few days. As one of Mo Xi's closest confidantes, she knew the truth better than most. She knew very well what Gu Mang meant to Mo Xi, and because of this knowledge, she felt Mo Xi was far too strong. Clearly, what he held in his arms was a flame about to gutter out. Clearly, what lay before him was a pitch-black road. Clearly, every fresh piece of news he received was more devastating than the last. Yet Mo Xi endured all of it.

In her capacity as a healer, Mengze had seen all types of people become fearful, despairing, reluctant, or mad when faced with such a plight. She'd seen children turn away from their ailing parents in sorrow, husbands give up on their weakening wives in cowardice... Many of those people, when forced into a corner, could only bow their heads in defeat. She wasn't in their shoes; she hadn't experienced their lives and suffering, and so she hesitated to rashly judge their choices as right or wrong, selfish or merely indifferent. Still, she had seen her share of the fickleness of devotion.

How could she not be moved at the sight of Mo Xi's stubbornness in refusing to bow to fate? Mo Xi didn't complain or blame others for his situation, nor did he lash out or break down. Anyone could see the unbearable weight of the emotions he suppressed in his face. Anyone could see how, even now, his fingertips trembled as he stood beside her. But this man was extraordinarily clear about everything he did, and was terribly

harsh on himself. He never wasted time doing anything he considered unnecessary, even if venting his sorrow would bring him some momentary ease. Throughout all this, he had been calm in a way that was almost masochistic, battling nightmares that were more than enough to destroy his heart countless times over.

In the end, Mengze heaved a sigh. “The Soul-Summoning technique...is a piece of the Rebirth technique, one of the three great forbidden arts. For a healer to practice this school of magic, they would need not only a sufficient level of cultivation but also to have had the opportunity to learn the technique. In the rumors among the medicine sects, such individuals are nearly supernatural in their abilities, and their whereabouts are unknown—they’re practically legendary. But...”

Mengze paused, her slender fingers gripping the hems of her sleeves as if in indecision. Looking up, she continued, “I once came across a legend in a medicine manual I found in a bookshop. North of Lin’an, there’s a cluster of densely wooded mountains. Within them lives a reclusive sage who knows Rebirth.”

She saw Mo Xi’s pitch-black eyes light up.

“The Soul-Summoning technique is the first step of Rebirth. If the legend is true, this sage could certainly summon Gu-shixiong’s two lost souls, but...” She turned away. “This legend is no more than a few sentences,” she explained quietly. “There’s no other evidence of such a sage living near Lin’an. Assuming it’s true, this person has vanished into the mountains and would be nigh impossible to find. In the legend, his temperament is fickle and capricious; he helps people when happy and harms them when displeased. Even if you two manage to find him, you can’t know if it’ll bring fortune or calamity.”

She could see by Mo Xi's expression that he'd already made up his mind. Mengze sighed. "Mo-dage, if you really want to go, I can't stop you. Chonghua is at war with the Liao Kingdom, and Lian-ge is bedridden with his injuries. At this moment, his life hangs by a thread; even I don't know if it's possible to save him. If you really can help Gu-shixiong recover, it would be a great boon to Chonghua. But the situation is delicate... I worry Imperial Brother won't let you travel far from the capital. How about this? Go in and take some rest. After all, you sustained considerable injury suppressing Gu-shixiong's demonic qi. In the meantime, allow me to explain to Imperial Brother and make the request on your behalf."

She gave Mo Xi a gentle smile that couldn't hide the faint sorrow in her eyes. "I'm sorry—I wasn't the first person to recognize your potential. When your family was struggling, I wasn't at your side... Let me help you one more time. If you can save the person that you...that you care for..." She looked down, wisps of dark hair curling at her pale, slender neck. "Then I would be happy too. Rest assured: leave Imperial Brother to me."

The rain had grown heavier. Mengze gave Mo Xi some final instructions on Gu Mang's medicine, then summoned Yue-niang. The two women left under umbrellas.

Mo Xi returned to the room to sit beside Gu Mang.

Only a few servants remained in the courtyard, Housekeeper Li among them.

"Shifu, why are you frowning? What are you thinking?" a new apprentice asked, rousing Li Wei from his thoughts.

Li Wei looked away from the decorative screen he'd been gazing at and cleared his throat. "Nothing."

Of course it wasn't nothing. He'd heard Princess Mengze's entire conversation with his lord. All throughout, he'd felt uneasy.

Li Wei had previously served in the palace. He'd seen enough of concubines, consorts, and female officials. However noble these women's birth, they were still human; they had human emotions, and emotions were rarely easily dispelled. It was feeling that made them sit alone in an empty bed-canopy until daybreak, or laugh unabashedly in their own palace hall upon hearing some other favored concubine had died of disease. Feeling drove their schemes, hatred, and jealousy; it was why there were many things they clung to against all reason.

But to Li Wei, Mengze seemed unlike those other women. While she did experience hardship, sorrow, and dissatisfaction, it all appeared fake to Li Wei, like powder on a beauty's face. Love that could be so easily abandoned was not love at all—and she'd waited for Mo Xi in vain more than ten years. Or was it perhaps that, as one of Chonghua's three gentlemen, her behavior simply wasn't like that of ordinary women?

As Li Wei thought, he couldn't help but furrow his brow.

Chapter 161: Lies

THE STORM WORSENERD in the wake of Mengze leaving. Muffled thunder rumbled overhead, pressing down on the capital of Chonghua.

Gu Mang was asleep, but Mo Xi knew he was afraid of thunder. He didn't move from the room. Evening found him at the west-facing window, trimming the candle wick with a pair of golden shears. The hazy flame flared, setting the whole room flickering with light.

He returned to Gu Mang's side and sat on the edge of the bed. Gu Mang's pillow had shifted sideways as he slept, so Mo Xi helped him straighten it back out.

It was at this point that he discovered the book beneath the pillow.

Mo Xi froze for a moment before pulling out the book. There was no title inscribed on its cover, but upon flipping it open to the first page and seeing that familiar hand, he immediately understood—this was the booklet of notes Gu Mang had written in every day to retain his memories.

He had wanted to read it when he'd first discovered it, but Gu Mang had stopped him. It would be far too embarrassing, he'd said; Mo Xi was only to read it after he lost his memories again. Moments later, realizing he had put a damper on Mo Xi's mood, Gu Mang had cajoled him—*Aiya, who knew how much he might still remember ten or twenty years in the future?*—and told Mo Xi not to worry so much.