

The Hope (in his) Chest

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Song Lan sat in the dewy grass, Shuanghua hugged closely to his chest, and watched the sun rise above the horizon. He had picked up this new habit sometime after the final events in Yi City. Every morning he would sit down, take a break from his travels and enjoy dawn with all those thoughts and feelings that came with it.

He had always found beauty and tranquility, hope even, in the break of a new day. Back then, when he had first learnt the characters to Xiao Xingchen's name, he had experienced a sense of fate. Now, dawn and stars and gentle breezes and the moon above all reminded him of his love, his loss, his own hand in it. Sometimes, when the moon was full, Song Lan would frown at it and think very loudly, "You look nothing like him!"

During one of those nights he found he had trouble recalling Xingchen's features. He bought a notebook and charcoal to add to his writing kit in the qiankun pouch. It turned into another new habit: journaling. Like letters to Xingchen, complete with little sketches of things he had seen and people he had met, of Xingchen, too, of course.

It was after an especially beautiful sunrise that Song Lan looked down, the page of the current journal open to a drawing of Xingchen, and wondered, if Baoshan Sanren even knew what ill fortune had befallen her disciple. He closed the journal and got up, a decision made.

Baoshan Sanren welcomed him into her little abode upon her mountain, offered tea

and a kind smile. They talked for a long time, Baoshan Sanren in a hushed tone, laced with melancholy, Song Lan with thoughtful, slow strokes of chalk on slate. When his fingers stopped working, she held out her hands. He relived - if one could even call it that - the final hour of his life and the subsequent years in a heartbreaking session of Empathy.

Afterwards they sat in silence, hands still lightly touching in comfort.

"Let me show you something, Zichen," she said, pulling him gently to his feet. She led him into another room, clean but gloomy from disuse.

"This used to be Xingchen's room, growing up," she clarified while Song Lan looked around from his position near the threshold. One item stood out from the other few pieces of furniture. A big wooden chest, decorated with simple but elegant floral carvings and metal fittings.

"When Xingchen was about three years old whatever family he had left abandoned him, along with this dowry chest, at the foot of my mountain." She walked over to it and carefully ran her fingertips over the chest lid. "A letter attached to it claimed them both cursed for some reason they didn't bother to explain further." A wry smile crossed her face. "Utter nonsense, of course. He was a loveable child. A pleasure and privilege to raise and teach. And the chest is just a chest." Baoshan Sanren shook her head as if to dislodge some memories that came unbidden to the forefront of her mind.

Song Lan swallowed around the lump in his throat.

The chest's hinges creaked as she opened the lid.

"I have kept the letter and some items of his time with me in here," she said quietly, sinking to her knees in front of the chest. "Come." She beckoned him over.

Song Lan felt a nervous numbness spread from his fingertips and toes into the core of his undead body. Nodding once, he approached slowly, apprehensive of what he might find.

He chanced a glance into the chest. Folded clothes and papers of some sort, rolled up neatly, a well-loved doll of all things.

He knelt and gestured questioningly at the doll.

Baoshan Sanren laughed lightly. "He adored this little thing." She didn't seem to dare touch it. "It used to be Cangse Sanren's, when she was just a little girl herself. They never met. She had already left by the time Xingchen arrived. I like to think they would have been great friends. A doll is a poor substitute for a sibling or friend, but better than none, surely? They must have been lonely at times, with just little old me for company."

Song Lan chewed the inside of his lip in contemplation and didn't know how or what

to answer.

She rummaged around the papers. "Ah!" She unfurled one of them, holding it out for Song Lan to see. A drawing, obviously done by a child's hand, depicting a house, trees, flowers and several persons, all in differently coloured robes, some armed with swords. The proportions were terribly wrong. The faces were all laughing though.

Song Lan couldn't help but smile wistfully.

"He told me about wanting a family," he wrote on his slate. "We had an idea for the future."

He sighed.

"But things," he hesitated, unsure how to put it into words.

"Turned out differently?" Baoshan Sanren filled in.

He nodded, looking away.

She put the picture back into the chest and took Song Lan's hands into hers again.

"Take it from someone who lost dear ones, too." She squeezed gently. "There comes a day when the ache dulls and you start remembering the good days more often than the bad. This kind of pain never truly goes away, but you learn to live with it. But you cannot let it consume your whole life. Or you will end up sad and alone, quite possibly on top of a mountain."

He gave her an incredulous look.

She huffed a laugh. "What I mean is..." She tilted her head to the side, thinking. "Don't be miserable forever. Xingchen wouldn't have stood for it, you know."

He smiled in agreement. It was true.

"Tell you what, Zichen." She smiled at him almost shyly. "Whenever you feel like you cannot go on without choking on that feeling, you come visit and have tea with me? Share the burden and the memories?"

Song Lan's mouth dropped open in surprise at the offer. She looked at him, sincere and kind. A thought crossed his mind that this lady could have been his mother-in-law in another time or world.

"Thank you," he mouthed and bowed to her. So deep, his forehead touched their hands. In their positions it made them almost look like he had curled up in her lap.

"You are a loyal friend to him."

He shook his head, disagreeing.

"No, but you are." One of her hands let go only to come back to pat his head gently.

They stayed like this for a few minutes. Until Song Lan took a deep breath to collect himself and sat back up. If he had tears to shed...

Baoshan Sanren dabbed the corner of his eyes with her sleeve anyway, then her own.

They smiled a sad smile at each other in understanding.

"You love him like a mother," he wrote with shaking hands.

"Mn," she agreed and stroked his wrist. "You love him, too."

Song Lan nodded. At her continued prompting glance, he elaborated.

"Like", he hesitated again, chalk hovering over the slate. He stared at the slate, unseeing.

She waited patiently for him to gather his thoughts.

"Like any way a person can love another. Most of which I only understood too late."

Her hand rubbed his upper arm.

"As is often the case... We all live with regrets and painful thoughts of what-ifs."

"How does one go on?"

"By learning from mistakes, I like to think. By upholding their memory and honouring their wishes. By fulfilling the dreams?" She didn't look so sure herself. She smiled then. "By not hiding yourself away on a mountain, that's for sure." She took him by the shoulders, as if to shake sense into him. "Go out and do the work you both liked to do. He wanted to help make the world a better place, if only for a little while, in a small place. Sounds feasible."

He felt the weight of Fuxue and Shuanghua on his back. He felt the spirit-trapping pouch in the folds of his robe pressing against his chest.

On a sudden impulse he produced the journals he had filled to the last page and handed them to her.

She flicked through them in awe. She looked up from a drawing of Xingchen's softly smiling face with new tears in her eyes that she blinked away with effort.

"May I keep these here?" Song Lan wrote. Added "In the chest?" as an afterthought.

"Of course, Zichen, of course." She pressed the journals to her bosom before tenderly placing them in the chest.

Song Lan proceeded to close the lid as quietly as possible.

"You must promise me to come visit and bring more memories with you."

Song Lan laid a hand on his heart, then moved that same hand to the front of the chest.

Thus Song Lan continued to roam the world, Fuxue, Shuanghua, Xingchen's spirit-trapping pouch and journals always with him. He kept his promise to visit. There was a lot of space in that dowry chest to fill.

Over time the visits became less frequent but never less heartfelt. And time passed and the world changed.

On one visit, Baoshan Sanren told him, she had decided to leave the mountain herself. She couldn't say where to, yet, but somewhere out there... She trailed off.

"The world is different now, Teacher," he cautioned.

"That's the idea. Maybe I can be different, too?"

He mulled that over.

"I would like to ask a favour of you, Zichen," she interrupted his thoughts.

He looked at her, nodding for her to continue.

"The chest. I want you to have it. To take care of it."

Song Lan was speechless. What was he supposed to do with it? Carry it around? Stay here and guard it?

"I want to trust you with the memories of Xingchen."

Song Lan's heart broke all over again. Honestly, he had lost count of how many times it had at this point.

He grabbed her hands and nodded seriously. He would figure it out.

He stayed for a while and helped Baoshan Sanren prepare for her departure. He

accompanied her down the mountain and watched her take careful steps through the grassy plains. She turned around once. They waved at each other, both smiling encouragingly. She left.

He still stood there long after she had vanished from his sight. They would meet again, wouldn't they? It wasn't like he was truly alone now. His hand rested over the pocket that contained Xingchen's pouch.

He went up the mountain, wrote his journal, drew Baoshan Sanren, watched the stars and the sunrise. All of it from Xingchen's old room.

The dowry chest kept him company. When he placed his latest finished journal inside, he hugged the chest. It somehow managed to give him some sort of comfort. Maybe even a little bit of hope? For what he didn't quite know.

When he left the mountain, the chest was safely tucked away in a cave, protected by the mountain and Song Lan's talismans. The old abode was left to be found by any soul who needed a roof, they had agreed.

But he would come back for the chest. Stay for a few days and leave again. The seasons flew by like a stiff breeze and sometimes Song Lan would almost forget how long he had been on the road if it weren't for his journals.

And the world spun around him, seemingly picking up speed. Time gnawed on everything but the chest. Song Lan kept it in perfect condition thanks to charms and care.

Times changed even more. Song Lan took the swords down from his back and placed them into his qiankun pouch. People changed. Their ways changed. But Song Lan did not. Not much at least.

Eventually he left Fuxue and Shuanghua in the chest, not without a heavy heart. But he could not leave Xingchen's pouch which had begun to show signs of age, despite Song Lan's best efforts.

And the world spun out of control. Ablaze with speed, greed and war.

Song Lan's last memory was of thinking, "This is it then? I shall see you again, Xiao Xingchen." A journal, Xingchen's pouch and three frightened children that choked on

smoke he held in his embrace when the roof came down. Buried them while the flames turned them to ashes.

Song Lan was reborn half a century later. And the curious thing was, he remembered. He didn't think that was normal. He kept remembering bits and pieces throughout his childhood and teenage years. It was not fun. It did, however, spark an interest in history at an early age.

Which was how he found himself with degrees in history and archeology and a team of colleagues up on top of a mountain. At the mouth of a cave that felt so familiar he wanted to cry from nostalgia.

They had found the remains of a tiny settlement nearby. Pure coincidence. His professor had been hiking with his family in these woods and mountains and came upon washed out steps in the stone and overgrown weird shapes.

They also found an old wooden chest that stubbornly wouldn't open for anyone until Song Lan tried. He gasped at the first glance of its contents and promptly fainted.

When he came to, the lively intern was fanning him while talking to someone.

"I swear, it wasn't my cooking, Gege," she insisted, pouting.

He turned his head to the side, groaning. That chest full of journals and childhood trinkets and two swords. Hundreds of years old. If he was honest, there were days when he thought all those memories from back then were a fantasy. Something his mind made up for some strange reason. But seeing the physical evidence? He was so overwhelmed, he couldn't catch a proper thought or feeling.

"He's waking up, Gege! Look!" The girl looked suddenly awfully familiar, too. Song Lan had not noticed that before. Modern clothes, hair curled and dyed pink.

"I can see, A-Qing. Please move aside and let me check my patient?"

That... voice! Song Lan felt like his heart was exploding and his stomach imploding. He rolled onto his side, trying to sit up, despite dizziness and nausea. Gentle but firm hands pressed him back down onto whatever cot he was lying on.

A face came into Song Lan's focus. A well-known, beloved face, with sparkling eyes behind a slender glasses frame and an amused smile on pinkish lips.

"Now, now, none of that. Rest for a while. You gave your teammates and my little sister here quite the fright, dropping like that."

"Sister?" He rasped, coughing slightly.

"Me!"

But Song Lan did not look away from that face for even just a second. He would never look anywhere else ever again, if he could get away with it.

"That's my older brother, Xiao Xingchen. He's a nurse, which is super cool! You're very lucky, you fainted today of all days when Gege was visiting me at work! He patched you up right away!"

"Wha'?"

Xiao Xingchen smiled down at him. "You hit your head from the fall. Don't worry, it's just a scratch." He carefully took Song Lan's hand and looked at a kind of old-fashioned wrist watch, checking the pulse.

"Prof is really angry with you, just a heads-up," A-Qing chattered on. "You bumped against that hope chest, you know, with your forehead. He's so mad. Apparently there was blood?"

Song Lan didn't care if it was just a scratch or if he brained himself half to death. Beside him on the cot sat Xiao Xingchen, healthy and happy and reborn into times of peace.

This Xiao Xingchen's smile was even brighter than memory served Song Lan as he offered him a bottle of water.

"Were you dehydrated? When did you last eat?"

A-Qing answered for him, "Lunch box during lunch break, with tea from the big, communal thermos."

Song Lan nodded weakly, sipping the water.

"It's not that hot or sunny, so no heat stroke. You didn't feel hot earlier."

Xiao Xingchen's soft hand landed on the good half of his forehead before sliding down to cup his cheek. "Hm, no temperature."

Which was about to change, Song Lan thought, slightly panicked. He felt a blush rising on his face.

"Oh-oh," A-Qing said and ducked behind Song Lan who didn't have time to check what was going on.

"So you're back among the living, ey, Mister Song?" The professor peered over Xiao Xingchen's shoulder. "That's nice. Can I scold you now?"

"Please don't. He needs rest." Blessed Xingchen, always his noble, righteous, kind self.

The professor sighed but didn't back off. He raised his cotton gloved hand that held one of the journals. "Maybe you can explain to me, Mister Song, why the handwriting in these diaries, allegedly from the 1940s and earlier, looks exactly like yours?"

"That's gotta be a coincidence, Prof!" A-Qing piped up in his defense.

"And this, too, I suppose?" The older man opened the journal as carefully as his professional standards demanded and held it out from them to look at.

Two of the three of them lost control over their jaws. Song Lan just frowned. Maybe he should pretend to be more surprised by a drawing in an antique journal that looked so very much like the man next to him. He couldn't do it. Instead he looked at Xiao Xingchen.

"Possibly?" Xiao Xingchen whispered, blushed for some reason and shrugged.

"I swear," the professor grouched, waving the journal at them. "If this turns out to be an elaborate practical joke to woo your sweetheart in white over here, Mister Song, you can kiss your job on my team bye-bye."

"It's not a joke..." Song Lan said meekly.

Huffing the professor stormed off in the direction of the cave.

"Sweetheart in white?" Xiao Xingchen repeated, embarrassed. "I just met you, did I not?"

A-Qing grinned. "Ahhh, but maybe you know each other from a different lifetime! Star-crossed lovers reincarnated to finally find their love and happy-ever-after!"

"You are such a romantic, A-Qing." Despite his words, Xiao Xingchen's blush deepened.

"Don't tell me Song-gege is not one hundred and ten percent your type, Gege!"

"A-Qing!" Xiao Xingchen hissed, seemingly even more embarrassed now. The tips of his ears were bright red.

In the meantime Song Lan felt one hundred and ten different feelings. He could not voice any of them even a little bit. He hid his own flushing face behind the water bottle.

"You know I'm right. I can't wait to tell Granny!"

Xiao Xingchen groaned into his hands, but it soon turned into laughter.

"I apologize for my sister's behaviour. Can I make it up to you? Like, buy you a coffee or something?"

A-Qing snorted. "Really smooth, Gege."

Song Lan blushed harder. He really wanted to say yes. "I prefer tea, but sure. Why not?"

As it turned out, the professor kept his word. He didn't fire Song Lan, however. He promoted him. These days, Song Lan spent his time not travelling the world but travelling between university, the local museum and his new home with the Xiaos, being very busy with writing his doctoral thesis about a dowry chest full of hope and memories.

The End.