

To have and hold and heal

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To have and hold and heal

by [naye](#)

Summary

Zhao Yunlan is sick. Shen Wei overreacts.

[My [podfic version](#)]

Notes

Many thanks to the fabulous [Xparrot](#) for encouraging me to explore this idea, and for the super helpful edits.

Shen Wei wasn't used to "sick". Not this kind. He had tended to countless wounds and injuries, but the Dixingren he had spent most of his life with had been very healthy, overall. They couldn't afford to be otherwise.

Shen Wei was familiar with disease, in theory. Not only did he have a PhD in the biological sciences, but he had spent years with human students and colleagues. But when those humans were sick, they mostly stayed away. They certainly never invited him to their bedsides.

So Shen Wei had never before seen what influenza *did*. He understood it from a scientific point of view, of course—infinitesimal self-replicating not-quite-living organisms taking over a host's cells to reproduce with ruthless efficiency. But he had never before seen the pain those viruses could wring from their victims. Never had cause to be frightened by how hot a body defending against that invasion could run, or seen how the process caused messy rejection of food and liquid both.

To Shen Wei, who knew that the flu was occasionally lethal to humans, this particular kind of sick rated as an emergency. An emergency he alone could manage. "No hospital," Zhao Yunlan had whined, huddling under the extra blankets Shen Wei had brought him. "I don't wanna."

Hospital care had been a reasonable suggestion, but Shen Wei didn't yet regret acquiescing to Zhao Yunlan's request. Leaving him in the hands of strangers—the thought of it was nearly unbearable. Trusting random humans with Zhao Yunlan's well-being, in a place Shen Wei already knew staff had let people die on their watch—no. And even if the doctors and nurses were exquisitely talented and trusted, Zhao Yunlan would never get any proper rest there. Sharing a room with strangers—or even just being alone, either would be bad. Ever since they very nearly hadn't returned from Dixing alive, Zhao Yunlan's sleep would grow restless and fragmented unless Shen Wei was there to soothe him.

Having coughed himself awake, Zhao Yunlan winced as he shifted to sit up against the pillows Shen Wei had arranged for him. Shen Wei eyed him critically, hoping for signs of improvement. It had been days already, and yet—hair tousled and sweat-damp, Zhao Yunlan's pink cheeks and glassy eyes indicated the fever hadn't broken yet. Alarmed, Shen Wei watched the tip of Zhao Yunlan's tongue touch his chapped lips—dehydration was a real worry.

"Here," Shen Wei said, calm and encouraging as he handed Zhao Yunlan a small bowl half-full of nutritious and warm (though not hot) chicken soup. Shen Wei had learned not to put too much food in Zhao Yunlan's bowl—the physical weakness it brought was another terrifying aspect of the flu. If someone were to attack—

"Thanks, baby," Zhao Yunlan said hoarsely, as he smiled a pale, tight smile that made Shen Wei think of dying men. Then he made a face as he put the bowl to his lips.

"Is it too hot? Too spicy? I shouldn't have—"

“Xiao Wei,” Zhao Yunlan’s exhalation was half laugh, half exasperation, and turned into a coughing fit before he went on, “It’s fine. It’s delicious. It’s just a—a human thing. When we’re sick, food isn’t always...”

“You need to keep your strength up,” Shen Wei pointed out.

“Mm.” It wasn’t exactly a protest, because Zhao Yunlan drank most of the soup before pushing the bowl back into Shen Wei’s hands.

“And water,” Shen Wei insisted, before letting Zhao Yunlan roll over on his side. Shen Wei removed a few of the supporting pillows, and tucked the blankets tightly around Zhao Yunlan’s shivering body. When he came back from washing the bowl, Zhao Yunlan was fast asleep. Shen Wei tidied away a few discarded tissues, then sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to disturb his suffering beloved, and considered his options.

Shen Wei had tried to ease the worst of the symptoms, but the influenza had penetrated everywhere, and trying to calm the raging fever did more harm than good. It was Zhao Yunlan’s body’s own defenses, after all—shutting that down only gave the viruses free rein to replicate as they pleased. And Zhao Yunlan had insisted there was no danger—that a bit of Shen Wei’s food and plenty of rest would see him right in no time, and that there was no need for hospitals or healing. That last he’d added after a few failed attempts at managing the symptoms had left Shen Wei a little tired.

But it had been *days*. Far too much time spent making sure Zhao Yunlan didn’t fall over on the way to the bathroom again, and cleaning sheets soaked through with sweat, and listening to that terrible, hacking cough that tore at Zhao Yunlan’s chest.

Meanwhile Li Qian had brought Shen Wei plenty of reading to help him understand what was happening. And of course, he already knew that human science had no guaranteed way of fighting the flu virus. It was terribly frustrating, to get the minutiae on various forms of complications—myocarditis, encephalitis, myositis—and lethal outcomes, without being able to stop the illness before it could get that far.

Unless, of course, Shen Wei *could* stop it.

Zhao Yunlan coughed and writhed restlessly under the covers, and Shen Wei put a hand on his clammy forehead—the temperature difference between them was dreadfully stark like this, but the cool of Shen Wei’s palm made him sigh and relax momentarily. The fever stubbornly remained as high as ever, and for all that it pleased Shen Wei that he could bring Zhao Yunlan any relief at all, the gesture was a useless one.

Shen Wei was still considering his options when Zhao Yunlan woke with a groan. “Gonna be sick.”

Hands full managing that situation, Shen Wei noted it wasn’t just his imagination—Zhao Yunlan was losing weight he could ill afford to, and though he was still burning hot his skin was beginning to dry out. How could Shen Wei be expected to watch Zhao Yunlan decline like this, and not do anything?

Getting Zhao Yunlan settled again took a while—first he complained about aches that neither the painkillers he'd already taken or Shen Wei could ease, and then he kept rousing from his exhausted daze to ask about his team, and about Ye Zun. One at a time, forcing their names out through coughing fits, agonizingly confused about his own whereabouts and theirs. It seemed to get worse at night, Shen Wei had noticed. Even with lights on in the apartment, the darkened windows took Zhao Yunlan back to Dixing—a Dixing where worst-case scenarios were running rampant in his fever-addled brain.

Surely it would be better to cut this process short than let it run its natural course—a natural course and where Zhao Yunlan risked permanent damage or death. Even if Zhao Yunlan had said he'd be fine—well, he wasn't. And Shen Wei thought he had the means to change that, so—change it he would. He had waited long enough already. Surely Zhao Yunlan couldn't mean for Shen Wei to simply wait and hope for the best, when the worst would be so unthinkable bad?

Shen Wei started by doing what he could for Zhao Yunlan's comfort. The blankets had begun to overheat him—a leg and an arm were both sticking out of the bed, seeking cooler air. So Shen Wei removed the extra layers, and wiped Zhao Yunlan's face with a damp cloth, preparing a basin of cold water with which to repeat the process later. It went next to the clean, empty basin half under the bed. He didn't want to wake Zhao Yunlan to coax him to drink, but placed a half-full bottle of water mixed with a rehydration pack—Li Qian had brought a stash along with the papers she'd printed for him—within easy reach.

Then Shen Wei divested himself of his sweater vest, shirt and pants, leaving them neatly folded on the trunk by the foot of the bed. With any luck, he'd be changing back into them before Zhao Yunlan could wake, but this would be more comfortable for the duration.

Shen Wei carefully eased himself down next to Zhao Yunlan under the covers, where it only took moments for Zhao Yunlan to register his presence. Zhao Yunlan rolled over and snuck an arm and a leg over Shen Wei, burrowing his face in Shen Wei's neck. It felt like being cuddled by a furnace. A satisfied sigh triggered a cough, but it faded quickly, and Zhao Yunlan stilled once again.

Shen Wei closed his eyes, and began to concentrate. First on ignoring the jarring fact that Zhao Yunlan's energies were all out of alignment—heart beating too fast, lungs labouring hard, weakness dampening the usual sparkle Shen Wei would feel coming off of him. Then he went deeper, beyond the surface jumble of essence and impressions.

Observing beyond the limits of those senses Shen Wei had been born with took focus and determination. Nothing as clear as vision or hearing, but a simple cut or a bruise could be felt as a straightforward disturbance, easy enough to put right by nudging the body's own systems to do their work faster. A first shove of energy to direct them, and then a trickle to keep them going was all it took. This, however—as Shen Wei already knew, it was something altogether different. The damage wasn't simply internal, but hidden inside the body's own cells.

It was intensely demanding to hone his perception to a microscopic focus, but once he did, Shen Wei began to feel what was happening at the cellular level in Zhao Yunlan's body. From his vantage point—his energies meshing with Zhao Yunlan's, existing in that other body while anchored to his own—it was like gazing upon a vast battlefield: there were dead cells

and dying, cells strategically taken out by the body's own defenses, cells killed by the virus, and cells either resisting the invasion or entirely untouched.

Most of the damage was in and around Zhao Yunlan's lungs—Shen Wei had to pause and adjust his own breathing before he could continue, plagued as he was by thoughts of pneumonia and the words *lethal outcome*.

Once he could focus again, he sensed so much frantic activity that it was hard to know where to begin. There was danger in interrupting the immune system—but also grave danger in provoking it to overreact. So Shen Wei painstakingly avoided anything that felt like it was of the body, and concentrated on the foreign invasion. Contact with the virus felt—wrong. Cold and lifeless, for all that the multitudes of viruses *teemed* under his touch. The difference between his own energies and Zhao Yunlan's—between Dixing and Haixing—was nothing compared to the difference between them as living beings and the viruses as... *other*.

How could humans stand this? How could they stand having these *things* inside their own bodies? No wonder Zhao Yunlan had been so uncomfortable, if he could feel even a fraction of this. Shen Wei shuddered, but held firm against the urge to retreat away from that sensation. Ideally, he would have liked to find a way of shutting all of the viruses down at once. After all, they weren't truly alive, so it took very little of his energy to simply rupture them into so much harmless garbage. But even pushing himself to his limits, he couldn't exert influence over more than a fraction of Zhao Yunlan's cells at once—not while also keeping his actions from triggering the body's own defenses. So he had to go easy, a little bit at the time.

Patience would be key. Shen Wei surfaced for a moment, senses drawing back into his own body so he could open his eyes and look at Zhao Yunlan's face resting on his shoulder. With the exception for a small furrow of pain between the brows, his expression was relaxed in repose, mouth half-open around wet, wheezing breaths, sweaty bangs sticking to his forehead. He showed no discomfort from the meshing of their energies, and was in a deep, restful phase of sleep. It would be a perfect time to begin.

Shen Wei brushed the errant strands of hair away from Zhao Yunlan's face, and let his hand linger on the clammy skin underneath for a moment, estimating that the fever might have risen by a fraction of a degree since he last checked. Then he closed his eyes and dove in.

It felt more like the memory of battle come alive than healing. The scale of it might be imperceptible, but that did not make the ongoing struggle any less intense. The repetitive act of discovering and destroying the invading viruses, then moving on without doing any other damage, sent Shen Wei into a familiar daze. One where there was no end in sight, but the battle would be lost if he yielded—if he paused but for a moment. So he pushed on, deeper and deeper, until everything became just that: discovering. Destroying. Moving on.

Then, stopping, though there were still multitudes to destroy.

Stopping because there was nothing left with which to move his perception—to drive that simple burst of undoing he had come to perfect.

Stopping like an unwound watch, falling out of his own senses—first into his own body, which *hurt*—and then into nothing at all, when his energies scattered beyond his ability to hold onto consciousness.

Zhao Yunlan.

Zhao Yunlan needed him.

It was an imperative—an instinct that Shen Wei would follow through anything. Certainly the realization was enough to wake him up, despite his body's preference for lingering in a cool, quiet nothing for a bit longer.

“Yunlan?” Shen Wei sat up—wanted to sit up, but got no further than opening his eyes and speaking his beloved's name.

“Shen Wei!” Shen Wei could read relief and exasperation both in Zhao Yunlan's face, peering at him from above, but his priority was with Zhao Yunlan's health. Didn't his voice sound a little less raw? And hadn't the color in his cheeks improved?

“Shen Wei,” Zhao Yunlan repeated, touching Shen Wei's cheek with a gentle hand, completely at odds with his tone. “Shen Wei, *what the fuck?*”

“Zhao Yunlan. How are you feeling?” Shen Wei wished he could sit up, to better check Zhao Yunlan's vitals, but—nothing in his aching body really wanted to follow through on that impulse. Zhao Yunlan was kneeling next to him, mattress dipping so that some of Shen Wei's weight rested against him.

“How am *I* feeling?” Zhao Yunlan laughed shortly, then coughed, staring at Shen Wei with his hair falling over his forehead in soft disarray. He pulled his hand back. “Shen Wei. I woke up, and you were passed out. On me. You had passed out on me, and you weren't answering, and you looked like *shit*. Another ten seconds and I was going to call the ambulance!”

“That will not be necessary,” Shen Wei informed Zhao Yunlan.

“Great!” Zhao Yunlan's needlessly sarcastic exclamation was followed by another coughing fit, necessitating the intervention of a tissue.

“You should drink some water,” Shen Wei pointed out, trying not to wince at the way the loud sounds exacerbated the throbbing in his skull, which felt filled with sharp knives made entirely of lead.

Zhao Yunlan grabbed the bottle Shen Wei had prepared—it was satisfying to note that it was almost empty, having already come to good use—and took a deep gulp, which settled his throat. “This is so I can keep *yelling at you*, Xiao Wei!”

Shen Wei flinched. “What—”

“My fever is down. Gone, maybe? I feel a *lot* better. And by some *strange coincidence*, you just happened to pass out at the same time?”

Shen Wei thought back. He had passed out, yes. “Temporarily. It is probably nothing.”

“Nothing?! Shen Wei. Baby. Idiot love of my life—” Zhao Yunlan drew a deep breath, and took a careful sip of water before placing his hands over Shen Wei’s shoulders and leaning over him in the bed, staring him straight in the eye. “What did you *do*?”

“I—” Shen Wei couldn’t help but remember the way Zhao Yunlan had scowled and told him, “*And no healing, okay?*” a few days ago. It had been easy enough to ignore as long as Zhao Yunlan wasn’t looking at him, but now—“I... found a. A solution to the virus?”

“And you kept it all nice and theoretical and wrote it up for a medical journal?” Really, the fact that Zhao Yunlan was being this sarcastic was the clearest sign of improvement Shen Wei had seen so far.

“I had to—try it out.”

“On me.”

Shen Wei was beginning to wish he could close his eyes, to escape the searing emotions he could see in Zhao Yunlan’s. But he could no less look away than he could lie. “Yes,” he whispered.

Zhao Yunlan ran both hands through his hair, scratched the back of his neck, and then stared at Shen Wei some more. Shen Wei missed the comforting pressure of his hands. “I thought I told you—I thought we had talked about this?”

“About the influenza?” The pounding in Shen Wei’s head was growing worse, and he felt—bad. Sick?

Zhao Yunlan leveled an incredulous stare at him. “No! I mean—yes, I’m pretty sure I did mention I’d be fine and you shouldn’t try anything, but. No! We talked about you *doing things*—permanent things!—for me, which fuck you up. *Especially* without telling me.”

Oh. Yes, that had been—painful. To realize that by helping Zhao Yunlan get his vision back all those months ago, Shen Wei had also hurt him. It was still difficult for Shen Wei to fully understand the magnitude of that pain, but it had been easy enough to see in Zhao Yunlan’s eyes and hear in his voice. Even if Zhao Yunlan had healed Shen Wei—even if it had all worked out, the memory of that conversation, and of the decision Shen Wei could never unmake, was distressing. But that had been about something that nearly killed Shen Wei. This was a completely different situation.

Wasn’t it? Caught in Zhao Yunlan’s expectant look, Shen Wei blurted the first thing that came to his mind. “I didn’t know. I thought—it was only a little bit of energy, I don’t know why—” Why he’d lost consciousness, and forced Zhao Yunlan to wake up alone and untended, with no explanation for the sudden onset of Shen Wei’s weakness.

Shen Wei was beginning to understand why Zhao Yunlan seemed so shaken.

“Yeah,” Zhao Yunlan sighed, deflating visibly at whatever he saw in Shen Wei’s expression. “You scared me. If you found something you wanted to do—couldn’t you at least have waited until I was awake?”

“I—I didn’t want to disturb you?” Shen Wei offered weakly, though he could see now that he had done a lot worse than disturb Zhao Yunlan.

“Shen Wei. You know I love you, and you know you are and will always be my most precious treasure.”

Even knowing that he was being scolded, hearing those words from Zhao Yunlan made a bright flame flare in Shen Wei’s heart. He smiled, recklessly. “I know.”

Zhao Yunlan huffed at the interruption, and Shen Wei saw a grin in his eyes as he kept his lips in a tight line. “But you pull something like this again and you’re moving back to your old apartment for *a month*.”

Shen Wei nodded, then winced, as the nod made the leaden knives in his skull vibrate. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Zhao Yunlan’s expression softened. “Next time you freak out and want to do something stupid—talk to me first?”

Shen Wei felt a surge of that sick feeling, much stronger than before, but managed to mumble, “I will. I mean—I won’t. Zhao Yunlan, I won’t—”

“Hey. Hey, Xiao Wei?”

Whatever was happening felt *terrible*. Shen Wei groaned, twisting against the sheets, and it wasn’t until Zhao Yunlan offered him the basin that he realized what was happening.

It made no sense, though. Even as he was undeniably suffering one of Zhao Yunlan’s own influenza symptoms, Shen Wei was completely baffled.

Zhao Yunlan rubbed Shen Wei’s back through the undershirt, and spoke Shen Wei’s own thoughts out loud. “I thought you said you were immune to all Haixing viruses?”

“I am,” Shen Wei said, because—he always had been.

Zhao Yunlan wobbled out of bed, and came back with a clean basin and more water—one bottle for each of them. Shen Wei drank, then curled up on his side to see if it would help with the throbbing or the aching or any of it at all.

It didn’t, really, but Zhao Yunlan tucked him under a blanket and stroked his hair, which was a relief. All other sensory input was coming back with things feeling wrong and bad and off, so having something pleasant to focus on—it helped.

“Seriously, baby. What did you do to yourself?”

“Nothing,” Shen Wei croaked. His throat hurt. “I just—I used some energy to destroy the viruses.”

Zhao Yunlan was silent for a moment, his hand pleasantly cool against Shen Wei’s forehead.

That.

That wasn’t right, was it?

“Dark energy?”

Shen Wei nodded. Winced. He really should stop doing that.

“And you did this for how long?”

Shen Wei had no idea. He hadn’t really thought about it, but—before he’d squeezed his eyes closed, it had been light, hadn’t it? And he’d started deep into the night. “A couple of hours? Maybe more?” he offered hesitantly.

Zhao Yunlan sighed. “Professor Shen. I feel like you of all people should know this, but—flu viruses like to mutate. You know that, right?”

“Antigenic shift,” Shen Wei agreed. He wanted to explain about hemagglutinin and neuraminidase proteins, but those words felt like a lot right now.

“Yeah, that.”

Another moment of silence, where Shen Wei felt he should be taking in the implications. The implications were—“Oh no.” Shen Wei opened his eyes and looked at Zhao Yunlan, hoping he hadn’t hit on the right answer.

“Dixing flu,” Zhao Yunlan shrugged. “It’s a thing now. Congratulations?”

Shen Wei groaned and turned his face into the pillows.

Zhao Yunlan gently patted his head. “It’s okay,” he said. “We’ll stay quarantined for as long as it takes to make sure it doesn’t spread.”

Shen Wei burrowed deeper into the pillows. The risk that would pose to everyone was utterly terrifying—“Maybe I can—”

“Hush,” Zhao Yunlan said, very softly. “You can relax and let me take care of you. That’s it. That’s all you’re going to do now, okay?”

“Yes,” Shen Wei agreed miserably.

“Look, if we’re lucky it’s not even Dixing flu, just—Hei Pao flu. Your very own strain, just for you.”

The thought gave Shen Wei a little hope. They'd still have to be vigilant, but—but maybe his carelessness wouldn't cause any more harm than it already had.

It was a thought Shen Wei held on to for the full week it took for the symptoms to start abating. A terribly unpleasant week, but one that would have been a lot worse if Zhao Yunlan hadn't been true to his word—he didn't leave Shen Wei's side. He didn't even complain about his self-imposed quarantine, as if he didn't have better things to do than play nursemaid. If Zhao Yunlan's tender care came with the occasional asides about choices having consequences—well, Shen Wei accepted that he might deserve those.

Shen Wei was too weak and miserable to do much of anything, but Zhao Yunlan seemed to be well on the way to recovery. When he wasn't caring for Shen Wei, he kept himself busy chatting with his team on the computer and watching the television and staring at this phone. But when Shen Wei was awake, Zhao Yunlan was always ready to do whatever was needed, even before Shen Wei asked. And maybe all the dishes didn't get done immediately, and there was laundry beginning to pile up, but Shen Wei always had water and tea both at hand, and clean sheets, and food Zhao Yunlan would sit by his side and feed him.

Shen Wei was quietly relieved Zhao Yunlan didn't attempt to add cooking to his repertoire—just thinking about the way Zhao Yunlan could torture instant noodles made Shen Wei feel a bit worse. Fortunately, Zhu Hong brought medicinal Snake Tribe specialties to their door twice a day—Zhao Yunlan complained weren't as tasty as Shen Wei's own cooking, but ate with good appetite. Da Qing, Lin Jing, and Xiao Guo all stopped by as well, and their snack offerings—including dried fish, popcorn and a special-edition lollipop mega pack—kept Zhao Yunlan from indulging in any culinary adventures.

Nights, Shen Wei had the disorienting experience of falling asleep with Zhao Yunlan stroking his hair, and waking up after Zhao Yunlan was already up. Despite waking them both up coughing, Zhao Yunlan refused the idea of either of them sleeping elsewhere. "Look, I can nap all day if I want," he'd said, and that was a good argument—but the way Zhao Yunlan smiled when he watched Shen Wei slowly come awake in the morning was what stopped Shen Wei from pushing the point. Shen Wei understood the pleasure of those quiet moments, and it seemed selfish to rob Zhao Yunlan of the chance to experience them.

The days bled into each other in a fevered haze, until one afternoon brought everything back into focus. Shen Wei woke from a nap and felt—rested. Enough to sit up and look around for something to do, bringing Zhao Yunlan over to arrange some pillows for him, and rest his palm against Shen Wei's forehead for a couple of seconds.

"Yeah, that's definitely down," Zhao Yunlan said. Shen Wei had never thought to take his temperature before falling ill, so all they had to go on was feeling. "Your fever must have broken this morning, just like you guessed."

Shen Wei smiled, pleased that he was finally making some progress with recovery. There was still the cough, but the most unpleasant effects of the virus in his body had tapered off one after the other. "My head does feel a lot clearer," he offered.

"Okay, so." Zhao Yunlan sat with his legs crossed in the bed next to Shen Wei, who was propped up on more pillows than he really knew what to do with. "If you're feeling up to it,

you could try your virus busting now?”

“My what?”

“What you did on me. Making the virus go away.”

“But—” Shen Wei had promised he wouldn’t do that anymore. Hadn’t even thought of trying, no matter how bad he had felt, all because of Zhao Yunlan forbidding it. “But didn’t you say —”

“To let me take care of you and not make yourself *pass out* again! Yeah, of course. But we can’t let this thing spread, and if you have a way of making sure there’s no more of the Hei Pao flu, that would be really great.”

Shen Wei blinked. “Even if it uses my energy?” Which Zhao Yunlan had definitely told him not to be reckless with.

“If it uses *some*—I was thinking maybe ten minutes at a time, to start with? You said it took you hours before you actually passed out before, so that should be fine, right?” Zhao Yunlan looked to Shen Wei for confirmation.

“Yes. Yes, of course, but—” Zhao Yunlan had been so against it before that Shen Wei wanted to make certain there would be no misunderstandings.

“Shen Wei,” Zhao Yunlan said slowly. “Please tell me you understand the difference between doing a little bit of virus busting on yourself under controlled circumstances, and knocking yourself out overdoing something on me that I told you not to do in the first place?”

The words were patient, but Shen Wei winced at the sharp edge in them. He’d had plenty of time to think about everything Zhao Yunlan had said—and to clearly remember Zhao Yunlan’s anguish, not just now, but right after the incident with the Longevity Sundial as well. Shen Wei would do anything to keep from hurting Zhao Yunlan like that again. He drew a deep breath. “I do. And I’m sorry. I wanted—I wanted to make sure you would be safe, but...” Even now, putting it into words was proving to be terribly difficult. “But that’s not what you wanted?”

Zhao Yunlan didn’t let Shen Wei simply leave it at that. “I didn’t even know, Shen Wei. What you did back then—”

“I should have told you,” Shen Wei said softly. “I thought—“ he shook his head. “I didn’t think. I didn’t think...” Shen Wei looked down at his hands, folded on the blue geometrical patterns of the blanket.

Zhao Yunlan’s hand—shockingly warm, after days of feeling cool against Shen Wei’s skin—cupped his jaw, tilting his head back up. Zhao Yunlan’s thumb stroked Shen Wei’s cheek, and Shen Wei looked into Zhao Yunlan’s eyes. Crinkling with amusement at the corners, they were warm and tender and full of—full of love. It was undeniable and incomprehensible, but somehow Zhao Yunlan mirrored Shen Wei’s love, in every single way.

“You didn’t think it would matter what happened to you?” Zhao Yunlan asked, gently.

Shen Wei nodded, and Zhao Yunlan made a soft *hah*. “And now?”

Now Shen Wei had spent the more lucid parts of his week thinking about it, and about the reason Zhao Yunlan sometimes shouted at him, and he thought he knew what answer Zhao Yunlan wanted. It was difficult—almost impossible—to understand. But with Zhao Yunlan looking at him like that—with Zhao Yunlan’s gentle touch steadying Shen Wei, coaxing the words out, Shen Wei managed to whisper, “You love me.”

Zhao Yunlan’s eyes shone. “With all my heart.”

Those words gave Shen Wei’s own heart such fierce pleasure it was very nearly pain. So precious was Zhao Yunlan to him that Shen Wei would do anything—would give anything for him. To be worthy of that love.

But. What Zhao Yunlan wanted—it wasn’t Shen Wei’s sacrifice, or his service. He took a deep breath. “And you want to keep me safe.” Like Shen Wei wanted to keep his Yunlan safe, always and forever—enough that he had used his own powers thoroughly recklessly. Shen Wei had done that, and the burden of worry and care had fallen on Zhao Yunlan’s shoulders instead. A trade Zhao Yunlan would never have made if asked.

“Yeah,” Zhao Yunlan breathed, his eyes too haunted for this to be just about the influenza. “I do. And I won’t stand by and let anyone hurt you. Not even you, Hei Laoge.” Zhao Yunlan shook his head, unstyled hair a tousled mess. “Especially not you. Do you understand?”

Words failed him. Shen Wei wanted to say yes. He wanted to understand enough to keep from hurting Zhao Yunlan ever again. Zhao Yunlan’s love for him demanded nothing but what was willingly given—but unless it was also willingly received, Shen Wei would do nothing but diminish it. Was that the right answer?

Unsure, but feeling he had waited too long to answer, Shen Wei nodded once.

It was enough to make Zhao Yunlan smile, sun-bright and dazzling. Shen Wei wanted to bask in it—wanted to treasure the moment. But Zhao Yunlan pulled him in for a long, sweet kiss that he was helpless to resist. At least until it triggered another coughing fit. Zhao Yunlan winced in sympathy and rubbed him between the shoulder blades.

Shen Wei held back the next racking cough, ready to apologize and pull away. Then he realized what he was doing, and relaxed. He leaned forward instead, and closed his eyes as Zhao Yunlan’s arms came around his heaving shoulders, holding Shen Wei until he found his breath again.

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