

a stone to break your soul, a song to save it – rikke - 魔道祖师 - 墨香铜臭 | Módào Zǔshī - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù [Archive of Our Own]

Chapter 1: did you hear the yiling patriarch got married?!

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

It started with a wedding.

In the cultivation history books, it was marked as a joyous occasion—a marriage joining two of the top four sects at the time, an alliance that would solidify the relationship between GusuLan and YunmengJiang.

On the streets, people gossiped about the engaged couple. Both parties were men, and on top of that, two out of the four most promising talents of their generation. While seeing cutsleeves was not unusual, it was unusual for them to be married in such a public way and from such prominent families who would surely expect heirs. The whispers said that the two were like the cowherd and the weaver girl, so captivated with one another that they'd argued their case against the entire cultivation world. There had been a special meeting held in the Golden Pavilion on Koi Tower where fifty sect leaders gathered. Then the mutual sect leaders had met for a month before the engagement was announced.

That was what was shown to the public.

The wedding itself occurred on an auspicious day but with little fanfare. Only the Lan clan and the Jiang family were present. The ceremony was quiet, the three wedding bows exchanged before the GusuLan Ancestral Hall, and with that, Wei WuXian, the notorious Yiling Patriarch, became the cultivation partner of the Second Jade of Lan, Lan WangJi.

"Lan Zhan! Just one drink!" Wei WuXian said, grinning at his new husband from where he sat at the opposite side of the sitting table. After the short wedding ceremony, Wei WuXian had been herded off to the Jingshi, Lan WangJi's private living quarters, where a servant had brought them one of GusuLan's plain, tasteless meals. Having expected this, he'd given Wen Ning instructions to procure a jar of Emperor's Smile for him—he wasn't sure how long it had taken him to do it, but by the time Wei WuXian entered the Jingshi, the jar was already waiting for him at the door.

Wei WuXian tried again. "Come on, it's our wedding. You can at least have a drink on your wedding day."

"Alcohol is forbidden in the Cloud Recesses," Lan WangJi said. He slowly took the plates off the tray they had been sent on, placing the portions equally between himself and Wei WuXian.

"Just one celebratory bowl, Lan Er-Gege," Wei WuXian bargained.

"No exceptions," Lan WangJi answered.

Wei WuXian pouted. "Fine, if you won't drink, then I'll just have to drink myself."

"No exceptions." Lan WangJi pinned him with a look. "That includes you."

Wei WuXian reached for his jar of Emperor's Smile, only to have Lan WangJi reach for it at the same time.

"Oh, don't tell me you changed your mind?" Wei WuXian said, grinning wider.

"It's confiscated," Lan WangJi answered, and pulled it out of reach to set on the ground beside him.

"Ugh, you're so boring," Wei WuXian said, but he didn't want to get in a fight with Lan WangJi. At least not tonight. "I can't believe I, Wei WuXian, would get married to you of all people!"

Lan WangJi gave him another flat look and began to eat.

"It's supposed to be my wedding banquet. At least let me have some spices," Wei WuXian muttered as he also picked up his own pair of chopsticks. He sighed, looking at the food—plain white rice, pan-boiled bok-choy, and tofu. Not even meat! Tofu!

Because the truth was, the marriage was not one of hard-won love like the street gossip claimed. It wasn't even one of alliance like the genealogy books recorded. It was one arranged out of desperation.

After Wei WuXian stormed Qiongqi Path and killed four of the Jin Sect cultivators there, he'd barricaded himself and the remnants of the Wen Clan in the Yiling Burial Mounds. The fifty-sect emergency council had not been held on behalf of two cutsleeve cultivators, but a council quickly configured to decide on a course of action for the founder of demonic cultivation who had gone rogue. YunmengJiang was still considered a weak sect, recovering from the Lotus Pier Massacre, and Wei WuXian had made enemies of nearly everyone, either because they feared him or because they couldn't control him. Jiang Cheng had been left with a clear message—cut ties with Wei WuXian or else.

Pressured on all sides, Jiang Cheng had gone to the only sect he felt he could reason with—GusuLan. Apart from the girl, MianMian, only Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi had spoken on their behalf at the council. A month of negotiations went by in the Cloud Recesses before a marriage was arranged between Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi. Under watch by the strictest and most morally upright of all sects, no one would dare openly criticize GusuLan if they took in Wei WuXian in order to reform him. Furthermore, he would be married to Hanguang-Jun, whose reputation was unbeatable in the cultivation world, and who was not the Lan Sect Leader, so even if he never had children, it wouldn't be as big of a problem. It was a marriage of convenience arranged to save Wei WuXian.

So of course, there was no wedding banquet. As soon as the ceremony concluded, Lan XiChen had accompanied Jiang Cheng and Jiang YanLi back for Lotus Pier to take care of all the other affairs they had to smooth over for Wei WuXian, but Jiang YanLi had promised to bring his favorite lotus rib soup the next time she came to visit.

"Speech is forbidden when dining," Lan WangJi said.

“Lan Zhan, you’re killing me here!” Wei WuXian complained. He ate as fast as he could, finishing his portion so he could keep talking. “Normal weddings should have alcohol! Good food! Lots of people and lots of talking!” he said with mouth full.

Lan WangJi continued eating, chewing each mouthful carefully and swallowing before he would take another bite. This meant that by the time Lan WangJi was finished eating, Wei WuXian had gotten so bored that he’d lay down on the floor and was trying to reach the jar of alcohol with his foot. Every time his foot got near, Lan WangJi would move the jar further away.

“Are you done eating?” Wei WuXian said, finally sitting back up when Lan WangJi put down his chopsticks. “Does that mean we can talk now?”

Lan WangJi shot him another look. Wei WuXian hadn’t stopped talking the entire time anyway.

Wei WuXian grinned. “So, Lan Zhan, where are the Wens staying?” he asked.

Wei WuXian liked to think that although he’d just been saddled with the most boring person in the world as his new husband, he’d taken the news pretty well. Jiang YanLi had protested more than he had—after all, even though he was marrying a man and it couldn’t exactly be called a loving marriage, it wasn’t like Wei WuXian had any particular girl he was interested in. As long as he could move the Wen clan up to the Cloud Recesses with him, he knew the GusuLan Sect would never mistreat them and they’d be well-protected. And this way, YunmengJiang wouldn’t be forced to cut ties with him, which meant he would be able to see Jiang YanLi and Jiang Cheng when he wanted, even attend Jiang YanLi’s wedding no matter how much he disapproved of Jin ZiXuan.

He’d also secretly looked forward to seeing the look on Lan WangJi’s face when Wei WuXian showed up as his bride. But even though he’d talked his shijie into putting a bit of rouge on his cheeks and lips, Lan WangJi’s eyebrow barely twitched when he saw him. It would have been more effective, Wei WuXian decided, if he’d been decked out in full wedding attire. Unfortunately, the entire thing had been so rushed that there was no time, and really no reason, for either party to acquire any wedding clothes.

“They are temporarily housed in the disciples’ quarters. We will begin construction for their permanent living quarters tomorrow,” Lan WangJi answered. He gathered the various plates and chopsticks, stacking them neatly on the tray the meal had been brought in, and left it in the hallway outside the door for a servant to pick up later.

“Oh good, I’m going to go visit them then,” Wei WuXian said, jumping to his feet. “Have a good night!”

“Wait,” Lan WangJi said, blocking his way out.

Wei WuXian paused. “What?”

“Bedtime,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian’s grin began to widen again. “Bedtime? Wow, Hanguang-Jun, you’re being so forward,” he teased.

This time, Lan WangJi finally had a better reaction, although only the very base of his earlobes turned pink. “Curfew,” he bit out.

Wei WuXian had completely forgotten about the nine o’clock curfew the GusuLan Sect enforced. “It’s not that late yet, just a few minutes.”

“It’s time,” Lan WangJi said.

“Lan Zhan, I can’t believe you’re so eager to get in bed with me.” Wei WuXian tried a different tactic. If he couldn’t convince Lan WangJi to loosen up on his rules, maybe he could disgust him into kicking Wei WuXian out. Jiang Cheng had told Wei WuXian that it had taken ages to talk GusuLan into arranging a marriage for him even if they’d been sympathetic to the situation, and then even longer to convince Lan WangJi. He was actually extremely curious how exactly they’d finally talked Lan WangJi into accepting the marriage. “Well, if you insist.” He leaned forward and draped himself up against Lan WangJi. “Lan Er-Gege, be gentle with me.” He fluttered his eyelashes at him.

He felt Lan WangJi stiffen beneath his touch and congratulated himself, bracing himself for impact when Lan WangJi inevitably kicked him out.

Instead, Wei WuXian felt his entire body go weak all of a sudden—he hadn’t experienced it before, but he’d heard of the body-locking spell. Before he could slide to the floor, Lan WangJi caught him and tossed him over one shoulder.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian protested. “Come on, that’s not fair! When did you even learn this spell? Isn’t the silencing spell bad enough already? You GusuLan bunch of—”

Wei WuXian’s lips sealed themselves shut in the next instant, and no matter how much he tried to make noise or move, he couldn’t do anything. Lan WangJi opened a second door and walked toward a bed. This room was clearly the bedroom judging by the enormous bed that took up one entire side of it. The sheer size of the bed, the color of the wood, the frame of it—none of it matched the rest of the almost non-existent decor in this suite, so Wei WuXian concluded that someone must have brought it in especially for them. He wondered what had happened to Lan WangJi’s old bed, because this one could fit at least five grown men on it. Someone had also put out red blankets and stuck a big red paper with the character for “luck” painted on it right over the bed. Wei WuXian wanted to laugh—he and Lan WangJi would certainly need luck to make this marriage last.

Lan WangJi put him down more gently than he expected, holding his head so that it wouldn’t hit anything as he was set on the left side of the bed. He felt Lan WangJi arranging his limbs until he was lying flat, and then pulled a blanket over his immobile body.

He heard shuffling, and felt the bed frame move—Lan WangJi must have lay down on the other side. He wasn’t even close enough for them to be touching on that giant bed. A moment later, Wei WuXian heard a quiet rush of wind and the lanterns were blown out, and then everything was silent.

Lan WangJi really wasn’t going to touch him at all. Wei WuXian huffed an exhale and resigned himself to a few boring hours counting rabbits in his mind before he could fall asleep.

By the time someone knocked on the door, the sun was already high in the sky and Wei WuXian's back ached from sleeping in the same position all night.

"Are you going to sleep all day?" He recognized Wen Qing's voice drifting from somewhere outside of the Jingshi. "Get up already!"

"Let me sleep," Wei WuXian complained. "I was done by Hanguang-Jun all night. Have mercy."

"As though he would touch you," Wen Qing said.

Wei WuXian dragged himself up, pulling on his robes as he did. "Why wouldn't he? He's my cultivation partner now," he said as he opened the door.

Wen Qing stood on the other side, now dressed in the pristine white of GusuLan robes. She gave Wei WuXian a probing look from head to foot and declared her diagnosis. "He didn't touch you."

"Then explain this." Wei WuXian pointed to his aching waist.

"He probably put a body-locking spell on you to keep you from harassing him," Wen Qing said dismissively. "Let's go. Lan QiRen wants to speak to everyone."

"You're so cruel," Wei WuXian complained, though he followed her out.

With the wedding the day before, he'd been too busy to pay attention to anything else. It had been awhile since he'd been anywhere further than Yiling. Constantly surrounded by the resentful energy in the Burial Mounds, he'd forgotten how nice it was up in the Cloud Recesses. The sun shone bright up in this altitude, and the air was fresh and held that slight crisp bite of autumn turning slowly to winter. Wei WuXian took a deep breath and stretched, grinning from ear to ear.

"Ah, it smells so much better than the Burial Mounds," he said.

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. "That was a corpse mountain—anywhere would smell better than there."

"So you should be more grateful I brought you all with me up here," Wei WuXian said.

"Yes, yes, thank you great Lord of Evil, Yiling Patriarch," Wen Qing said dryly.

Wei WuXian winced at the embarrassing title. "You are so mean to me," he complained as he followed her up the pebbled pathway, heading further into the depth of the Cloud Recesses. The As per its name, the mountains and valleys Cloud Recesses were often ringed with clouds of fog, so Wei WuXian didn't notice the small plain until they'd followed the footpath through a bank of fog. The area that the Lan Sect had designated for the Wen clan was a beautiful, verdant little valley further out from the main complex of the Cloud Recesses. The only building currently there was a small cottage ringed with purple gentians a little distance away from where a group of craftsmen were already hard at work.

Piles of wood and stone and other construction materials had already been assembled, and like Lan Wangji had promised, the work had already begun. The group of Wens were standing a little distance

away in the middle of a lecture Lan QiRen had apparently already begun, so A-Yuan was the only one to notice the newcomers.

"Xian-Gege!" he called and ran up to him, crashing right into Wei WuXian's legs and hugging him.

"Oh, A-Yuan is so happy to see me today," Wei WuXian said cheerfully and picked up the toddler in his arms, carrying him back over to the rest of the family. "Are you making trouble for everyone?"

"A-Yuan is good," A-Yuan said, playing with a lock of Wei WuXian's hair, holding it between his chubby fingers.

"Ouch, don't pull," Wei WuXian said, loosening his hair from the child's grip.

The group had been distracted when A-Yuan shouted, and had gone silent, watching as Wei WuXian and Wen Qing walked up to them. Lan QiRen looked at Wei WuXian like he'd just been forced to swallow something sour. He grinned at the Lan elder. "Good morning, Uncle!"

Lan QiRen's whole face turned purple. "What did you call me?"

"Uncle," Wei WuXian repeated, grinning wider. "I'm married to Lan Zhan now, aren't I? Which makes you my—"

"Don't say it!" Lan QiRen shouted.

Wen Qing elbowed him in the back.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Ah, I forgot how much fun the Cloud Recesses are," he said. He transferred A-Yuan's weight to one arm to wave the free one at Lan QiRen. "Continue, Uncle!"

"You—" Lan QiRen took a deep breath and recomposed himself. "As I was saying," he said. "We know that many of you are already cultivators. If you so wish, you may take the GusuLan exams and formally apprentice into GusuLan Sect. If you do not wish to do so, you may live as civilians. However, everyone living in the Cloud Recesses is expected to follow our sect rules, which are carved on the stone wall at the entrance. Our next round of exams begin in three days, so you have until then to consider," he said. "And for those of you interested, to study. I will now inform you of the requirements of the examinations."

It was a more generous offer than Wei WuXian had expected. While some of the wealthier Wen families had bought their way into other cultivation sects during the Sunshot Campaign, GusuLan had refused to accept even one disciple they had not personally selected out of their examination process. Although protecting the Wens had been a part of the marriage negotiations, Wei WuXian had thought it would be fine if the Wen clan was left alone in some corner of the Cloud Recesses to farm and take care of themselves. At best, he thought they might become servants for the GusuLan cultivators. He didn't expect this offer to include allowing the Wen clan the privilege of taking the GusuLan cultivation exams.

Wei WuXian sat down on the plush grass, playing with A-Yuan as Lan QiRen droned on about the various requirements of joining GusuLan. He was ready to lay down and take a nap when Lan QiRen barked, "Wei WuXian! Get up!"

"What? I married into GusuLan so I don't have to take the exams, and you already made me copy the rules so many times I could write them out blind-folded," Wei WuXian said.

"You have other responsibilities," Lan QiRen said. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" Wei WuXian obediently got to his feet and brushed off his clothes. A-Yuan latched himself onto Wei WuXian's leg as he started following Lan QiRen away.

"At least in name, as a member of the Lan...household..." Lan QiRen sounded like he was forcing the words out, "there are certain expectations of you," he said. "You also are expected to follow our sect rules, and most importantly, you are forbidden to continue practicing demonic cultivation—Wei WuXian, are you listening?" he snapped when Wei WuXian bent to adjust A-Yuan's grip on his leg.

"I'm listening, I'm listening, but Uncle, demonic cultivation isn't as bad as you think," Wei WuXian said, grinning. "My hypothesis ended up being right—it is possible to harness resentful energy, and—"

"Forbidden!" Lan QiRen shouted. "It's forbidden! "

He shouted so loudly that A-Yuan burst into tears, still clinging to Wei WuXian's leg.

Lan QiRen immediately stopped shouting, staring down at the child. Wei WuXian would bet that Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen had probably never even cried as babies, so of course Lan QiRen had no idea what to do.

When Wei WuXian was about to pick up A-Yuan, though, he heard another voice speak up behind him.

"Uncle. Wei Ying."

Wei WuXian turned to see Lan WangJi standing there, looking down at the crying child clinging to Wei WuXian's leg.

When A-Yuan heard the new voice, he looked up, and recognizing Lan WangJi, he wailed and raced for Lan WangJi's legs. "Rich brother!" he cried.

Lan QiRen looked like he was about to spit blood. "You—you know this child?"

Of course, Lan WangJi knew him. During that month of marriage negotiations, before Lan WangJi had been appointed the job of being Wei WuXian's husband, Lan WangJi had once visited Yiling for a night hunt. Although Wei WuXian never found out what the assignment was, Lan WangJi had also met and consequently spoiled A-Yuan during that short visit. A-Yuan hadn't shut up about his "rich brother" ever since, and mistook at least one white-robed person for him every single time Wei WuXian brought him to Yiling after that.

"I gave birth to him," Wei WuXian said cheekily to Lan QiRen. "He's ours."

Lan QiRen turned a shade of purple that even Wei WuXian, with all his experience of angering Lan QiRen had never seen.

Wei WuXian laughed so hard he had to hold onto Lan WangJi's arm to stay standing. Lan WangJi, meanwhile, patted A-Yuan on the head.

"A-Yuan missed Rich-Gege," A-Yuan said, beaming through his tear-streaked face at Lan WangJi. "Xian-Gege said you wouldn't come see us anymore."

"Hey, it wasn't a lie," Wei WuXian said, raising his hands. "He didn't come see us—we came to see him." He grinned at A-Yuan. "Anyway, stop calling him Rich-Gege." He grinned. "You should call him dad from now on."

"I never called him dad!" A-Yuan blushed and buried his face in Lan WangJi's leg.

"You—you—" Lan QiRen stuttered.

"And you can call him Great-Uncle," Wei WuXian continued, pointing over at Lan QiRen.

"Wei WuXian!" Lan QiRen shouted.

"Shh, Uncle, shouting is prohibited in the Cloud Recesses, you know," Wei WuXian said. "You're going to make your grand-nephew cry if you keep yelling."

"Wei Ying, stop provoking others," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian pouted. "All right, all right," he said. "A-Yuan, call him Lan Er-Gege, okay?" He winked at Lan WangJi.

A-Yuan nodded, his face still buried in Lan WangJi's leg.

"WangJi, have you brought the item I asked you to bring?" Lan QiRen said to Lan WangJi, apparently choosing to ignore Wei WuXian altogether.

Lan WangJi gave a short nod.

"The both of you come with me," he said without even glancing at A-Yuan.

"A-Yuan, go play by yourself now," Wei WuXian said, patting him on the head. "You can see your Lan Er-Gege anytime you want now."

A-Yuan looked like he wanted to stay longer, but upon seeing Lan QiRen's face, didn't quite dare protest, and toddled back down the path toward the rest of his family.

Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi followed Lan QiRen into the library where Lan QiRen sat at one of the tables, and gestured for the other two to do the same. After they did, Lan WangJi pulled out a small wooden case, placing it in the center of the table, and opened it. Sitting on red cloth was a stone about the size of Wei WuXian's hand, shaped in a perfect circle. The stone was made entirely of white jade and pulsed gently with spiritual power.



“This is one of the Lan family treasures, the Purification Stone,” Lan QiRen said. “Do you remember how it came to be?”

Wei WuXian thought back to all those lessons he’d suffered long ago. “One of the Lan ancestors found the jade perfectly formed at the top of a mountain where it had sat for hundreds of years, gathering spiritual power from the ice and the snow,” he said slowly. “It had been purified by the elements, and can be used to purify...resentful energy,” he finished.

“So you did pay attention to some of my lessons,” Lan QiRen said. “What are the limitations of this stone?”

When Wei WuXian hesitated, Lan QiRen gestured for Lan WangJi to answer. “As it is a stone, it gathered spiritual energy slowly, and can only discharge it slowly. Dependent on the level of resentful energy built up, it may only have limited effectiveness.”

“Very good,” Lan QiRen said. He pinned Wei WuXian with a stare. “I’m afraid the amount of resentful energy you’ve gathered to yourself with demonic cultivation will be too much for this stone—if only you had come to GusuLan earlier,” he said. “But what’s done is done. From now on, you will spend every day purifying yourself of resentful energy here in the library,” he ordered.

“Uncle,” Wei WuXian whined. “It’s already bad enough I have to follow all these rules, you’re really going to lock me up here too?”

“WangJi, watch him and make sure he does it,” Lan QiRen said, ignoring Wei WuXian altogether. Then he rose and left the building.

Wei WuXian sighed as soon as he left and draped himself over the table. “I already told you I can control it,” he said.

“Begin,” Lan WangJi ordered.

Wei WuXian picked up the stone. “Okay, okay,” he said. “I’ll do it. You don’t need to supervise me.” He assumed the pose for meditation, cross-legged, with his hands cupping the stone in his lap. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them again. “You’re really going to just sit here and watch me? Even if you aren’t bored, I’m going to get bored just watching you,” he said when Lan WangJi didn’t move. He sighed. “Fine, it’s your own time you’re wasting,” he said and shut his eyes again.

In order for the stone to work, Wei WuXian had to pass his resentful energy into it, and allow the spiritual power to enter him. At least that was the way it would have worked if Wei WuXian still had a golden core. As it was, any spiritual power entering him had nothing to purify. Holding the stone like this, at most, it might dispel a bit of the resentful energy gathered to Wei WuXian, but ultimately, it wouldn’t do much good.

Lan QiRen and Lan WangJi didn’t have to know that, though, because Wei WuXian had no intention of stopping demonic cultivation. Since he no longer had a golden core, it was the only path left for him if he wanted to still be a cultivator, if he didn’t want anyone to know he’d lost his golden core, if he wanted to protect the people he cared about. If it took being bored out of his mind sitting for hours at a time in the library pretending to purify himself with a stone, he’d just have to deal with it.

By the time Lan Wangji let him out of the library for dinner, Wei Wuxian had been bored nearly to tears and had thought up at least three new spell talismans he wanted to try with demonic cultivation. Lunch had been served in the library, and although Lan Wangji had started reading a book after a few hours, he never left Wei Wuxian alone.

"I'm going to have dinner with the Wens," Wei Wuxian said as soon as he heard the gong sound for dinner.

"Wait," Lan Wangji said. "The resentful energy hasn't improved," he said after looking at Wei Wuxian for a few moments.

"You said yourself the stone works slowly," Wei Wuxian said. "I'll see you later!" he shouted and took off before Lan Wangji could make him do anything else.

Wei Wuxian had eaten with the Wens ever since that one dinner party they'd thrown him that day Lan Wangji had visited. He'd forgotten how much he loved having company around, people to talk with, to eat with, and he'd gotten used to the loud chatter of the Wen clan as they gathered around every night to eat. But until the Wens had their own living quarters, there was no place for them to eat except with the rest of the Lan Sect cultivators. And as Lan Wangji had so eloquently schooled A-Yuan a few weeks ago, there was no talking while eating under the Lan household rules.

The Wens, although they were sitting together at a few of the tables in the hall, were as silent as the rest of the GusuLan Sect, picking at their bland meals in silence. Wei Wuxian felt like he'd walked into a cemetery.

"Someone say something," he muttered, taking a seat next to Wen Qing.

"No speech while eating," Wen Qing hissed, clearly having studied those three thousand rules, and continued to eat.

"You too?" Wei Wuxian complained. "Where's Wen Ning? I haven't seen him since yesterday." He could at least bully Wen Ning into talking to him.

"In seclusion until they decide what to do with him," Wen Qing said. "He's fine. Safe."

Wei Wuxian frowned. "They can't just lock him up. I'll talk to—"

"Don't you dare," Wen Qing hissed. "GusuLan is already being good enough to us. Once they realize he's harmless, they'll let him out on their own. Don't you interfere," she ordered.

"He's your brother," Wei Wuxian said.

"Wei Wuxian, speech is prohibited while eating!" Lan Qiren barked from the head table up front where he and a few other elders of the sect were dining.

Wei Wuxian jolted in his seat. Even eating with Lan Wangji was better than this, he thought, picking at his food. At least he was fun to tease.

Even A-Yuan quietly ate and ignored all of Wei WuXian's attempts to make faces at him, so he had to suffer through a boring dinner too. Even after dinner, no one would pay attention to him. The Wens were busy—all of them studying the GusuLan Sect rules or practicing their cultivation in preparation for the exam.

Bored almost to tears, Wei WuXian gave up trying to find entertainment or a sympathetic person. At least it was easy to break out of the Cloud Recesses when no one was paying attention. As soon as Wei WuXian had jumped the wall the same way he'd done so many times before, he legged it down the mountain. On foot, the trip took longer than it used to by sword, but he was still in Caiyi Town by the time an hour had passed. He sat himself down in the nearest tavern, and called over a jar of Emperor's Smile from the innkeeper with extra spicy peanuts to go with his alcohol.

"Ah, I was going to die from boredom! This is what life is about," Wei WuXian said after downing his first bowl. He hugged the jar. "Emperor's Smile, how I've missed you!"

He drank and ate alone for awhile, thinking about where he wanted to go once he was done. One perk of having been moved to GusuLan was that he no longer had to suppress the numerous corpses of the Burial Mound, and he could go wherever he wanted whenever he wanted. He was debating if he wanted to rent a boat and see if he could find any lotus ponds nearby, when a commotion started at another table.

"I'm telling you, I saw what I saw!" one young man was shouting at another. "I'm not taking that way again even if you pay me—"

"We've taken that bridge a thousand times," the other young man said. "It's the fastest route. No one has even reported a fierce corpse in that area."

"If I say I saw it, I saw it!" the first man said. "Call me a liar again, and—"

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Wei WuXian said, walking up to them. "What was it you said you saw?"

"A ghost," the first young man said. Both of them were young, maybe around fifteen or sixteen years old, and dressed in matching green robes. They were clearly having dinner judging by the half-eaten dishes at the table.

"Nothing," the second one said.

"It's a ghost, I'm telling you!" the first man insisted. "What else would you call a woman you can see through?" he demanded.

Wei WuXian pulled up a bench to their table. "Tell me what you saw," he said, interested.

"Don't indulge this one," the second young man said. "He sees ghosts everywhere. His old woman raised him to be paranoid."

"I'm not paranoid—it's called being cautious," the first man shouted. "You listen to my story and see if you think I'm just being paranoid," he said to Wei WuXian.

So over the next half hour, Wei WuXian found out the two young men were a pair who worked for the Tang family delivery business. The paranoid one was named Liu FengYa, and his skeptical friend was Guo Yi. The Tang family was a well-established family based in the Lanling area who had long run a delivery service. The original Tang to start the business had started out as a rare, rogue cultivator. When his first wife had been robbed and killed by bandits on her way to visit her mother, the original Tang had started this delivery business to ensure that anyone who hired the Tang family would never have to worry about either goods or people being robbed. Three generations later, the most current Tang clan leader had no talent for cultivation, but was a shrewd businessman, and hired cultivators from smaller sects to transport the goods.

Liu FengYa and Guo Yi were two such young cultivators from small local sects—not terrible in their cultivation, but not outstanding talents either. They’d been tasked with a job a week ago to deliver a certain package from Yantai City to Caiyi Town. When they’d dropped off the package, the head of the manor had asked for a second package to be delivered to Yantai City again. Since Yantai City was in the border between the Lanling and Yunmeng territories, there was some distance and geography separating the two locations. There were two ways to travel between the two cities—the first was a broad road constructed a few years ago that circumvented a forested gulley where the fengshui was so bad that it was easy to lose your way. The second and faster route was a bridge that stretched over the gulley that had been travelers’ primary route before the broader road had been constructed. It was this bridge where Liu FengYa claimed to have seen a ghost, and was dead set against returning that way.

“I was on the bridge too and I didn’t see anything,” Guo Yi said when Liu FengYa had finished speaking. “It’ll take at least two weeks if we use the road. The bridge will only take five days.”

“Well you never pay attention to anything!” Liu FengYa answered. “You thought you were just getting better food than everyone else because you were lucky, when Fu ShaoLin was making special meals for you the whole time because she liked you.”

“That’s not—that wasn’t because of that,” Guo Yi said, turning red.

“I’m telling you there’s a ghost,” Liu FengYa insisted.

As he’d listened to their story, Wei WuXian had been helping himself to the dinner that the boys had ordered, picking from the spiciest dishes and pouring bowls of Emperor’s Smile from the boys’ order once he’d finished his own jar.

“Why don’t you just fly on your swords and skip it entirely?” Wei WuXian asked, pouring himself another bowl.

“You’ve clearly never delivered anything in your life,” Liu FengYa said. “The package is this big! This big.” He gestured with his arms, some sort of large box that was about as tall and wide as their table. “We couldn’t carry that flying.”

“Well, whether or not there’s a ghost, why don’t we go find out?” Wei WuXian said, finishing off the last of the Emperor’s Smile. “I’m ready. Let’s go!”

The two younger cultivators stared at him.

"Hey, you finished all the alcohol!" Liu FengYa said when he reached for the jar again. "Who are you anyway?"

"Wei WuXian."

All three of them whirled around to stare at the fourth person who had spoken. Wei WuXian felt his stomach drop down to his feet.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, good Lan Zhan, Lan WangJi, Hanguang-Jun, I can explain," Wei WuXian said, quickly putting down his empty bowl and smiling at him. "See these two young cultivators, they've seen a ghost plaguing Beiluo Bridge—you know how important that bridge is to civilians traveling through that area. We can't let it go uninvestigated, right? After all, Hanguang-Jun has a reputation to keep up."

The two young cultivators stared slack-jawed at them.

"Hanguang-Jun?" Guo Yi asked, though any cultivator would recognize him by looks alone. Apart from Lan XiChen, no man in the cultivating world could compete with Lan WangJi's icy beauty. Even if they didn't recognize his face, with the GusuLan robes and forehead ribbon, the guqin strapped to his back, and Bichen at his waist, there was no one else he could be. "Didn't Hanguang-Jun just get married? If he's Hanguang-Jun, then doesn't that make you—you—"

"The Yiling Patriarch?" Liu FengYa yelped.

Wei WuXian grinned and reached over to pat him on the head. "Oh, don't look so scared, FengYa," he said. "You were just now yelling at me for finishing your alcohol, weren't you?"

"I-I-I—"

"What ghost?" Lan WangJi interrupted with a look at Wei WuXian that told him to stop teasing the boys.

Wei WuXian grinned. Lan WangJi really was good—even if he'd clearly come to fetch Wei WuXian back up to the Cloud Recesses, he couldn't hear about a case like this and not go help. Finally something interesting. "I'll catch you up on the way," he said.

Now that Hanguang-Jun had agreed to investigate, Guo Yi had no protests. It was decided that they would fly over to get rid of the ghost tonight, and the boys would be able to travel on the bridge the next morning with their package. Apparently Lan WangJi's excellent, upright reputation cancelled out Wei WuXian's pitch-black reputation, and the boys hadn't run away screaming or threatened to kill Wei WuXian on sight.

Plan decided, the boys went to settle their account with the innkeeper, and Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi went outside to wait for them.

"I'll go. You return to the Cloud Recesses," Lan WangJi said once they had stepped outside. "You shouldn't use resentful energy."

"I won't! I promise I won't," Wei WuXian said, and seeing his chance at finally doing something fun tonight slipping away, quickly added, "Lan Zhan, you know what I'm like—I can't stay up there anymore today. My butt is going numb from sitting so much. Come on, it will only be a short trip—take care of that ghost and come back. I won't give you any trouble at all! I'll let Hanguang-Jun do all the hard work! Please, Lan Zhan, Lan Er-Gege..." He whined. "I promise I'll be good and stay in the Cloud Recesses after this. Please..."

"You'll stay?" Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian quickly nodded. "Yes, I'll stay, I'll stay. You won't have to come get me again."

When the young cultivators came back out, Wei WuXian grabbed Lan WangJi by the arm before he could change his mind. "All right, boys, let's go!"

"Your sword," Lan WangJi said.

"I left it back in the Jingshi," Wei WuXian said. "It's fine. I'll ride with you. I need to tell you about the details anyway."

"Are you...are you really married?" Liu FengYa blurted out after watching the exchange.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Does it not look like we're a lovey dovey couple?" he asked, his grin turning mischievous as he looped both his hands around Lan WangJi's arm this time, shamelessly hanging onto him. "You should be grateful, we are taking our newlywed time to come help you guys." He slouched a little so he could lean his head against Lan WangJi's shoulder.

Liu FengYa turned a brilliant shade of red and started stuttering. "You—you—"

"You, you, what?" Wei WuXian grinned. "Never seen a cutsleeve before? Or never seen a man as handsome as my husband before?" he said.

He grinned wider when Liu FengYa huffed and leapt up onto his sword to begin flying away. Guo Yi didn't have quite as interesting of a reaction, but he also leapt up on his sword.

Wei WuXian smiled watching them. "Shall we go, Lan Zhan?"

Just like that time at Yiling when Wei WuXian's talisman had warned him of trouble in the Burial mounds, Lan WangJi lifted him up with one hand around his waist to ride Bichen together. Like the other times Wei WuXian had ridden with him, Lan WangJi's posture and strength were both undeniable—so steady that if not for the frigid wind blowing against his face, Wei WuXian could have been standing on solid ground.

"Tell me the details," Lan WangJi said as they followed the young cultivators.

Wei WuXian did as requested, telling him everything he'd heard from the boys. But partway through the story, Wei WuXian began to fidget. Without spiritual power that could help regulate his temperature, he was more susceptible to the cold than he used to be. And while he was no stranger to suffering, he didn't have to right now. Lan WangJi was pressed warm to his side, and he was tall—not much taller

than Wei WuXian, but tall enough that Wei WuXian could press his face into his shoulder, protecting at least half his face from the cold. Wei WuXian wrapped his arms around Lan WangJi's middle, sighing when he felt warmer.

Lan WangJi, on the other hand, stiffened up. "What are you doing?" he said.

"I'm cold. As a good husband, the least you could do is keep me warm, right?" Wei WuXian said, batting his eyelashes up at Lan WangJi. The effect was lost, unfortunately, because Lan WangJi didn't so much as glance at him, staring straight ahead at the boys. But when he didn't drop Wei WuXian or do anything else to stop him, Wei WuXian smiled and tucked himself a little closer. "Anyway, Liu FengYa says the ghost was a middle-aged woman," he continued with the story.

After he finished telling Lan WangJi all the details, they lapsed into a comfortable silence. The moon was bright and clear in the sky, illuminating the beautiful night. He could smell sandalwood when he breathed—a cool, refreshing scent like Lan WangJi himself, and Wei WuXian found himself smiling.

"Hey, Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian asked. "Why did you agree to marry me?"

Pressed chest-to-chest like this, Wei WuXian could feel Lan WangJi take a breath. "Wei Ying, I—"

Wei WuXian felt the cold wind suddenly stop as Bichen came to a halt, hovering in midair. "What is it?"

He didn't need to ask the question. As soon as he looked, he could see what had made Lan WangJi and the two boys in front of them stop flying.

They'd arrived at their destination. There was a rope bridge stretched across a fog-stained gulley just as the boys had described, but there was no ghost, at least not one they could see, because the entire rope bridge had been set on fire.

Notes:

i still can't believe it's canon that wwz told lwj that he gave birth to a-yuan when lwj asked him who the child was. couldn't resist adding it in here lol

Chapter 2: third wheeled by a ghost

Chapter Text

Beiluo Bridge was on fire.

The two young cultivators who had led them there didn't seem to know what to do, hovering on their swords in front of Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian.

"Lan Zhan—" Wei WuXian didn't need to finish his sentence before Lan WangJi was already flying them down to the nearest bridge end.

He put Wei WuXian down on the ground, and Wei WuXian took a step back to give him space. Lan WangJi slashed at the air with his sword. Infused with spiritual energy, the blast was so powerful that

Wei WuXian's hair flew back. Immediately, the fire went out, leaving behind only a smoking black bridge stretching across the gully.

Liu FengYa and Guo Yi landed beside them after a moment.

"He's so good," Liu FengYa murmured, wide-eyed.

Wei WuXian grinned. "Of course he is," he said, and focused on business. Thanks to Lan WangJi's quick action, the bridge was still intact, though ruined for travel. "Whoever set the fire is still closeby," he said. "Hanguang-Jun," he began.

"Mm." Lan WangJi picked Wei WuXian up by the waist again to fly to the other end of the bridge.

The two young cultivators followed, calling questions.

"How do you know he's still nearby?" Liu FengYa asked. "Couldn't he have run off by now?"

"The bridge hasn't been burned enough to collapse yet," Guo Yi said. "Whoever set fire to it would want to watch and make sure it collapsed first."

Wei WuXian grinned. "Very good, Guo Yi," he said. "Why are we going to the other side now?" he asked.

Guo Yi was quiet, thinking for a moment. "Because he wasn't on the side we were on," he said.

"Exactly," Wei WuXian said. "If we didn't see him on this side, he must be on the other side, although we may not be able to catch him now that he knows we're here."

Sure enough, by the time they'd landed on the other side of the burnt bridge, there were only a series of footprints left in the dust to show their hypothesis had been correct.

"Too bad," Wei WuXian said. "The culprit could have told us about the ghost."

"The ghost? What does the bridge-burner have to do with the ghost?" Liu FengYa asked.

"You tell me." Wei WuXian turned to the young man.

Liu FengYa scrunched up his eyebrows, and after a long moment, said, "Maybe because he didn't want people to see the ghost?"

"Correct," Wei WuXian said. "Most likely, you weren't the only one to see the ghost. It's likely that this person knows who the ghost is and didn't want anyone else to recognize her so he came to get rid of it," he said. "We happened to come just a little too late to catch him, unfortunately, but..."

"But what?" Guo Yi asked.

"But burning a bridge only prevents people from traveling on it—it won't stop a ghost from appearing," Wei WuXian said and turned to Lan WangJi. "Lan Zhan," he said.



Lan WangJi began flying them up again, this time along the length of the bridge. What Wei WuXian hadn't mentioned to the boys, though, was the amount of resentful energy coming from the gulley below them. There were corpses down there—a lot of them. Wei WuXian could feel them reaching out to him for any kind of outlet for their resentment. The two halves of the Yin Tiger Seal in his pockets trembled as though excited. But that was to be expected for a place like this with such bad fengshui. Before the bridge was built, a lot of people must have stumbled into that gorge, lost their way, and died there. Even after the bridge was built, the forest around the area was so dense that it was an easy ambush spot for robbers and brigands, so countless people must have died then too.

Wei WuXian automatically reached for his flute, only to have Lan WangJi move the hand around his waist up to grab his wrist as well. "Don't, Wei Ying," he said.

"Lan Zhan, if I can bring up some of those corpses, they could help us catch the culprit," Wei WuXian said. "He can't have gone far yet."

"No," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian felt his arm tighten around his wrist, and sighed. "It's a waste to let him get away just because you're too good for demonic cultivation," he said.

Lan WangJi didn't rise to the bait, only continuing to guide the sword along the bridge.

At about the halfway point, Wei WuXian finally saw something. "Lan Zhan, there," he said, pointing. Hovering on the bridge was the outline of a woman, barely visible surrounded by the wafting gray smoke. She was small in stature, and her pale light blended almost completely in with the smoke.

Lan WangJi brought them closer.

"That's her!" Liu FengYa shouted. "I told you I saw her!"

The ghost, because that was what she was, hovered on the bridge. She was, as Liu FengYa described, a middle-aged woman who was beautiful in a way that must have meant she was stunning when she was younger. Her hair had been done up in a complex, flattering hairstyle, and she was wearing beautiful robes with ornate stitching and bright colors that only two types of people could afford—the rich, or the prostitutes who worked in brothels.

The ghost had been staring blankly out across the gorge, but at their voices, she glared up at them. Almost all ghosts left on earth were there because they had resentment tying them down, so it wasn't an expression Wei WuXian was unused to seeing. Liu FengYa, though, let out such a yelp that the ghost startled and winked out of existence for a moment.

"Shh!" Wei WuXian hissed. "Come on, come out again," he whispered, urging the ghost to reappear.

He waited, staring at the bridge.

After several long minutes, he whispered to Lan WangJi, "Lan Zhan, if you just let me call up her corpse, we'll know—it must be down there," he said. "It's only one corpse. I've already called so many, one more isn't going to make a difference."

"No," Lan WangJi answered.

"We're so close—" It would be so easy if he could just call her up. They'd be able to immediately ask who she was, what she wanted, maybe even question her about the bridge-burner.

"No," Lan WangJi repeated.

"Demonic cultivation has good uses—"

"No."

"There!" Wei WuXian was distracted from the argument when Guo Yi pointed to a spot down in the gulley.

A little ways below the bridge, the woman had appeared again, this time, hovering close to the fog-wreathed gorge. She seemed to be looking for something because she would bend every so often as she trailed along the gorge, and disappear into the fog.

"Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian said, pushing aside his frustration with him for the time being.

Lan WangJi slowly descended. The boys came as well, following close behind Lan WangJi. This close to the base of the gulley, Wei WuXian could feel the cold damp of the fog clinging to his skin, raising goosebumps everywhere it touched. He could feel the resentful energy from a number of dead coming from around them, though he couldn't see any bodies. It would only take a quick song to make them rise. He glanced at Lan WangJi again.

He felt the shift in the energy at the same time as he saw Lan WangJi's eyes widen.

"Run!" Lan WangJi ordered.

The boys startled.

"Run!" Wei WuXian shouted. "It's a trap!"

But already, thick tendrils of fog were reaching up like so many thick-fingered hands to grab at the young cultivators. Liu FengYa wobbled on his sword, and Guo Yi hovered, turning when he hears his friend gasp. The moment of hesitation cost him when an arm of fog reaches to tangle around first his ankle and then the rest of his leg all at once, dragging him down toward the gulley.

The clear, strong notes of the guqin cut through the fog.

Liu FengYa reached forward just in time to catch Guo Yi by the hand, though Guo Yi's sword was pulled down into the ravine. Still balanced in midair, Lan WangJi had unstrapped his guqin and was playing the hovering instrument with one hand, the other still holding Wei WuXian by the waist.

Within two strums, the ghost of the woman disappeared in a sprinkle of pale light, but the fog was not as easy to deal with. Every time Lan WangJi attacked one tendril, another burst up.

"It's a landborne abyss," Wei WuXian said. "We need to leave!"

The boy struggled. Liu FengYa held tight to Guo Yi's hands, but clearly, neither his cultivation nor his physical body were strong enough, because they were beginning a slow descent into the gulley, getting closer to the fog even as Lan WangJi kept it away from the boys.

"Lan Zhan, fly closer to them," Wei WuXian said.

Lan WangJi did as told, still playing his guqin to keep the fog away.

"Hold tight," Wei WuXian said and reached out as soon as he was close enough to grab Guo Yi's hand.

In a moment, he'd caught the boy, and Lan WangJi flew higher. They rose steadily, Bichen carrying the weight of three people while Lan WangJi's attention was still half-divided by playing the guqin and watching the landborne abyss.

Freed of his burden, Liu FengYa was able to fly up to meet them, his brow glistening with sweat. "Sorry," he huffed.

"My sword," Guo Yi said, staring down at the fog.

"It's gone," Wei WuXian said. "We need to retreat."

Lan WangJi agreed with a short nod. With Liu FengYa flying beside them, Lan WangJi strummed the guqin until they were far enough away that the landborne abyss gave up its prey for lost.

"What was that?" Liu FengYa asked as soon as Lan WangJi put away his guqin, signalling it was safe. Their pace of flying also slowed because it was clear that Liu FengYa was having trouble keeping pace with Lan WangJi.

"A landborne abyss," Wei WuXian said. "I'm sure you two have been told to stay away from Biling Lake?"

Guo Yi nodded, still looking depressed about his lost sword. "Our elders told us there's a waterborne abyss there."

Wei WuXian nodded. "A landborne abyss is the same principle but on land," he said. "An abyss of any kind is created when too many people have died in a place and their resentful energy never purged," he explained as they flew. "After awhile, it develops into an abyss that expects to be fed more bodies," he said. "You said a road was constructed recently to circumvent the gulley. When was it finished?"

"Nearly seven months ago now," Guo Yi said. He looked at Wei WuXian. "So the landborne abyss...it's been starving because everyone has been taking the other road?" he asked.

Wei WuXian smiled. "Exactly," he said. "That ghost was probably part of the landborne abyss trying to lure prey down into the gulley," he said. "It's a good thing the two of you ran into me before you tried to cross that bridge again." A thought occurred to him and he glanced at Lan WangJi. "Lan Zhan, do you

think the bridge-burner knew it was a landborne abyss and that was his way of keeping people away from it? Or because the bridge-burner knew the ghost? Or both?" He thought out loud.

"There is not enough information to know yet," Lan WangJi answered.

Wei WuXian sighed. "It's just like you to say that," he said. "All right, no guessing then."

The case concluded that way. They parted ways with the two young cultivators when they reached Caiyi Town. Without the bridge, the two boys had no choice but to go the long way using the road, and planned to set out the next morning. Lan WangJi gave Guo Yi a recommendation for a swordsmith in Gusu for a new sword, and Wei WuXian told them to work hard and cultivate more.

Then he and Lan WangJi headed back to the Cloud Recesses. By the time they arrived, it was far past curfew, but a landborne abyss couldn't wait, so Lan WangJi went to wake Lan XiChen.

Although Wei WuXian had been briefly greeted by Lan XiChen at the wedding ceremony, the Lan sect leader had gone to Yunmeng immediately after to help smooth things over with the other sects, so this was really his first time speaking to his, well, his brother-in-law since then.

Wei WuXian found himself a little nervous even though Lan XiChen had always by far been the nice Lan in the family.

Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi sat side-by-side, waiting in Hanshi's main sitting room until Lan XiChen came out to meet them.

"Sect Leader Lan, we're sorry for waking you this late at night," Wei WuXian apologized as soon as Lan XiChen came. Although technically he was only a few years older than himself and Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian always felt like he was speaking to someone much older when he saw Lan XiChen. He was the one Jiang Cheng had done the primary negotiations with, and Wei WuXian found himself a little nervous that, upon finding Wei WuXian had not only broken the rules on his first day, but had also made Lan WangJi break the rules, Lan XiChen might annul the marriage right then and there. After all, apart from Lan QiRen, no one was closer to Lan WangJi. Even though Lan XiChen had helped them by taking in Wei WuXian and the Wen clan, there would probably be a limit to how much he'd allow Wei WuXian to blacken his younger brother's name.

"No need to worry." Lan XiChen held up a hand and smiled, sitting down across the table from them. "WangJi already told me it's urgent. What happened?"

Wei WuXian found himself edging a little closer to Lan WangJi. "We found a landborne abyss," He started with the most important part. "It was my fault," he added. "I left the Cloud Recesses without telling anyone tonight." He confessed the entire affair to Lan XiChen, words tumbling out one after the other until the story was finished. He took a deep breath. "It wasn't Lan Zhan's fault," he said. "If we'll be punished for breaking curfew, please punish me—he was only coming to get me." He bowed his head. He'd caused Lan WangJi to be punished because him once when they were fifteen years old. He still remembered how surprised he had been when Lan WangJi actually punished the both of them, even though it was Wei WuXian's fault. He'd respected him for it ever since, and had no intention of dragging Lan WangJi down with him again.

He waited for the verdict, only to hear a soft, gentle laugh.

Wei WuXian startled and looked up.

Lan XiChen was laughing. "You haven't changed since you studied here, Young Master Wei," he said. "The more important thing is this landborne abyss," he said, sobering up. "Technically, that gulley is in the Lanling territory, so it falls under LanlingJin jurisdiction. I was already planning meet with Jin GuangYao next week for his son's Full Month Celebration, but I can move the trip up and go tomorrow." He looked over at his brother. "WangJi, in the morning, please send a few of our cultivators there to erect a barrier until I've informed LanlingJin."

Lan WangJi nodded.

"As for the other matter," Lan XiChen said, and Wei WuXian's stomach sunk to his feet. "Even though it's good that we discovered this landborne abyss before it took any more lives, you still broke curfew," he said. "I think copying the rules one time will be enough punishment."

Wei WuXian stared at him. That was the lightest punishment he'd ever gotten in all the times he'd been punished at the Cloud Recesses. "Yes! We will definitely do that! Thank you, Sect Leader Lan! Lan Zhan, let's go," Wei WuXian said, grabbing Lan WangJi to leave before Lan XiChen could change his mind. "We're going to bed! Good night!"

He all but pushed Lan WangJi out of the Hanshi.

"It was my fault you got punished too, so I'll copy for you," Wei WuXian said as they walked down the halls toward the Jingshi. He was in a good mood with the light punishment and things having turned out all right with the landborne abyss. Lan XiChen could be counted on to take care of it now that he knew.

"No need," Lan WangJi answered.

Wei WuXian grinned, looking over at him. "Even when it's not your fault, you'll accept punishment," he said, putting his hands behind his head. "You're too good, Lan Zhan." Lan WangJi's brow furrowed, and Wei WuXian's grin widened. "I'm paying you a genuine compliment here, Lan Er-Gege," he said. "You're really admirable. I've never met anyone like..."

Lan WangJi held up a hand for silence and Wei WuXian went quiet, looking for whatever had caught his attention.

At the end of one of the outdoor hallways leading to the disciples' headquarters, a dark figure was slowly walking toward them.

"Wen Ning? A-Yuan?" Wei WuXian asked as the figure came out into the moonlight. "What are you doing wandering around so late at night?"

"Young Master Wei? Second Master Lan?" Wen Ning looked sheepish for being caught out. He had been walking slowly along the hallway, holding A-Yuan in his arms. "We didn't mean to break curfew," he apologized. "A-Yuan has been having trouble sleeping in a new place, so I brought him out for a bit... I'll take punishment." He looked more sheepish than ever, bowing to Lan WangJi.

"Xian-Gege," A-Yuan said, holding his arms out until Wei WuXian picked him up from Wen Ning's arms.

"A-Yuan, why are you awake so late?" Wei WuXian asked, holding him close and letting A-Yuan tuck his head into the curve of his neck.

"S...Snores," A-Yuan confessed. "The snoring is so loud."

Wei WuXian snorted a laugh. Back in the Yiling Burial Mounds, A-Yuan and his grandmother had their own room, so although the old woman snored, A-Yuan wouldn't be disturbed by much else. Now that they'd been re-housed with all the disciples, even in the women's and children's quarters where A-Yuan was staying, there must be a lot more people. He was having trouble getting used to the noise, though Wei WuXian had the hardest time imagining any Lan snoring. He tried to imagine Lan WangJi snore, and even with his creative mind, he could not summon the image. Of course, he'd slept next to Lan WangJi last night and in the past before too, so he already knew Lan WangJi was as perfect in sleep as he was awake.

"All right, all right," Wei WuXian said, rocking A-Yuan in his arms as the child yawned, playing with the collar of Wei WuXian's robe. "Wen Ning, they let you out? Your sister said they locked you up for observation."

Wen Ning nodded. "They let me come out to sleep," he said. "But um, I don't need to sleep," he said, looking even more apologetic at Lan WangJi. "So when A-Yuan was having trouble sleeping, I thought I'd walk him around until he got tired."

"How long will they keep you?" Lan WangJi asked.

"Just one more day," Wen Ning looked a little awestruck at being addressed directly by Lan WangJi. "They are treating me very well," he said quickly. "They said since there has never been a case like me, they need to be cautious."

Although Wei WuXian had complained to Wen Qing earlier about the GusuLan treatment of Wen Ning, it was already far better than he had actually expected given how bent on the righteous way GusuLan was. At worst, he'd expected them to hunt Wen Ning down even if they accepted all the other Wens into GusuLan. At best, he'd expected them to lock him out of the Cloud Recesses to fend for himself. One of his own stipulations for the marriage was that Wen Ning be allowed to live with his family. He'd refused to budge on that point, and in the end, GusuLan had finally consented with their own caveat that Wen Ning could stay only as long as he wasn't a threat. Apparently, that included these few days of observation, but Wen Ning didn't seem to mind.

"Wen Ning is really useful," Wei WuXian told Lan WangJi. "Before I had him, I could only bring one bag of groceries up from Yiling myself. Wen Ning can drag a whole cart up the mountain by himself with me sitting in it too," he bragged.

"Ah, Second Master Lan is stronger," Wen Ning said, interrupting Wei WuXian. "You told me before that he carried you and another disciple on Bichen away from a waterborne abyss," he said, glancing timidly at Lan WangJi.

“Oh, Lan Zhan did that again tonight,” Wei WuXian said.

“I can take him,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian turned to him, distracted from his story. “What?”

“Your arms are getting tired,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian’s arms had, indeed, started getting tired holding A-Yuan who had fallen asleep, head pillowed against his chest. He hadn’t shifted much, though—Lan WangJi really was observant. He happily passed over the child, a little curious about how Lan WangJi would look holding him.

Lan WangJi took him in the same position, letting A-Yuan use his shoulder as a pillow. Wei WuXian found himself smiling as he watched. “You really are good with kids, Lan Zhan,” he said. “Anyway, like I was saying—we found a landborne abyss,” he continued telling Wen Ning his story.

By the time he had finished recounting the whole story again, Wei WuXian had finally started calming down after the excitement of the day.

“Wen Ning, can you take A-Yuan back?” Wei WuXian asked, and helped Lan WangJi pass A-Yuan back to Wen Ning’s arms. “Ah, he drooled on you,” Wei WuXian said, staring at the stain on Lan WangJi’s otherwise pristine white robes. Even after that battle with the landborne abyss, not a mark of dust had settled on him. “Let’s go back, I’ll help you get it out tomorrow,” he said as they parted ways with Wen Ning.

The contrast between Lan WangJi’s otherwise perfect appearance and that spot of drool on his robe made Wei WuXian smile. So even the great Hanguang-Jun was defenseless against a child, he thought, delighted at the discovery.

By the time they’d reached the Jingshi, there wouldn’t be more than a few hours before sunrise, and Wei WuXian undressed down to his undergarments and got into his side of the large bed without protest.

Lan WangJi took more time, folding both their discarded clothes carefully before he got in his side of the bed. There was at least a two-person distance between them. Wei WuXian wasn’t sure if the large distance was more for his or for Lan WangJi’s comfort—maybe both. It funny how such a gesture was really just so Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian thought, smiling as he fell asleep.

Wei WuXian woke feeling disoriented. He was pressed against something—no, someone warm. Lan Zhan, he thought sleepily. He smelled nice, like sandalwood but a softer, warmer scent than the incense burner he used. Wei WuXian smiled and tucked himself up a little closer to the soft undergarments pressed against his cheek, sighing in contentment. When his eyes squinted open, he could see the outline of Lan WangJi’s form stretched beside him, their two sets of blankets now indiscernible from one another like this. He could feel the rise and fall of Lan WangJi’s steady breathing. It was still dark in the room, must still be so early that Lan WangJi hadn’t even woken up yet. He shut his eyes, ready to drift back to sleep.

But then, that was strange. He had never before woken up before Lan Wangji, so why was he awake now?

The thought dragged Wei WuXian out of sleep again, making him aware. It had been a feeling that woke him, he realized. The back of his head tingled, hairs prickling at the back of his skull—he was being watched.

He shifted and turned to look behind him.

His eyes widened and he slowly sat up, making no sudden movements. He reached over and shook Lan Wangji's arm a few times.

He could feel Lan Wangji stir behind him. "Wei Ying?" he asked, his voice gruff with sleep.

Wei WuXian tightened his grip, fingers digging into his arm, and Lan Wangji must have seen it too because he went stiff and silent behind him.

He could see the tiny crow's feet lining her eyes, the full lips that had been painted in rouge, the ornaments that gently swayed from her hair. Not an arm's length away, hovering at the edge of the bed, the ghost of the woman from Beiluo Bridge was staring straight at Wei WuXian.

Chapter 3: hanguang-jun goes to a brothel with his husband, but not like that

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian kept his eyes on the ghost in front of him. It had been some time since any supernatural creature startled him awake—he'd spent the last few months sleeping in a cave next to a corpse-filled pool and Wen Ning's talisman-covered body. But maybe because he'd grown relaxed in the Cloud Recesses, he'd gotten complacent.

Wei WuXian felt Lan Wangji sit up behind him. It had been a long time since Wei WuXian had backup, and even though he had handled all manner of supernatural creatures on his own and knew he could do it, it was nice knowing he had someone he could rely on.

The ghost stared only at Wei WuXian, her eyes unwavering from his own.

"Who are you?" Wei WuXian asked slowly.

She didn't seem as angry as she had on the bridge, her brow was smooth from any furrow. This close up, he could see the details—the puffiness under her eyes from not enough sleep, the lines drawn down from her nose down to the corners of her lips, fine wrinkles covered in powder. The most distinctive feature on her, though, was the huge bloodstain on the front of her dress. He hadn't noticed it before because her dress was also red, and the bloodstain so large that it covered the entire front half of her



chest, looking like a bad dye job. But now, Wei WuXian could see that it had been some sort of bad chest injury that had killed her.

“What do you want?” he asked. She must be a strong ghost to have gotten into the Cloud Recesses. Between the good fengshui, the cultivators, and the warding arrays around every major sect, it would be difficult for anything but an extremely strong ghost to get inside. Wei WuXian had originally assumed she was part of the landborne abyss’s lure, but maybe it was more than that.

The woman opened her mouth.

Wei WuXian automatically recoiled when a gush of black spectre’s blood poured from her mouth. The blood, of course, was as ghostly as she was and disappeared into nothingness. Her tongue had been cut out.

“Lan Zhan, where’s your guqin?” Wei WuXian asked.

When he’d studied at the Cloud Recesses in the past, like all the other students, Wei WuXian had learned about the GusuLan Sect’s special guqin language. It typically took long years of hard work to learn the guqin language and communicate with spirits using music, but Lan WangJi had already mastered it before they had met. Wei WuXian remembered Lan QiRen making Lan WangJi demonstrate once in front of the class a particular song, Inquiry, that had been composed by a GusuLan ancestor. It was useful exactly for cases like this where the victim’s identity was unknown.

Lan WangJi seemed to catch on to what Wei WuXian wanted, and he felt Lan WangJi move behind him. A moment later, he saw Lan WangJi return in the periphery of his vision, and place his guqin down on the bed.

Lan WangJi began to play, a short excerpt of a melody echoing in the empty quiet of the room. Then he took his right hand away from the instrument.

A moment later, one string vibrated on its own.

The ghost had answered.

They could speak to her using the guqin language.

“Lan Zhan, ask her who she is,” Wei WuXian said.

Lan WangJi played a few phrases of a melody, and once more waited.

This time, a series of notes sounded.

“Her name is Yang FeiFei,” Lan WangJi said after the sound died away.

The name was unfamiliar, but it sounded like a nickname or a stage name—the type that belonged to a young girl or that a courtesan might adopt to charm men. It seemed Wei WuXian’s original analysis of this ghost woman might be correct.

“Ask her what she wants,” Wei WuXian said. “Why has she followed us here?”

Lan WangJi played a few more phrases. This time, when he stopped, there was a long silence. Then one string after another was plucked, series of notes in quick succession that continued for far longer than Wei Wuxian expected. Nearly fifteen minutes had passed before the strings stilled.

“The answer is unclear,” Lan WangJi said when the last of the notes had faded. “She has much to say.”

“Even I could tell that,” Wei WuXian said. “It’s a complicated story, isn’t it?”

Lan WangJi gave a short nod.

“Lan Zhan.” Wei WuXian glanced at Lan WangJi before turning his attention back to the ghost. “If you’ll be my anchor, I can try Empathy.”

Every sect had its own method of seeking answers from spirits. GusuLan specialized in the guqin language, but during the month Wei WuXian had been shut up in the library with Lan WangJi, he’d come across an old spell called Empathy that had fallen into disuse from some long-lost sect. He’d only used it once before when he’d been trying every method to bring Wen Ning back after his rash promise to Wen Qing. It hadn’t been much use that time, so he’d been itching to try it again ever since. Empathy, unlike Inquiry, used the user’s own body as a medium so in theory, he would be able to enter into the ghost’s soul and memory, and experience everything they had experienced. Because of that, it involved a high risk of possession—if the ghost was stronger than the empathizer, it could take over the body entirely. It was probably the reason the spell had gone into disuse.

“No,” Lan WangJi said.

“I can control it, especially with you as an anchor,” Wei WuXian said. Yang FeiFei’s ghost might be strong enough to have followed them into the Cloud Recesses, but Wei WuXian had even managed to make Wen Ning a living corpse—he would be able to control it. “Just pull me back if it takes too long—”

“No,” Lan WangJi repeated.

“I’ve already tried it before with Wen Ning, and I was fine,” Wei WuXian said, conveniently leaving out how the spell hadn’t worked that time. “Just let me try for a few minutes. It’ll at least give us a few answers.”

“No,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian was starting to get annoyed. “Even you can’t understand her answers using Inquiry,” he said. “So now what? Because you’re stubborn, you’re just going to let her haunt us? For how long?” he demanded. “It’s not like she can’t try to possess me even without Empathy.”

Lan WangJi was frowning now, just the slightest downturn of his eyebrows, but the expression made Wei WuXian’s heart speed up. “Not until you’ve been purified,” he answered. Of course that would be his response. Lan WangJi had never approved of Wei WuXian from the moment they met, and every interaction ended with them parting on bad terms. There was no reason that a marriage of convenience would have changed that.

Wei WuXian laughed. “Purified? With that stone? I’ll be white-haired and wrinkled by the time that happens,” he said. “Am I supposed to be locked up until then?”

Lan WangJi actually looked angry now, his eyes burning with an intensity Wei WuXian had witnessed a handful of times.

“You’re just like all the rest! Self-righteous and stuck in your ways,” Wei WuXian continued, the words pouring out of him now. “So what if I practice demonic cultivation? You and all your righteous path sects can judge me, but don’t forget who helped bring down the Wen clan in the end. It was fine for you to use me for demonic cultivation when it suited your cause, but not now that I’m more powerful than all of you combined?” he said. “I might have been forced to marry you, but don’t think you can control me!”

“Wei WuXian!” Lan WangJi said, pale eyes flashing.

“Am I wrong?” Wei WuXian answered. He was breathing hard, his fists clenched to his sides. He was ready to argue more, to yell until he was satisfied, but Lan WangJi looked away from him first.

That was when Wei WuXian noticed that during their argument the sky had lightened, and with the dawn, the ghost had disappeared.

“She’ll be back,” Wei WuXian said. “And you better make up your mind what you want before then, Lan WangJi.”

Wei WuXian was in a bad temper the next day. For one, it had taken him a long time to go back to sleep after the fight. He didn’t know when the ghost might reappear—typically, they, like all other dead creatures preferred to come out at night, which was why night hunts were held when they were. But there were always exceptions, and he didn’t particularly want to wake to a ghost staring at him again. For another, after their fight, Lan WangJi had separated their blankets again, folding Wei WuXian’s neatly on his side of the bed, and since it was 5 a.m., left after that.

Wei WuXian had been keyed up and grouchy even after he was gone, and it had taken him awhile to fall back into a fitful sleep.

By the time he woke up for a second time, it was nearly noon, and he was still tired.

Breakfast had been left on the table in the Jingshi’s main room that had long since gone cold. It was really only cold congee and a few side dishes, but someone had also left a jar of chili peppers for him to season his breakfast. The consideration of it all—that Lan WangJi had apparently given the servants instructions not to wake Wei WuXian, knowing he hadn’t gotten enough sleep last night—made Wei WuXian feel a mix of guilty and annoyed about being made to feel guilty.

After breakfast, Wei WuXian went to the library on his own.

Lan WangJi was already there and reading a book when he appeared. He glanced up only when Wei WuXian sat down across the table from him.

Wei WuXian reached over to pick up the Purification Stone that had already been placed out for him. "Um, about last night, I'm sorry," he said, passing it between his hands.

"No need to apologize," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian took a breath. "The chili peppers," he began and glanced up at Lan WangJi. "Did you get them for me?"

Lan WangJi gave a curt nod.

"Thank you," Wei WuXian said.

Lan WangJi didn't answer, only looking back down at his book. Wei WuXian supposed that was his cue as well, and picked up the Purification Stone, settling into lotus position to begin.

It was difficult for Wei Wuxian to sit still that day. He kept glancing at Lan WangJi, wondering what he was thinking or if he was still thinking about the fight at all. He wondered what they'd do when the ghost came back as it would inevitably do—if he couldn't perform Empathy and Inquiry was no good in this case, they might have to resort to forceful suppression. But Yang FeiFei had clearly followed them back with a purpose, and Wei WuXian felt sympathy for her—if they could help her, he didn't want to suppress her spirit and prevent her from reincarnation forever.

He forgot all about the problem when a servant came to the library pavilion late in the afternoon and delivered a red invitation.

Wei WuXian opened the invitation and, after skimming the words, jumped up, waving the card in Lan WangJi's face.

"Look! It's my shijie's wedding invitation!" he said, grabbing Lan WangJi's sleeve and shoving the card closer to his face until he finally took it from Wei WuXian. With everything that had happened, Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan's wedding date had been pushed back. Wei WuXian had been worried that his problems might affect his shijie's future. Even if he didn't personally like Jin ZiXuan, she did, and if, because of him, the Jin clan had problems with her, he would never forgive himself. But apparently, the date had been set again for a month from now, and this time, Wei WuXian would even be able to attend.

He grabbed Lan WangJi's arm and shook it. "We're invited," he said. "I can see my shijie get married!" When he'd heard about Jiang YanLi's engagement from Lan WangJi before all this had happened, he'd thought for sure that he wouldn't be able to attend. He hadn't even been able to go any farther than Yiling. But thanks to Lan WangJi now, he would be able to see his shijie looking her most beautiful on the happiest day of her life.

"Too bad she's still marrying Jin ZiXuan," he said, making a face. "But we're invited," he said, hooking his chin over Lan WangJi's shoulder to look at the invitation again. "I have to prepare the best present," he decided. "Can I prepare it?" he asked. "You're okay with that, right?"

"Mm," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian beamed and hugged his arm a little tighter. “Thank you,” he said.

“First, let go of me,” Lan WangJi said, voice strained.

Wei WuXian quickly withdrew. “Don’t get mad, Lan Er-Gege,” he apologized. “I’ll start purification now,” he said.

“That’s enough for today,” Lan WangJi said, getting to his feet.

“What? Why?” Wei WuXian asked, surprised, as he stowed away the invitation in his pocket. The sun had not yet set, and since he had missed the entire morning, he’d thought Lan WangJi would make him practice purification until dinnertime. He was in such a good mood now, he’d been determined to do it without complaint to make it up to Lan WangJi.

“We’ll eat dinner now. Prepare for travel,” Lan WangJi said.

“Where are we going?” Wei WuXian asked, following him out of the library.

“When the ghost comes tonight, we will follow it,” Lan WangJi answered.

So that was his plan. Since Lan WangJi’s Inquiry couldn’t give them the answers they needed, and Wei WuXian was forbidden from using Empathy, the next most practical thing to do was to follow the ghost. Spirits, like corpses with resentful energy, would always lead back to either their bodies, or the cause of their deaths. Once they knew who this Yang FeiFei was, they would naturally be able to exorcise her.

Wei WuXian obediently followed Lan WangJi to the kitchen. It was still early enough in the afternoon, that apart from large pots of rice being cooked, no other food had been prepared yet. Wei WuXian didn’t realize what Lan WangJi intended to do until he picked up a pot.

“You’re going to cook?” Wei WuXian asked, eyes wide. He burst out laughing at the sheer incongruity of seeing Lan WangJi, in his pristine white robes, holding a cooking pan. The Lan WangJi who had accepted a pair of rabbits from Wei WuXian years ago because he refused to let him kill and cook them—this Lan WangJi intended to cook? “Do you even know how to cook? Have you ever even been in a kitchen before?” Laughing, he took the pot from Lan WangJi. “Step aside, let Master Wei show you how it’s done!” he said.

Lan WangJi’s eyebrow twitched, but he moved to one side, letting Wei WuXian take over. Wei WuXian actually enjoyed cooking the same way he enjoyed experimenting with different spells and talismans and cultivation techniques. It was fun, and he liked seasoning his own food—it was only that he’d gotten banned from the kitchens at Lotus Pier that he didn’t get to cook often.

Lan WangJi was a surprisingly good partner. He would hand Wei WuXian whatever ingredients he asked for, and when Wei WuXian handed him plates to set out, he did so without complaint. In a little under an hour, they had set a full table for two in the dining area full of red-colored dishes still so hot they were steaming.

“Let’s eat!” Wei WuXian said cheerfully, and watched as Lan WangJi picked up his bowl of rice and his chopsticks.

Lan WangJi hesitated and then took some of the spicy mapo tofu Wei WuXian had made, bringing it to his lips.

“How is it?” Wei WuXian leaned forward in his seat, waiting for the verdict.

Lan WangJi coughed. “Good,” he said.

Wei WuXian beamed at him. “Right? I remembered your taste is like mine when we ate at that restaurant in Yiling,” he said, grinning. “See? I made you all dishes you ordered that time too.”

Lan WangJi paused, looking between the food and Wei WuXian. “You remembered,” he said.

Wei WuXian smiled. “Of course I did! It was the first good meal I got to eat since we moved to Yiling—Wen Qing never lets me add spice to anything. Sorry I forgot and made you pay that time too,” he said. “This is making up for it, okay?” he said cheerfully and dug in himself. Since Wei WuXian had an unusual love for spicy food, it was hard for him to find someone who enjoyed it as much as he did. Even Jiang Cheng who had grown up with a Yunmeng palate would just curse and hit the table when he tasted Wei WuXian’s cooking, so he was happy that he’d finally found someone with an equal appreciation for it. Spicy food really was the best after all!

After dinner, they went back to the Jingshi and prepared for the job. Lan WangJi laid out a variety of different talismans and spells and healing herbs and elixirs that they might need, allowing Wei WuXian to pack away all the ones he wanted into his qiankun sleeves first. Then they settled down to wait.

“How long do you think it’ll be before she comes?” Wei WuXian wondered out loud as he sipped from the tea that Lan WangJi had poured for him. “Do you think she’s a courtesan?” he asked. “From the name and her clothes, she seems like she might be, except that she’s older.”

“There is not enough information to determine yet,” Lan WangJi answered.

“How do you think Wen Ning is doing?” Wei WuXian continued, bored and just wanting to talk. “Do you think they let him out yet? I should ask him if he can sense ghosts the same way he can sense other walking corpses,” he said. “Did you know he can tell when other walking corpses are nearby? He said it’s because they’re his kind—I wonder if ghosts are similar enough for him to sense.”

He continued talking about whatever came to his mind, and Lan WangJi would answer the occasional question or nod to show that he was listening. Before long, the sun had set, and Wei WuXian was in the middle of telling Lan WangJi about the time when he’d buried A-Yuan like a radish when the air by the table shimmered, and Yang FeiFei appeared.

Wei WuXian focused on her and smiled. “Good evening, Lady Yang, we’ve been waiting for you,” he said to the ghost. “Show us where you would like us to go.”

The ghost nodded and floated out the door.

Ghosts, since they were no longer bound by physical bodies, could travel at any speed they wanted, but Yang FeiFei floated slowly and gracefully down the hallways and then pebbled pathways of the Cloud

Recesses. She had likely died recently then, if she still traveled the same way she had when she was still living. The problem was that there was no way to speed her up until she learned to do it herself.

And so they walked all night. By daybreak, they still hadn't reached the destination when the ghost disappeared, but without her, they could travel faster. Lan Wangji flew them both on Bichen when Wei WuXian claimed to have forgotten his sword in the excitement of seeing the ghost again. They followed the road until they reached the nearest city and found an inn to rest for the day.

Wei WuXian originally debated whether to get one or two rooms—since theirs was a marriage of convenience, now that they were away from anyone who might care, they didn't need to share a room. But Lan Wangji made the decision for him and ordered just one room. Apparently he didn't trust that Wei WuXian wouldn't try to run off again even after he'd promised to stay.

They slept through the day, and in the late afternoon, left their room.

The innkeeper came rushing up to them as soon as they stepped down into the first floor, asking if there was anything the two gentlemen wanted, the chef was good here, and they could bring food and alcohol right over.

Wei WuXian grinned and shook his head. "No, but tell me, where is the largest brothel here?" he asked.

The innkeeper looked taken aback and his gaze shot between Lan Wangji and himself. "Are the two of you not..." he trailed off.

Wei WuXian ignored it and leaned close. "Come on, a man has needs. Tell us," he said, grinning conspiratorially.

The innkeeper didn't look entirely convinced but nodded. "There's one if you go a little further down this street," he said. "You'll pass a butcher shop first. That building is hung with lanterns so you can't miss it," he said.

"Thanks," Wei WuXian said cheerfully. "Let's go, Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji followed him out the door. Wei WuXian grinned as he walked, darting glances at Lan Wangji's face. "I bet you've never been to a brothel before, have you, Hanguang-Jun?" he asked. "You never even saw a spring drawing before I showed you that one time. Don't be too shocked." He grinned as they reached the door of the brothel. "And asking for information is just asking. Don't cheat on me, okay?" He winked at Lan Wangji.

"Ridiculous," Lan Wangji said, and Wei WuXian laughed as he walked inside.

The brothel, like most others, was decked in red lanterns and smelled strongly of incense and perfume. As soon as they walked in, the madam hurried up to them, her eyes widening at the sight of Lan Wangji as though she couldn't believe such a person had walked through her doors.

"Welcome to my establishment," she gushed. "Have you two traveled far?" she asked. "What would you like to start with? How about choosing a few dishes?" she suggested. "Our cooks are wonderful here, and our alcohol is the finest in this area. I can send a few beautiful girls to keep you company."

"A table and dinner will do for now," Wei WuXian said and followed her through the building. Like most inns, the first couple of floors would be dining areas where the courtesans would entertain—sometimes there would be one who performed on an instrument or sang, sometimes there might be one who danced. Patrons would watch and eat, and other girls would accompany them, pouring them alcohol and urging them to buy more. Then there were the bedrooms further inside the complex where men could be privately entertained or spend the night.

Tonight, there was a girl performing at the center of the dining floor on a guqin. The madam led them to one of the open tables close by her.

"Madam, we were wondering—does the name Yang FeiFei sound familiar to you?" Wei WuXian asked as they took a seat.

The madam frowned and shook her head. "It doesn't," she said. "But we have a lot of other girls. I'm sure we can find one to suit your preferences."

Wei WuXian shook his head. "I'm only interested in that one in particular. She's a bit older, in her middle years, very beautiful," he said.

The madam raised her eyebrows. "An old courtesan? Our house has none of those," she said.

Wei WuXian shrugged. "All right then, we may as well get dinner," he said and named off a few dishes.

"We're eating here?" Lan Wangji asked after the madam had rushed off, promising quick service. He didn't seem to know where to look.

Wei WuXian nodded. "Why not? Even if you're not hungry, I am, and we're already here. We can enjoy the scenery while we eat. Even you can appreciate a beautiful woman, can't you?" he said, grinning. "Don't look so serious. I didn't even order alcohol. We can leave right after we've eaten."

Wei WuXian fully enjoyed himself as they waited. The innkeeper had given them a good recommendation—the girls at this brothel were cute and easy to watch as they came and served the food. Lan Wangji looked so uncomfortable when a girl bent down right across from him next to Wei WuXian, though, that Wei WuXian took pity on him and told the girls to leave once the table had been set.

"Lan Zhan, you really aren't living to the fullest," Wei WuXian scolded him once the girls had left. "That girl was clearly interested in you, didn't you see?" he said and grinned. "She might have even given you a discount."

"Not interested," Lan Wangji bit out.

Wei WuXian laughed. "I guess it's a good thing you married me, then," he said. "You won't have to worry about any of that!"

Lan Wangji didn't say anything, only picking up his chopsticks and starting to eat.



Wei WuXian found his attention wandering again as he ate. The girl playing the guqin was also pretty, he thought, though she didn't play the guqin as well as Lan WangJi did. Of course, in terms of looks, Lan WangJi was also unbeatable—he wasn't called one of the Two Jades of Lan for no reason, after all. Wei WuXian found himself feeling oddly proud of Lan WangJi, and then silly for comparing Lan WangJi to any sort of woman.

After they finished eating, they left and Lan WangJi flew them toward the next city following the road. Since they hadn't found the right city yet, it made sense to follow the road to the next city down and cover more ground before the ghost showed up again. Wei WuXian held onto Lan WangJi, wrinkling his nose when he smelled the perfume still lingering on his clothes.

They had already reached the next town by the time the ghost showed up, and as expected, she continued leading them in the same eastern direction.

They ran into dead ends this way three more times, but on the fifth night, they had barely walked through the doors of a brothel before the madam was already spilling information.

"Oh, you certainly came to the right place," she said to them. "The other brothel here in Yueyang had a terrible misfortune just two weeks ago."

"What misfortune?" Wei WuXian asked.

"Oh, well, I'm not sure I should say. I don't like to gossip," the madam said meaningfully.

"How about a jar of your finest alcohol and a few dishes," Wei WuXian said.

"Of course!" the madam said, summoning a servant to carry away their orders. "It's not that I enjoy gossiping," she repeated, clearly pleased with her audience, "but people should know before they get themselves involved with bad luck," she said and sat herself down at their table. "A month ago, there was a murder and there's been nothing but bad luck here since."

"Who died?" Wei WuXian asked, narrowing in on the information. "A courtesan?"

"How did you know one of the victims was a courtesan?" the madam asked. The servant returned with a jar of alcohol and three bowls. The madam began to pour alcohol for them.

"Oh, rumors here and there," Wei WuXian said. "So she worked there?"

The madam nodded, jumping back into her story. "But the unusual thing was that she wasn't from that brothel," she said. "Or more accurately, she worked there a long time ago in her youth, but years ago, she moved to another city—some people say she moved away because she had conceived a child and wanted to raise it in the Qishan countryside. Others said she abandoned her child and moved to another city in the Yunmeng area to work at another brothel," she said. "But you want to know what the scariest thing about her is?"

Wei WuXian leaned forward. "What?"

The madam said in a loud stage whisper, "They say her lover was the Yiling Patriarch!" she said. "The Yiling Patriarch had a child."

Wei WuXian choked on the sip of alcohol he'd just taken, and immediately turned to Lan Wangji, trying to convey with his eyes that it definitely wasn't him. He had only just had his first kiss by a total stranger forced on him a few months ago. As much as he appreciated how women looked, he had never gone any further than casual flirting. Lan Wangji stared impassively back at him.

"I um, I don't think the Yiling Patriarch has a lover," Wei WuXian said. "And, and didn't he just get married?" he said. "Yeah, he just got married."

"Oh, you know how it is, young master," the madam said with a chuckle. "The Yiling Patriarch has quite a reputation with the women if you know what I mean." She winked. "It doesn't take marriage to..." She made a gesture with her hand.

Wei WuXian laughed weakly and gave up. Even if he argued that the Yiling Patriarch would have only been a child when this happened, he clearly wasn't going to be believed, and he didn't really want to know what other crazy rumors were going on about him. "So when did she come back here?"

The madam leaned forward. "That's the thing, you see—after she left Yueyang, she never came back. Not until she suddenly turned up dead in that brothel. I heard that the madam there didn't even know she had returned until she discovered the body."

"So she was in the brothel when she died?" Wei WuXian asked.

The madam nodded. "Oh yes, and you'll never guess who she was with—it was Chang Ping."

"Who's that?" Wei WuXian asked.

The madam shook her head. "You really are new to this area. Don't you know, Chang Ping is the head of the Chang cultivator clan. Imagine, someone killed a cultivator and his mistress!" She looked significantly at Wei WuXian. "It was definitely the Yiling Patriarch, he couldn't tolerate someone coming after his old lover. Who else would be able to kill a cultivator in such a way?"

Wei WuXian nearly choked again. Again, he was being blamed for something he hadn't done. "How did they die?" he asked.

The madam grimaced. "Chang Ping died of lingchi, you know—being cut thousands of times all over his body until he died."

"And the woman?"

"Her heart was cut out of her body while she was still alive," the madam answered.

Wei WuXian thought of the blood-drenched dress that their ghost wore.

He had seen a lot of death, and much of it in the most gruesome ways possible. He had even committed some of those killings himself, but thinking of someone dying either of these ways would still elicit a shiver from anyone hearing it.

“What was the courtesan’s name?” Wei WuXian asked, though he was already sure he knew the answer.

“Her name?” the madam said. “It was Yang FeiFei.”

“Can you tell us where this brothel is?” Wei WuXian asked.

“Oh I wouldn’t go there. You’ll attract the attention of the Chang cultivators,” the madam said. “They’ve been visiting there every day since then waiting for the Yiling Patriarch to show up again so they can seek revenge.”

“Why do they think he’s still here?” Wei WuXian asked.

“Because he’s cursed the Chang clan,” the madam said. “Since those murders, they’ve had dead birds left by their door step, creepy messages written in blood on their walls—no one dares go near that place.”

Wei WuXian exchanged a glance with Lan Wangji. It looked like Yang FeiFei had led the to Yueyang because her murderer was still here.

Notes:

quick question, guys--do you prefer medium-length chapters like this one with short wait time or long chapters with longer wait time?

bc this chapter & the next chapter were actually originally planned to be 1 chapter but it's already at like 5k words and a lot of stuff is going to happen in next chapter too so i ended up just cutting it off here... and there's probably going to be similar issues in future chapters too so let me this chapter was satisfying enough to read or if you would have preferred the whole thing at once?

Chapter 4: chang clan's curse

Notes:

quick reminder

Jin ZiXuan  $\neq$  Jin ZiXun

Jin ZiXuan is Jiang YanLi's peacock of a fiancée  
Jin ZiXun is his shitty cousin

Chapter Text

After they had gotten as much information out of the madam as they could, they headed for the second brothel. At twilight in a city like this, there would typically be a lot of vendors hocking their street wares

and food before nightfall, but in Yueyang, almost all the stalls and shops they saw were already shut up despite it being just past dusk. But light shone through the cracks of shuttered windows and showing between doorframes. Wei WuXian could feel eyes peering out at them, watching the strangers who had walked into their town. Clearly whatever was going on with the Chang clan had this entire city spooked.

“What do you think the murderer wants?” Wei WuXian said as they walked.

“Revenge,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian nodded. “Great minds think alike,” he said. “It has to be revenge. Killing someone with lingchi takes extreme resentment, and if it’s extending to the entire Chang clan, most likely this Chang Ping offended someone badly.”

“The murderer is dangerous,” Lan WangJi said. “But not a cultivator.”

“You think so too, right?” Wei WuXian agreed. “A cultivator wouldn’t have needed to cut out their tongues to prevent them from screaming,” he said. “He likes torture—he’s been scaring the Chang clan but not acting. Even though Yang FeiFei was probably just in the wrong place at the wrong time, she was still killed, and on top of that, he mutilated her body.”

Lan WangJi nodded. “Be careful.”

Soon, they stood in front of a building that was bigger than the first brothel they’d visited. Four stories tall, it had newly painted eaves and decor, but the lanterns that hung on the outside of it were unlit. The front doors had been shut, and the only lights came from the fourth floor where the owner and prostitutes would be living. Even if they dared open shop, no one would want to visit a place where a double murder had just been committed—not until it had been purified, the murder caught, and things were safe again. Wei WuXian could feel the remnants of resentful energy pulsing from somewhere further inside the building.

He exchanged a glance with Lan WangJi and knocked on the front doors.

“Anyone home?” Wei WuXian called. He wanted to take a look at the room where Yang FeiFei had been killed before they made a visit to the Chang residence.

“Hey! Who are you?”

Wei WuXian turned to see a small group of eight or so people staring at him and Lan WangJi. Judging by their matching robes and the swords at their waists, they came from the same clan. “Chang cultivators?” he guessed.

“Chang ShiRei,” the one who had spoken said in a tone that clearly said he expected Wei WuXian to recognize the name. “Who are you?”

“Wei WuXian,” he answered.

It was extremely satisfying to watch the Chang cultivators back up a step and their eyes widen. “The Yiling Patriarch!” one of them said.

“That’s me,” Wei WuXian said with a bright grin.

“I told you the Yiling Patriarch was behind this,” one of the cultivators hissed to another.

“Get him!” Chang ShiRei ordered, unsheathing his sword.

Wei WuXian automatically reached for his flute only to have his view suddenly blocked by Lan WangJi’s broad back. He had unshouldered his guqin and held it in front of him, poised to block any attacks that might come at Wei WuXian.

“Hanguang-Jun!” Another cultivator gasped. “Why are you defending him? Don’t you know, he killed Sect Leader Chang! Step aside.”

“Be quiet, HaoLin,” Chang ShiRei ordered. Then, to Wei WuXian’s surprise, he inclined his head in a bow to Lan WangJi. “Hanguang-Jun, you helped our clan when the QishanWen Sect took over Yueyang. You saved my younger sister’s life then—the same sister who was killed by this monster. Please step aside so we can seek revenge.”

“Wei WuXian was in Yiling when Chang Ping was killed,” Lan WangJi spoke. His voice, low and quiet, nonetheless stopped everyone from moving another step. “He is innocent.”

Wei WuXian stared at his back, listening to those words. It felt like it had been a long time since anyone had defended him. He liked the feeling.

“How do you know?” Chang HaoLin demanded. “Were you with him?”

He knew because Wei WuXian hadn’t been able to leave once he’d barricaded himself in the Burial Mounds. Anywhere further than Yiling would risk his losing control of the corpses, and the whole Wen clan would have been in danger.

Explaining this to them would only make his reputation worse, though, and they probably wouldn’t believe him.

Wei WuXian popped out from behind Lan WangJi. “Obviously we’re here to investigate,” he said, waving a hand. “Even if you don’t trust me, you trust Hanguang-Jun, don’t you? If you can’t trust him, you can’t trust anyone in this world.”

Though the Chang cultivators looked reluctant, Lan WangJi’s reputation was even more well established than Wei WuXian, and they couldn’t forget a blood debt. Part of the reason the Sunshot Campaign had been successful was because of the numerous minor sects that had banded together with the rebellion. Nearly all of them had been helped at some point or other by Lan WangJi purely because he stepped in whenever he saw a problem. He was just that type of person and had always been. In hindsight, Wei WuXian saluted Jiang Cheng for somehow having talked Lan WangJi into being his cultivation partner—no one dared lay a hand on Wei WuXian when Lan WangJi was there.

“Let’s share information,” Wei WuXian said when the Chang cultivators stopped looking like they wanted to skewer him with their swords. “You want justice for your sect leader. We’re helping a ghost,” he said. “Let’s work together.”

With Lan WangJi still standing in front of him like an immovable glacier, the Chang cultivators had no choice but to accept.

“Let’s speak inside,” Chang ShiRei said finally.

With all the noise they’d been making, the madam of the brothel and several of her girls had come down and now opened the door. They were dressed in plain robes, but their hair had been combed and makeup done. They looked ready to receive guests though the brothel was clearly closed.

The madam didn’t look surprised to see the Chang cultivators. “Back again?” she asked. “If you’re afraid to go home, pay for a room. Don’t just sit here all night.”

“Bring some tea,” Chang ShiRei said, glaring at her. He had turned red and didn’t deny the accusation, though, so if he was trying to save face, he was making a poor attempt at it. “We have business to discuss,” he said, gesturing to Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi.

Just like the other brothels they’d been to, the women seemed awestruck at the sight of Lan WangJi. Even the madam blushed when she saw him and hurried the girls to hurry and prepare a table for them.

Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi followed one of the girls up to see the room where the bodies had been found while they waited. Like he’d sensed, this was where the resentful energy was coming from—the remnants of two people who had died in horrific ways, but Yang FeiFei’s ghost did not show up and neither did Chang Ping. The only thing left in the room was the faint woody smell of agarwood.

“The Chang estate,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian nodded. “She wants us to catch her murderer—that’ll be where he is,” he said. “But let’s hear their story first,” he said as they headed back down to the main floor.

Once they were brought tea and a few lanterns had been lit, the women disappeared back up to their living quarters and left them alone. Sitting in such a big room with just the ten of them crammed at one table and a handful of lanterns that cast shadows on everyone’s faces, the place was so silent that every minor shuffle could be heard.

“Tell us what happened,” Wei WuXian said, making himself comfortable next to Lan WangJi.

Chang ShiRei didn’t look happy, but did as requested. The story was similar to the one they’d heard at the previous brothel—about a week ago, the madam of this brothel had discovered Chang Ping and Yang FeiFei in a room on the third floor. They had both been tied up, and their tongues cut out so no one could hear them scream. There had been an incense burner in the room burning agarwood, a sedating herb, in the room so both victims had been unconscious—at least when the torture had begun.

All of this lined up with Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi’s conclusions that this had not been a murder committed by a cultivator.

The only thing they hadn't guessed was that the Chang cultivators had a suspect—a thirteen-year-old boy named Xue Yang.

"If you already know who did it, why did you accuse me?" Wei WuXian interrupted at this point in the story.

Chang ShiRei gave him a disgusted look. "Do you really think a thirteen year old boy who hasn't even learned how to cultivate would know how to drug a man and commit lingchi?" he said. The thought sent a chill down Wei WuXian's back—that a complete civilian had committed this premeditated crime, and at such a young age. "The only one cruel enough to teach a child something like that must be the Yiling Patriarch."

"You give me too much credit," Wei WuXian said. "Anyway, if you know he did it, why did you not capture him?"

Chang ShiRei exhaled. "Do you think we haven't tried?" he said.

"We heard he's been going to the Chang residence every day leaving you things like dead birds and so on," Wei WuXian said. "He's not even a cultivator. Why haven't you been able to catch him?" He frowned. "You mentioned earlier that your sister had died."

Chang ShiRei sighed. "To tell the truth, it's a relief seeing Hanguang-Jun here," he said. "After the night of the murders, Xue Yang has killed another one of us every night inside the Chang estate," he said. "He started with the servants—we would wake in the morning and find another person laying in the middle of the courtyard, tied up with their tongue cut out."

"Lingchi?" Wei WuXian asked. "Or their heart cut out?"

Chang ShiRei shrugged. "All different kinds of ways—one was poisoned, another was beheaded, my sister was stabbed. We've kept watch, set arrays, but somehow he's been able to get past everything."

"Why didn't you leave?" Wei WuXian asked.

Chang HaoLin slapped the table. "You think people haven't tried? Anyone who leaves this town turns up dead in the courtyard the next day," he said. "The servants are all dead by now. Of the cultivators, we're the only ones left," he said, gesturing to the eight huddled around the table.

When Wei WuXian had first seen them, he'd thought they looked shabby in comparison to Lan WangJi and that they'd been out to track down the killer of their sect leader. Now that he looked closer, he could see that all the men at the table were thin, their faces pale and clothes worn and dusty. The madame had expected them here tonight because they were too frightened to return home and too frightened to leave it.

"He's going to kill all of us one by one," Chang ShiRei said and inclined his head. "Hanguang-Jun, if you can help us, we will be in your debt once again."

Wei WuXian finished the last of his tea. "All right then, let's go," he said and stood up.

Chang HaoLin stared at him. "Go where?"

"Where else?" Wei WuXian said. "You just asked us to help you, didn't you?" he said. "Take us to the Chang estate."

Now that several hours had passed, Yueyang City was even more silent and dark. Lanterns had been put out for the night and only the pale moon lit the empty streets. Apart from the hollow echo of their boots on the dirt roads, Wei WuXian couldn't hear any other sign of living things around them. It was as though they were walking through a ghost town.

The Chang cultivators walked more and more slowly the closer they got to their estate, but eventually, Wei WuXian saw the large sign hung above the gate of the Chang compound at the end of a wide street. On an ordinary day, it would have been a beautiful estate—a little distance from the bustle at the busiest part of town, with few buildings beside its white walls. But now, it looked deserted and empty, alone at the end of the street with even its own occupants afraid to go near.

But though they walked up to the gates, the Chang cultivators wouldn't open them but hovered at the entrance as though to protect themselves in numbers. The arrays that had been hastily drawn along the gates were a mess as though scribbled by a child—no wonder Xue Yang had been able to get past them.

Wei WuXian understood what had happened now. This Xue Yang may not be a cultivator, but he was clever. He knew he couldn't take on so many cultivators in a fair fight, so he'd used fear as a tactic instead. He'd planned to drug and kill their sect leader and an innocent woman in the cruelest way possible to scare them. He left them threats and dead animals, vows that they would all die. Then he'd picked off the weakest of them first, merciless in his killing. With reason and a clear mind addled by fear made worse with every death, of course these cultivators hadn't been able to stop him.

Wei WuXian sighed. "Even if you're afraid of him, do you really think Hanguang-Jun can't protect you? It'll be safer where he is than out here," he said.

"He's not normal," one of the cultivators blurted out. "That phantom will get us—"

He broke off in a shriek, staring wide-eyed behind Wei WuXian.

The ghost of Yang FeiFei had returned, hovering in the air in front of Wei WuXian and blocking the gates. When Wei WuXian took another step closer, she shook her head and spread her arms.

"It-It-It's a ghost!" Chang HaoLin stuttered.

"Of course it is," Wei WuXian said. "She was also murdered by Xue Yang, wasn't she?" He sighed when none of the Chang cultivators took a further step. "Take a good look at her," he said. "Ghosts get stronger from absorbing yin energy. The more afraid you are, the more yin energy you produce. If you want a ghost to leave, get used to them and stop being so afraid," he said and turned toward her again. "Anyway, Lady Yang is helping us," he said. "She doesn't want us to go in so that probably means he's here."

"Xue Yang is here?" Chang HaoLin looked like he might faint.



Wei WuXian ignored him and strode past Yang FeiFei up to the gates.

“Be quiet,” Chang ShiRei said behind them. “The Yiling Patriarch is right,” he said. “We’ve been allowing this bastard to kill us off one by one. We need to face him like men.”

“Well said,” Wei WuXian said, and kicked open the gates to the estate.

Entering the Chang estate was worse than the city. Whereas there were living people shut behind those windows and doors out in the city, in here, the Chang estate was a graveyard. Windows were left open, there were baskets spilled on the ground. A pile of dead chickens, rotten and festering, had been dumped in a corner by the wall where apparently the Chang clan had been so eager to leave, they’d simply left the dead birds that Xue Yang had left them.

Worst were the line of distinct forms lying in a row on the ground of the courtyard. Nearly two dozen bodies lay there, covered in white sheets. The remnants of the Chang clan had been so panicked that they’d simply left the dead, apparently intending to take care of them at a later time. Beneath the moonlight, a gust of wind sent up a swirl of dust in the courtyard, and a few of the sheets fluttered. Wei WuXian could smell the stench of decomposition, a smell he’d been all too happy to leave behind when he left the Yiling Burial Mounds.

Behind him, he heard a few of the cultivators retch.

“Th-Th-There!” Chang HaoLin pointed to a spot in the courtyard just beyond the rows of dead.

A line of words had been carved into the ground:

Chang Clan Ends Tonight

“We’re going to die!” One of the cultivators lost his nerve and ran for the exit.

“Wait, come back!” Wei WuXian shouted.

The cultivator had just set foot outside of the gates, when he suddenly collapsed.

“He’s here!” Chang ShiRei said. Immediately, all the cultivators drew their swords, forming into a half-circle formation facing the gate.

Lan WangJi, likewise, had taken out his guqin to hold in front of him. Wei WuXian was the only one who stood unarmed.

From the shadows outside the gate, a young man walked inside. By the light of the moon, he looked normal. His smile was friendly, and he had a pleasant, boyish face fitting of someone his age. He was dressed in black robes and he held a sword now dripping with blood.

“That’s Chang Ping’s sword,” Chang ShiRei said, staring at it.

This was not good news. The highest quality swords would only allow themselves to be wielded by their owners and sealed themselves automatically if taken away. A smaller clan like the Chang clan likely couldn't afford swords of that high quality, but even a normal spiritual sword could only be wielded by a cultivator. Usually created from precious metals, they were often too heavy for the average man to pick up without spiritual power. Ever since Wei WuXian had lost his golden core, picking up his own sword took all the strength he had, and his had been forged for agility and not strength. That Xue Yang could not only pick up but wield a spiritual sword meant he had good potential as a cultivator, had maybe even begun cultivating on his own even without formal training. Cultivation in the hands of someone like him was bad news.

"So you hidden-headed turtles have finally dared to come back," Xue Yang said. His voice was also young and pleasant like his face—in utter contrast to his words. "Ooh, and you even brought friends?" he said. "Is that the Yiling Patriarch?" His eyes shone with a red light.

"Xue Yang," Wei WuXian said.

"Goodness, the Yiling Patriarch knows my name. I'm honored," Xue Yang said. Though he smiled, it held no warmth—only a hungry curiosity. "I've wanted to meet you."

"Enough talk," Wei WuXian said. "Put down the sword."

Xue Yang laughed, a high-pitched, eerie laugh that raised goosebumps on Wei WuXian's skin. "I earned this sword," he said.

"By killing an innocent man?" Wei WuXian said.

"Innocent?" Xue Yang's eyes sparked, his smile dropping off his face. "Innocent?" he repeated.

Chang HaoLin lost his nerve this time and tried to rush past Xue Yang. Wei WuXian reached for his flute, but he could already see it was going to be too late.

It all happened in an instant. Xue Yang raised his sword, feral grin painting his face. He cut down, but Yang FeiFei's ghost appeared suddenly in front of him, obscuring his vision of Chang HaoLin for just a second.

"You bitch—" Xue Yang cursed, cutting through her.

If Xue Yang had cultivated a golden core and was using that spiritual sword to its full potential, Yang FeiFei would have been exorcised immediately. But because he was a civilian, the spiritual sword only had its limited, inherent power. When it passed through her body, Yang FeiFei's ghost went a few shades fainter and she fell to the side, melting into the shadows.

But those few seconds were all they needed. Lan WangJi's guqin sounded powerful behind him at the same time as Wei WuXian lifted Chenqing to his lips and blew.

Around them, corpses burst out from beneath the tarps covering them. There were cultivators, strong men amongst the corpses, but the worst, most decayed ones were the women and small children, their flesh bloated and purple with decomposition. Xue Yang had killed the weakest first, the ones he knew

would be the worst to lose. Having died in such violent ways, having been left out in such an undignified way for weeks, the resentful energy surrounding each one of them was strong. Together with the cultivator that Xue Yang had just killed, the corpses grabbed hold of him, small children's fingers clenching into his feet legs, women holding to his waist, men on his arms and neck, until every inch of him was covered and held immobile. Wei WuXian could feel their resentment and fury waiting to be unleashed on the one who had brought them to such a fate, waiting for just the slightest permission.

Lan WangJi pulled Chang HaoLin back, and Chang ShiRei grabbed him by the arm. Lan WangJi stood in front of them, blocking any way out so none of them might try to run again.

Xue Yang laughed. "Too bad, I was so close to killing him," he said, allowing the corpses to restrain him. He didn't seem at all afraid or even uncomfortable in the grip of so much rotting, resentful flesh.

"Wei Ying," Lan WangJi said.

"Not now." Wei WuXian kept his eyes on Xue Yang. "Why did you kill them?"

Xue Yang tilted his head. "Because I said I would," he said. "And I always keep my promises."

"What did Chang Ping do to you?" he asked.

Xue Yang wiggled his hand, his arm unable to move in the grip of four corpse hands wrapped. His pinky finger was missing. "A few years ago, his father asked me to deliver a note for him," he said. "And for my reward, I was beaten, and he destroyed my hand," he said. "So I vowed to destroy his clan."

"You killed him—you killed all these people—just because of one finger?" Wei WuXian asked.

"Of course," Xue Yang said. "After all, these people don't have anything to do with me," he said. "But I have to live with this hand for the rest of my life. It's only justice." He looked at Wei WuXian. "Shouldn't you understand?" he asked. "The founder of demonic cultivation." He perked up, that enthusiastic boyish expression back on his face. "Will you teach me? Teach me demonic cultivation."

"It's not for you to learn," Wei WuXian bit out. He didn't want to think what someone like Xue Yang might try to do with demonic cultivation.

Xue Yang didn't seem bothered. "Then how about the Yin Tiger Seal?" he asked. "I don't need to be a cultivator to use it," he said. "Let me try it out once. Just once." His eyes glided over to the group of Chang cultivators still huddled behind Lan WangJi. "Where is it?" he looked at Wei WuXian and smiled. "Do you keep it on you? You must, right? You wouldn't let a treasure like that out of your sight. Is it in your pocket?"

Wei WuXian felt a chill run down his back. He wanted nothing to do with this madman. "You shouldn't be allowed to live past tonight," he said. He could feel the resentment from the corpses holding Xue Yang in place, the resentment of this entire estate, honing in on Xue Yang. His teeth ached.

"Wei Ying," Lan WangJi said.

“Shut up,” Wei WuXian snapped. He clenched his fist around Chenqing. The corpses wanted him to let them tear him to pieces, to give him the justice he deserved.

“Wei Ying,” Lan WangJi repeated.

“I know,” Wei WuXian said. It took more effort than he expected to loosen his grip on his flute. “We’ll bring him to trial.”

“Really? The great Yiling Patriarch wants me to go to trial?” Xue Yang asked. He laughed.

“I’m tired of your barking,” Wei WuXian said, gesturing. One of the corpses holding him in place put its hand over Xue Yang’s mouth.

“This is LanlingJin territory,” Lan WangJi said to the Chang cultivators. “Go to Koi Tower and inform Sect Leader Jin and Sect Leader Lan. He will be visiting,” he said.

Though the order had only been directed for one or two of the cultivators, it seemed even Chang ShiRei didn’t have the nerve to stay any longer and all the Chang cultivators fled, leaving only Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian alone with Xue Yang.

Once the cultivators had gone, Lan WangJi walk over to the pile of corpses restraining Xue Yang. He hit a few pressure points on Xue Yang’s body and the boy’s eyes rolled up in his head in a dead faint. Lan WangJi set him on the ground and Wei WuXian directed the corpses to retreat.

It took more self-restraint than he expected to let them leave.

“Wei Ying—”

“I know!” Wei WuXian said. “I have it under control.”

He slapped aside Lan WangJi’s hand that had reached out. “I’m only putting them back,” he said and raised Chenqing to his lips, playing a few phrases.

He directed the corpses back to lie neatly in the rows they’d been in before he’d woken them, adding the newest cultivator corpse to them as well. Then he walked over and covered each of them again with the white tarps. He took his time arranging them because he didn’t want to see how Lan WangJi must be looking at him, and didn’t want to argue with him about this again. But as he straightened the white sheets, he felt sick seeing the corpses—children as small as A-Yuan were among them, women like his shijie—innocent of everything but being associated with Chang Ping’s father. Yang FeiFei’s corpse wasn’t among them, but she hadn’t been a part of the Chang clan even if she had been involved with Chang Ping so her body wouldn’t be here.

When he was done, he settled down to wait. Lan WangJi stood as still as a statue, watching Xue Yang’s prone body.

At sunrise, a large group of cultivators came flying in to Yueyang. Apart from Chang ShiRei who had returned with them, Wei WuXian only recognized three of them—Lan XiChen, Jin GuangYao, and Jin ZiXuan. While he respected the first two, he grimaced when he saw the third.

“Why is that peacock here?” he muttered.

Lan WangJi turned to look at him, but Wei WuXian ignored the glance.

“Here we all thought marriage would reform you, but it’s not been three days, and you’ve already wiped out a clan?” It was an unfamiliar man who spoke. Dressed in the golden Jin sect uniform, he bore some resemblance to Jin ZiXuan.

“Did the Chang cultivators not explain to you the situation?” Wei WuXian said, eyeing Chang ShiRei.

“I did,” Chang ShiRei said. “Wei WuXian helped us. That madman would have killed HaoLin if he hadn’t stepped in.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he orchestrated this whole thing,” the Jin cultivator said. “Didn’t you say he raised corpses? Ones of the Chang clan no less!”

“Was I supposed to let them kill the rest of them?” Wei WuXian said. “Who are you anyway?”

The Jin cultivator looked surprised. “I’m Jin ZiXun,” he said.

Wei WuXian thought for a moment. “Oh, that’s right,” he said, snapping his fingers. “The one who tried to pretend like you hadn’t kidnapped and enslaved the Wen clan.”

“You—”

“Young Master Wei,” Jin GuangYao said, wearing an apologetic expression on his face. “Please, we came to get this young man.” He gestured to Xue Yang who was still unconscious.

“Isn’t he the one who attacked me first?” Wei WuXian said. “Why am I not allowed to defend myself? If you’re warning anyone, shouldn’t it be him?” He narrowed his eyes and let his hand stray near his flute. “After all, between he and I, I think everyone here knows who would win in a fight.”

“Wei WuXian! You—”

“I what? Have I even been wrong once about you? You killed innocent people then! You’re accusing me now!” Wei WuXian said. “You’d rather I let the entire Chang clan die at the hands of that lunatic than I save them.”

“What member of the Wen clan is innocent?” Jin ZiXun barked, ignoring the rest of the accusations. “So this is how you repay Jiang FengMian for taking you in? Forgetting about your loyalties and defending the Wen dogs now?” He turned to Jin ZiXuan who had, up until now, stayed silent. “You better watch who you marry, cousin,” he said to him. “Be careful who you bring into the family.”

“What did you say about my shijie?” Wei WuXian shouted, withdrawing his flute from his belt.

“Wei Ying.”

Lan WangJi's hand closed around Wei WuXian's wrist at the same time as Lan XiChen moved to stand between him and Jin ZiXun.

"Young Master Jin, please calm down," Lan XiChen said.

"You're defending him because he coerced a marriage out of your brother?" Jin ZiXun snapped.  
"GusuLan has really changed, defending demonic cultivators!"

"Jin ZiXun, the GusuLan sect has been nothing but righteous under Er-Ge's leadership," Jin GuangYao said, holding out his hands. "Please do not speak words you do not mean."

"Says a prostitute's son," Jin ZiXun snapped. "You're the same type as that bastard Wei."

"What the fuck did you call my parents?" Wei WuXian snapped, trying to raise Chenqing to his lips again.

Lan WangJi's grip on his wrist tightened. "Wei Ying," he said in warning.

"Lan WangJi!" Wei WuXian snapped, at last feeling his irritation grow to full resentment. "Even you're on his side?" he shouted, yanking his wrist out of his grasp. "I know it's only a marriage of convenience, but you could still show me some face!"

Something shuttered in Lan WangJi's eyes, but Wei WuXian had already shaken his sleeves and shoved his way past the cultivators at the entrance to stalk out of the Chang compound.

Wei WuXian found himself barging through the doors of the first brothel they'd visited in Yueyang, since he knew there was no way any of those cultivators would be shameless enough to step in here. Not that he expected anyone to come looking for him. He ordered himself a private room and five jars of their finest liquor.

As soon as the alcohol came, he sat himself down at the table and chugged one of the jars immediately. Upon only feeling a slight buzz, he started on the second. He didn't know why he'd lost his temper when he was used to being accused of things like this. People like Jin ZiXun were common now. Wei WuXian could even be blamed for someone's kid having lost their appetite because surely it was a curse by the Yiling Patriarch.

Wei WuXian shoved the bowl aside and took another long drink directly from the jar this time. He felt the liquor burn going down, and it felt good.

When he lifted his head again, he saw something hover at the edge of his vision. He turned, still holding the half-empty jar. The ghost of Yang FeiFei hovered to one side of him.

For the first time since he'd seen the ghost, she looked like she fit in here. Her ornate hair and robes would be fitting of any of the other courtesans in this brothel if only she weren't dead.

"So you survived?" he said, looking at her.

She came a little closer. Her expression, unlike the one of rage she'd worn previously, now looked concerned. She reached forward and though she couldn't touch him, her hand hovered over his like she was trying to comfort him.

With the little gesture, the fist around his heart began to loosen again.

Wei WuXian gave her a crooked smile. "I'm not upset," he said. "There's nothing to be upset about, after all," he said. "This is just more of the normal." He shook his head and smiled, looking down at her glowing hand hovering above his. "Ah, I guess I got my hopes up when I married Lan WangJi, but he and I—we have too many differences for an alliance to fix them." He smiled at her. "I don't know why everyone thinks the dead are so bad," he said. "It's not like you asked to be this way," he said and paused. "Well, not all of you—that Jin ZiXun is going to offend someone less forgiving than me someday."

He sighed again and looked up at Yang FeiFei's ghost. If she was just a little older, she might be his own mother's age if she had survived this long, he thought.

"Well, since you're here, you can keep me company as I finish the rest of these," he said, peeling the seal off the third jar of alcohol and toasting her.

"To catching your killer," he said, and tilted it back to drink.

Chapter 5: a speck of shit ruins the bowl of rice

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

When Wei WuXian woke, he was in an unfamiliar room. Lan WangJi was sitting on a chair beside the bed, reading a book. Still half-asleep, Wei WuXian gazed at him, the picture of elegant beauty, with the sun streaming through the windows backlighting him so Wei WuXian could see the little motes of golden dust floating around Lan WangJi's face like he was some kind of deity, sent down to judge the mortals.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei WuXian asked, squinting at him. It was bright in the room—the sun must already be high in the sky judging from the light.

Lan WangJi's eyes moved from the book to him. "How do you feel?" he asked, putting the book down when he spoke. "You drank a lot last night."

Wei WuXian felt tired, but not because of the alcohol. "I'm fine. I have a high tolerance," he said, slowly sitting up. They were still in the brothel and those jars of liquor he'd emptied last night sat on the table, some overturned and some upright. The room still reeked of liquor.

"How did you know I was here?" Wei WuXian asked, yawning. He wondered how long Lan WangJi had been here, a little surprised that he was here at all since he couldn't imagine Lan WangJi willingly setting foot in a brothel without job necessity. But of course, Lan WangJi was also Wei WuXian's legal keeper

thanks to Jiang Cheng, and no matter how much he disliked Wei WuXian, Hanguang-Jun was nothing if not responsible.

"Yang FeiFei showed me," Lan WangJi answered.

The ghost had betrayed him?

"And I thought she was being nice," Wei WuXian muttered. He shook his head when Lan WangJi gave him a questioning look. "It's nothing," he said. "You could have woken me if you wanted to leave earlier."

"You were tired," Lan WangJi answered.

Wei WuXian sighed. "I know I already cause enough trouble for you, Hanguang-Jun. So you don't have to bother with me. I can take care of myself."

Lan WangJi frowned. "Wei Ying, regarding last night, I—"

"Nevermind. Let's pretend it didn't happen," Wei WuXian said, waving away whatever he was about to say. While he didn't exactly feel comfortable with Lan WangJi after what had happened last night, he also didn't feel like arguing with him again. "All right, I'm awake. We can go back."

Lan WangJi sat in place for a moment, watching as Wei Wuxian put on the outer robes that he'd shed sometime during the night and straightened his hair. "What are you waiting for?" Wei WuXian asked when he finished. "I'm ready."

Lan WangJi stood, but hesitated at the door. "Wei Ying, regarding last night, I apologize. I did not intend to let Jin ZiXun insult you or your family."

"But you still did," Wei WuXian said.

Lan WangJi frowned. "Do you still believe you are in control?"

Wei WuXian sighed. "Lan Zhan, I know neither of us wants to be stuck in this marriage, but at least let's not make it worse than it is," he said. They were never going to see eye-to-eye no matter how much Wei WuXian tried. "I'm too tired to fight with you today so just please, be quiet."

Lan WangJi looked at him for a moment longer. Wei WuXian met his gaze and held it until Lan Zhan finally turned away and opened the door.

For a couple of weeks, things settled down. Wei Wuxian continued going to the library pavilion every day and put in his hours sitting with the Purification Stone. Lan WangJi, though, stopped watching over him and would spend his days going about his own business. Wei WuXian would see him every once in awhile passing by his area in the library, but he never stayed to supervise. Even though they shared a room, thanks to their different sleeping schedules, Lan WangJi was always asleep by the time Wei WuXian returned to the bed at night, and gone again by the time he woke in the morning.



Without someone keeping track of his every move, Wei WuXian also breathed a little easier and began enjoying himself again. He spent most of his free time with the Wen clan. The majority of the family, barring the very old and very young, had joined the GusuLan Sect and happily wore their white mourning robes and plain forehead ribbons. Wen Qing was now a part of the GusuLan medical team and trailed admirers, both male and female, asking her questions everywhere she went. Wen Ning had been let out of seclusion, and after the new living quarters of the Wen clan were completed, Wei WuXian saw bunches of children around him almost always, making him carry them or put them up in trees—no hint of fear on any of their faces as they called for his attention and pulled his hair.

Even Lan QiRen, who had been the most against letting a living corpse into the Cloud Recesses, was defeated by Wen Ning's mouse-ish personality when Wei WuXian, Wen Ning, and A-Yuan had run into him once—in A-Yuan's case, literally.

That night, they were on their way back to the Wen quarters, and A-Yuan had been trotting a little ahead of Wei WuXian and Wen Ning, eagerly telling them about a new friend he had made. As they turned the corner of a building, the child ran head-first into Lan QiRen's legs with enough momentum that he bounced back and sat on the ground hard.

"You're fine, A-Yuan," Wei WuXian said, having found that telling an uninjured child he was fine stopped tears much more quickly than making a fuss about it. It usually worked on A-Yuan who was well-behaved to begin with, but this time, he looked up at the face belonging to the legs he'd run into, and Wei WuXian could see the exact moment the child recognized Lan QiRen.

A-Yuan's eyes filled with tears, he opened his mouth, and he began bawling at the top of his lungs.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Sorry, Uncle, looks like he's afraid of you," he said, going to pick up A-Yuan who immediately buried his face in Wei WuXian's shoulder, but didn't stop crying.

Lan QiRen narrowed his eyes at him, and Wei WuXian prepared himself for another long lecture about how running and loud noise was forbidden in the Cloud Recesses.

But before anyone else had an opportunity to speak, Wen Ning immediately began bowing. "I'm so sorry, Elder Lan," he said, bowing over and over. "Please forgive my cousin. I will teach him good manners. I am so sorry we have not taught him well yet."

Lan QiRen, mouth half-open, shut it again.

"I'm really sorry. I'll keep a better watch on him. Please forgive us," Wen Ning continued, bowing so low he was nearly bent in half.

Lan QiRen didn't seem to know what to do in the face of such extreme politeness and after several moments of Wen Ning's continuous apologies, he raised his hand. "No need. He is only a child," he said stiffly.

"Thank you so much, Elder Lan," Wen Ning said, bowing even more. "I will make sure he stays out of your way. Thank you really so much."

Lan QiRen cleared his throat, looking anywhere but at the bowing corpse. "It's only a small matter," he said. "Carry on. Have a good night."

Wei WuXian almost burst out laughing right then and there. "I can't believe you actually managed to counter the old man," he whispered to Wen Ning when they were out of earshot. "I didn't think it was possible!"

"Young Master Wei, you really should stop teasing your uncle-in-law so much," Wen Ning said reproachfully. Even with his stiffened facial muscles, he looked highly relieved not to be under Lan QiRen's scrutiny any longer.

Wei WuXian snorted. "Uncle-in-law for what marriage?" he said, rolling his eyes.

"Young Master Wei," Wen Ning began. "Hanguang-Jun is—"

"I don't want to hear it," Wei WuXian said, stopping him before he could begin.

Ever since Wei WuXian had let slip that he and Lan WangJi weren't getting along, which was really nothing new for them, Wen Ning had taken to giving him unsolicited advice about making up with him.

Wen Ning looked at him in that mousey, reproachful way that made Wei WuXian feel like he was bullying a baby, and he turned his attention on A-Yuan, ignoring him.

"A-Yuan, he's gone, you can stop crying," he said, bouncing him in his arms.

But apparently A-Yuan had decided to team up with Wen Ning against him today, because he stopped wailing only to blubber, "I want to see Lan Er-Gege."

Wei WuXian sighed. "You can't," he told him point blank. "He's busy so you can't just bother him whenever you want."

But maybe because it was getting late or he was in a bad temper that day, A-Yuan would not be consoled. He kicked his little legs and wailed that he wanted to see Lan WangJi. He was making so much noise that other GusuLan disciples who passed by were shooting them disapproving looks.

Wei WuXian tried to detach A-Yuan from him. "Take him to bed. He's tired," he said to Wen Ning.

"No! I want to see Rich Brother!" A-Yuan wailed, snot and tears dribbling down his face. He clung to Wei WuXian, fisting his little hands into his robe.

"Why don't you just take him to see him," Wen Ning said, making no move to take the child. "A-Yuan, will you be good if Xian-Gege takes you to see Lan Er-Gege?" he said in utter betrayal.

"You realize I can control you if I want to," Wei WuXian hissed to him.

Wen Ning gave him a look like he'd just kicked a baby.

A-Yuan nodded. "A-Yuan will be good," he said, his sobs turning into hiccups, rubbing his red, tear-stained cheeks with his little fists.

Wei WuXian sighed and gave in. "Fine but only for a few minutes," he said. "Wipe your face. Your Lan Er-Gege is going to think I bullied you," he said, using his sleeve to wipe the child's tears.

A-Yuan beamed at him and nodded.

Wei WuXian sighed again and began heading back to the Jingshi. At this time of night, Lan Wangji would probably be getting ready for bed which was exactly why Wei WuXian preferred to stay out past then.

On the other hand, he had been putting off discussing his shijie's wedding with Lan Wangji and with the date creeping up, he couldn't keep putting it off.

It had been a full two weeks since Wei WuXian actually spoke to Lan Wangji, and he took a deep breath outside the Jingshi. Inside, the lanterns had been lit and he could hear the soft strum of the guqin.

"Hanguang-Jun," Wei WuXian said, striding in. "A-Yuan wouldn't stop crying until he saw you," he said, putting down the child.

Lan Wangji had been sitting at the table in the main room, his guqin placed out and the incense burner lit, the cool scent of sandalwood permeating the room. If he was surprised to see Wei WuXian, it didn't show on his face.

A-Yuan beamed at him and toddled forward as soon as Wei WuXian put him down. "Lan Er-Gege," he said, sitting quietly next to him as though he hadn't just been wailing his lungs out three minutes ago.

Lan Wangji had stopped playing when they came in, but when it seemed A-Yuan had nothing in particular to say to him, he began playing again.

Since Wei WuXian had nothing to do but wait until he was done or A-Yuan was ready to go to bed, he also sat a little distance from them, listening.

The song that Lan Wangji played was a slow one with a beautiful melody. Wei WuXian couldn't place where he'd heard it before, but he found himself humming along, knowing exactly when the dips and rises in the song came.

Lan Wangji looked up at him when he finished.

"What is that song called?" Wei WuXian asked, feeling more relaxed in his presence than he had in a long time. "Who composed it?"

"I did," Lan Wangji answered.

Wei WuXian was surprised. He'd heard Lan Wangji play guqin a number of times, but it was always either in attack or for some spell such as Evocation or Inquiry. "It's a spell?" he asked.

"No," Lan Wangji said.

"When have I ever heard you play anything that wasn't one?" Wei WuXian asked half to himself, but he couldn't remember when he might have heard this piece of music. "What's its name?" he asked. "When did you play it before?"

"You don't remember," Lan WangJi said, more of a comment than a question.

"If I remembered, I wouldn't be asking you," Wei WuXian said. "So when did you play it for me before?"

Lan WangJi frowned. "Think for yourself," he answered.

Wei WuXian sighed. "Everyone knows I have a bad memory," he said, but gave up trying to coax an answer out of him. "A-Yuan, you saw your Lan Er-Gege and even got hear him play a song. Satisfied?"

A-Yuan was staring wide-eyed at the guqin, though, and reached a hand out to touch the strings.

"A-Yuan, don't touch," Wei WuXian said. "You'll get the guqin dirty."

Lan WangJi, though, took a handkerchief out and wiped A-Yuan's hands for him. "Would you like to learn to play?" he asked.

A-Yuan's whole face bloomed as he smiled.

"It is almost 9," Lan WangJi said to him. "Go to sleep now. I will teach you tomorrow."

A-Yuan nodded even more enthusiastically and got up on his own to go to Wei WuXian.

"What do you say?" Wei WuXian prompted him as he also got to his feet.

"Thank you, Lan Er-Gege," A-Yuan said shyly.

"I'll take him back first," Wei WuXian said, letting A-Yuan cling to his leg as he walked back out. Once they were out of earshot of the Jingshi, Wei WuXian bent and poked A-Yuan in the forehead. "What a little traitor you are," he said. "So you do like your Lan Er-Gege more than me," he said. "How many times have you heard me playing the flute and you never asked to learn from me."

"A-Yuan wants to," A-Yuan said, letting go of his leg and toddling on his own so he could rub his forehead. "But Uncle Ning said I shouldn't learn it from you."

"Wen Ning is also a traitor," Wei WuXian said, narrowing his eyes.

"Xian-Gege, when can I come tomorrow?" A-Yuan asked, tugging on his robes as he trotted alongside him down the path toward the Wen quarters.

"Hm, why are you asking me?" Wei WuXian said.

"Because Xian-Gege doesn't wake up until 9," A-Yuan said. "Won't Xian-Gege also learn?"

Wei WuXian laughed. "Such a privilege isn't for outsiders like me," he said. "I still have to go to the library tomorrow. You can spend time with your favorite brother by yourself!" Then, thinking of the song he'd just heard, he bent and looked A-Yuan in the eyes. "Tomorrow, tell your Lan Er-Gege to teach you the song we heard today," he ordered him. "And ask him when he played it for me, okay?"

"Why doesn't Xian-Gege ask Er-Gege himself?" A-Yuan asked.

Wei WuXian straightened up again and kept walking. "If he wanted to tell me, he already would have. Be good and find out for me, okay?" he said.

When Wei WuXian finished walking A-Yuan back to the Wen quarters and returned, Lan WangJi was still awake and playing the song again. Wei WuXian stood, leaning by the door, listening until he finished.

"You're really not going to tell me when I heard it?" he asked. "Why are you so against letting me know?"

"Why is your memory so bad?" Lan WangJi answered.

Wei WuXian sighed. "Fine, don't tell me," he said and pulled out a piece of folded paper. He took a deep breath. "My shijie's wedding is coming up in two weeks," he said, passing the paper between his fingers as he spoke. "Do you know of any good craftsmen in Caiyi Town?"

"Mm," Lan WangJi said. "Show me the design. I will bring it to him tomorrow."

Wei WuXian didn't realize he'd been tense until Lan WangJi replied. "Here," he said, handing him the folded paper. He had drawn design after design for days until he was satisfied, and then, because he didn't know how to bring it up to Lan WangJi, kept it on his person until he had the opportunity.

Lan WangJi looked at the picture and nodded. Then he carefully folded it and put it inside his pocket. "Bedtime," he said and got to his feet. He made no move to force Wei WuXian to obey curfew, only retreating to the bedroom himself.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei WuXian called out. "You're still coming to my shijie's wedding with me, right?" he asked. It wasn't exactly an apology because Wei WuXian wasn't sorry, but he wanted to stop this cold war.

"Mm," Lan WangJi inclined his head.

Wei WuXian felt the tension leave his shoulders. "Thank you," he said when Lan WangJi paused at the door.

"No need to thank me," Lan WangJi said.

A week later, Lan WangJi returned with a small wooden box that he brought to Wei WuXian. Wei WuXian almost dropped the Purification Stone in his excitement as he opened up the present. He pulled back the soft red cloth covering it, and his eyes widened. It was a nine-petal lotus comb. The comb itself was made of gold, and the lotus petals were each made of a beautiful, deep purple jade. The artisan had followed Wei WuXian's design exactly, overlaying the jade with intricate gold patterning. The entire

effect of the comb was tasteful and delicate, suited to more formal occasions if Jiang YanLi paired it with fancier hairpins, but also for everyday use—well suited to his shijie and Wei WuXian’s plans for this comb.

Wei WuXian held the comb in his hand and smiled up at Lan WangJi. “Thank you,” he breathed out.

“Mm,” Lan WangJi said.

Once he was gone, Wei WuXian got to work. He had only a little more than a week to finish his shijie’s present. It took him a full seven days working all day and late into the night, only sneaking back into the Jingshi right before five o’clock to pass out for an hour or two before getting up to start all over again. But it was worth it when he finished. He had infused the comb with power—enough power to keep away any creature below a certain level. When his shijie wore this comb, she would be safe.

Satisfied with his gift, he put it away in his pocket, too proud and excited to leave it anywhere else. Throughout the day, he pulled it out to look at it again. Lan WangJi really did have good taste, he thought. Although he hadn’t specified what the comb be made out of, Lan WangJi’s choices for it—a refined gold for the metal that would represent the Jin family, and a purple jade for the flower that would represent the Jiang family, and maybe even a little of the Lan since it would be both his and Lan WangJi’s gift to her—were perfect. As expected of someone nicknamed the Second Jade of Lan, he thought.

Wei WuXian put the comb away again, and prepared to finish up for the day. He was so pleased with the comb that he thought about having dinner with Lan WangJi that night—but then, Lan WangJi surely enjoyed eating by himself more where he wouldn’t have to tell Wei WuXian to eat in silence five times a meal.

But as Wei WuXian began putting the Purification Stone away in its box, he noticed a small gray smudge on the white. He frowned and rubbed at it. When the smudge didn’t come away with his finger, he used the hem of his sleeve to rub a little harder, but the cloth made no difference.

Wei WuXian frowned, holding the stone up to the fading sunlight, and as he did, his heart began to beat fast. The little gray smoke-like curl was not on the pure white stone, but inside of it.

Wei WuXian swallowed hard, giving it one last scrub in a futile attempt. When his robe came away and the blemish was still there, he put the stone back in its box, covering it with the red cloth and tucking it back on the shelf.

It was so faint, Wei WuXian thought. It might just be a trick of fading light, he told himself. He’d check again tomorrow morning.

But under the bright morning sun, the stain remained and seemed to be larger than it had been the night before. For the first time since starting purification, Wei WuXian tried to let the stone do what it ought to do and take away the resentful energy. In the past weeks, he merely held it, keeping as much of his gathered resentful energy inside himself as he could because he would need it for demonic cultivation. Now, he let it out, feeding it into the stone so it could do what it should and cleanse him. But by noontime, the smudge had grown to the size of his thumbnail and darkened in color.

Even when Wei WuXian stopped actively passing it resentful energy, the spot continued to spread though its growth slowed down again. By the end of the day, even though Wei WuXian tried to contain all the resentful energy to himself, the dark spot had grown to the size of a grape. That was when he realized it was coming from inside the Purification Stone. Whatever he had done to it, the very core of the Purification Stone was corrupted—it was just that it had taken weeks for the darkness to spread to the surface.

No matter how he looked at it, this couldn't be a good development. For the first time since he'd started demonic cultivation years ago, Wei WuXian felt a thin icy trickle of fear. And yet, what could he do?

Wei WuXian tucked the stone away in his pocket, putting its box back on its shelf so unless someone opened it, they wouldn't notice it was gone. Then he went back to the Jingshi, looking for a place to hide it until the next morning.

The Jingshi was, in line with Lan WangJi's personality, almost entirely bare. What furniture was there, apart from the dumb bed, was spare and tasteful along with the decor. Even the wardrobe where Lan WangJi kept his clothes was neatly kept, with every item folded so perfectly, Wei WuXian almost thought it was a shame for him to take clothes out to change into. On the other hand, Wei WuXian had been given half of the wardrobe when he first came, and already, there were robes tossed in there unfolded, a load of half-scribbled parchment and scrolls, talismans and other artifacts that were strewn in alongside the robes since it was the only storage space he'd been given. He was trying to shove the Purification Stone as far into the back of his wardrobe, fighting with a particularly tangled robe, when he heard Lan WangJi's voice behind him.

"What are you doing?"

Wei WuXian startled, and the Purification Stone went slipping from his grasp. He reached for it at the same time as Lan WangJi, their fingers brushing, but it was Lan WangJi who picked up the stone.

"The Purification Stone." Lan WangJi frowned. "Why did you bring..." His eyes widened when he saw the black spot on the formerly white stone, swirling gently inside the white glow.

"I don't know what happened," Wei WuXian began confessing. "It started turning black yesterday, and I swear I haven't done anything to it. I've only been letting it absorb the resentful energy, Lan Zhan."

"I believe you," Lan WangJi said, but he was still frowning. He turned the stone over in his hand, looking at the dark spot. Then he held it in both hands. Abruptly, Wei WuXian felt a surge of spiritual energy. All the hairs on the back of his neck rose, and the very air crackled with energy. The Purification Stone shone so brightly that Wei WuXian had to look away.

After a long moment, the power surge died away, leaving Wei WuXian with stars flashing in his eyes. But when he looked at the stone again, that black spot was still there.

Lan WangJi exhaled.

"What is it?" Wei WuXian asked, staring between him and the Purification Stone.

Lan WangJi shook his head. “Not enough information to make a judgment yet,” he said. He looked at Wei WuXian. “Have you used demonic cultivation?” he asked.

“Of course not,” Wei WuXian said before thinking of Jiang YanLi’s comb. “Nothing dangerous, anyway,” he said. “All I did was infuse some power in my shijie’s comb to keep away low level creatures.” It was passive magic—channeling some of his already accumulated resentful energy into something like a shield. He hadn’t pulled in any resentful energy that wasn’t already on him, and anyway, the blemish had clearly been there for longer than a week—it must have begun as soon as Wei Wuxian received the Purification Stone.

Lan WangJi shook his head. He took the stone and left the room.

“Wait, Lan Zhan! Where are you taking the stone? Are you going to tell your uncle?” Wei WuXian called.

“Investigation,” Lan WangJi paused to answer before continuing on his way.

Wei WuXian slumped down once Lan WangJi had left. Maybe it wasn’t such a big deal, he told himself. Maybe it was just that the Purification Stone didn’t work on him, so Lan WangJi would come back with some other method.

But Lan WangJi didn’t return at all that night or the next morning.

Wei WuXian started out in the library pavilion, waiting for Lan WangJi to show up and give him instructions on how to fix the Purification Stone or some other GusuLan purification exercises, but he never came. By noontime, Wei WuXian decided that since he couldn’t do anything other than wait, he may as well distract himself, and left the library. It had been some time since he got to stretch his legs during the day, and with all the other Wens busy, he went to find A-Yuan.

It took some looking around before he found A-Yuan playing with a group of small children all around the same age as himself in one of the courtyards.

“A-Yuan,” Wei WuXian called when he saw him. Like everyone else in the Wen family, A-Yuan had started wearing the GusuLan sect clothes, which Wei WuXian had always thought was a terrible idea. Dressing a child in white was asking for near-constant laundry. A-Yuan was surprisingly clean, though the same could not be said of the boy he was playing with.

“Xian-Gege!” A-Yuan said and came running.

Wei WuXian grinned, crouching down to his height and patting him on the head. “What are you doing today?” he asked.

“Practicing cultivation with JingYi!” A-Yuan declared.

Wei WuXian’s grin widened. “Cultivation?” he said. “At your age?” The earliest that children could start cultivating a golden core was five years old. He himself hadn’t started until several years after that. Any younger, and children just couldn’t do it—he was willing to bet that even Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen hadn’t started until they were five, though he was sure they’d those three thousand GusuLan rules drilled into their memories far before then.



"So what is this?" he asked, flicking A-Yuan on the forehead where he'd tied a white ribbon.

"Hey! You can't touch that!" the much dirtier boy beside him shouted, pointing at Wei WuXian. This child was covered in dust with darker spots at his knees, stained sleeves and a streak of dirt on one chubby cheek.

"Oh? Why?" Wei WuXian asked and flicked the other boy on his forehead ribbon. Neither of them was wearing an actual GusuLan ribbon, but were playing pretend with white ribbon they'd gotten from somewhere.

"You can't touch!" the boy shouted even more shrilly. "Don't you know the forehead ribbon means to 'regulate oneself,'" he said, sounding like a very small Lan QiRen if Lan QiRen was enthusiastically shouting rules. "You can only let go of all regulations when you're with the one you love and cherish, your destined person, your cultivation partner!"

"Do you even know what those words mean?" Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow.

"Of course I do!" the boy shouted. "It means the person you marry!"

"JingYi, shouting is prohibited in the Cloud Recesses," A-Yuan said, sounding exactly like a tiny Lan WangJi.

Wei WuXian burst out laughing. "A-Yuan, I leave you alone for a few weeks and you decide you like your Hanguang-Jun dad more than me? You're even starting to sound like him."

"He's not my dad..." A-Yuan said, turning red.

"Hanguang-Jun is your dad? Is that why he teaches you guqin?" JingYi demanded, his eyes wide and shining. Wei WuXian had, in fact, forgotten entirely about the guqin lessons since he was always in the library during the day. Apparently, Lan WangJi had taken his promise seriously and really was teaching A-Yuan to play. "That's so cool!"

"Oh, you hear that, A-Yuan? You should be proud that Hanguang-Jun is your dad," Wei WuXian said. "JingYi wishes Hanguang-Jun was his dad too."

"Your mom is weird, though," JingYi said.

Wei WuXian sputtered. "How am I his mom?" he said, pointing to himself.

"Aren't you married to Hanguang-Jun?" JingYi said, putting his hands on his hips. "A-Yuan told me!"

"Well you're not wrong..." In the face of such logic, Wei Wuxian could only laugh. "Guess I'm your mom now, A-Yuan."

"But I don't want to call you mom," A-Yuan said. "It's so weird."

Wei WuXian shrugged his shoulders. "It can't be helped," he said. "Your friend here says I am, so we've got no choice, son."

"But—"

"It's your dad!" JingYi gasped, grabbing A-Yuan by the sleeve and pointing.

Wei WuXian turned in time to see Lan WangJi walking on the path by the courtyard, entirely within earshot of what they had just said.

Even with his thick skin, being caught in such a lie, Wei WuXian felt a little embarrassed, but he pretended like Lan WangJi hadn't heard a thing. "Lan Zhan," he said, straightening up. "You weren't in the library this morning, so I..."

"Wow, I can't believe your dad is Hanguang-Jun! You're so lucky!" JingYi said, tilting his head up more and more to continue staring at Lan WangJi as he walked over. JingYi patted A-Yuan on the arm as though he were proud of him.

"Lan Er-Gege," A-Yuan said politely. "A-Yuan has been practicing the guqin," he said.

"Very good," Lan WangJi said, nodding to him and then his friend, which was apparently too much for little JingYi to handle.

"We're going to practice cultivation!" JingYi shouted. He began dragging off A-Yuan only to pause and turn to Wei WuXian. "Can me and A-Yuan go cultivate, A-Yuan's mom?" he asked politely.

Wei WuXian had to keep from laughing at the question and put on his best serious expression. "So you do know how to ask for permission," he said imperiously. "You may go, but come back in time for dinner," he told him.

"We will!" JingYi shouted.

Wei WuXian smiled, watching them run around, pretending to cultivate and fight and fly. He remembered those days when he and Jiang Cheng and the other disciples used to play as children too—back when he had only just started learning how to cultivate and thought Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu were the most amazing cultivators in the world. He and Jiang Cheng had often played just like this, pretending to fight. Jiang Cheng always wanted to boss everyone around and assign roles, and got mad when Wei WuXian ignored his instructions. Jiang YanLi would laugh as she watched them, always ready with snacks when they grew tired.

Once the children were gone, he straightened up.

"Come with me," Lan WangJi said and turned, striding toward the Jingshi. He said nothing until they were inside and he shut the doors, muffling the sounds outside. He went to the table and knelt at it. Wei WuXian slowly did the same, a little nervous that Lan WangJi wasn't saying anything.

Lan WangJi reached into his robe and took out the Purification Stone, putting it down on the table. The black spot seemed to have gotten a little larger, a little darker.

Wei WuXian swallowed, looking down at it. “Lan Zhan, I—”

“What happened to your golden core?” Lan WangJi asked.

Wei WuXian felt the breath die inside of him as he stared at Lan WangJi. His heart dropped to his stomach and knotted up there. “Lan Zhan, I—I—”

“What happened?” Lan WangJi repeated when Wei WuXian couldn’t force any other words out of his mouth.

“You have to promise not to tell anyone,” Wei WuXian blurted out, hands sweating and cold as he clenched his fingers against his knees. “If anyone finds out, I—I don’t want the Wens to have to leave here,” he said. “They’re safe finally, and A-Yuan is so happy. He even has kids his own age he can play with. I can’t make them go back to the Burial Mounds. I can’t—” He couldn’t drag their happiness away from them now.

“I will not tell anyone without your permission,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian chest lightened a little with the promise, but he worried his lip, staring down at the blemished Purification Stone on the table. “I gave it to Jiang Cheng,” he said. “It was right after Lotus Pier—after everything that happened at Lotus Pier. Jiang Cheng was caught by Wen cultivators, and by the time I rescued him, Wen ZhuLiu had already melted his golden core. I could live without a golden core as a civilian, but his life would be over, so I...so I gave mine to him.” It was the first time he’d said it out loud since begging Wen Qing to do the surgery for them.

“Wei WuXian,” Lan WangJi said, more emotional than Wei WuXian had ever heard him up until then. “You—how you could you—”

“If his parents hadn’t adopted me, I wouldn’t have been able to cultivate one anyway!” Wei WuXian said. “So it was just paying them back for all those years,” he said. He finally looked up at Lan WangJi, clenching his fists. “So you tell me not to practice demonic cultivation, but what choice do I have?” he asked. “How was I supposed to protect everyone without a golden core?” He met Lan WangJi’s golden eyes in challenge. “If it hadn’t been for demonic cultivation, I—I’d be a useless person by now.”

Lan WangJi’s gaze burned into his. He seemed to be deciding what to say. “How?” he asked after a long moment.

Wei WuXian felt that knot in his stomach loosen a little more. Lan WangJi hadn’t yelled at him or gotten angry. And so the truth came pouring out—how he had convinced Wen Qing and Wen Ning to help him, the reasons why he was so indebted to the pair of siblings. Lan WangJi asked questions every so often through the story, how long the surgery took, whether it was painful, and Wei WuXian answered honestly now that he could.

At the end of it, Lan WangJi was very still, looking at him, and Wei WuXian waited for a response.

Now that the truth was out, he felt strangely relieved. One person apart from Wen Qing and Wen Ning knew, but Lan WangJi was different from them—where the Wens were in no place to judge him for

demonic cultivation, Lan Wangji was the most righteous man Wei WuXian knew, and he came from an upright, honorable sect. If Lan Wangji was able to accept him, then—

“Stop using demonic cultivation,” Lan Wangji said.

Wei WuXian didn’t realize he’d been holding onto hope—hope that Lan Wangji might understand, that he might accept him—until it was cut to pieces. He felt suddenly angry. “Then what I am supposed to do?” he demanded. “I can’t cultivate the normal way anymore! I can’t even fly on a sword without you! You can’t actually expect me to stay nicely by your side locked up in the Cloud Recesses forever, can you?”

“Wei Ying!” Lan Wangji said.

“Tell me what I’m supposed to do!” Wei WuXian challenged him. “If you have such a great solution, then spit it out!” he shouted. “Spit it out!”

“The demonic path is not healthy for mind or body,” Lan Wangji said. “You should not continue.” His eyes fell to the corrupted white stone sitting on the table between them.

“That might be true for everyone else, but I have no choice,” Wei WuXian said, following his gaze down, and taking in that visual representation of what was happening to the stone that must be happening to him as well. “Even if it’s bad for me, I have no choice.” He turned away from Lan Wangji. “You wouldn’t understand what being helpless feels like.”

Lan Wangji was silent. After awhile, he got up again, but didn’t leave, standing there as though wanting to say something.

Wei WuXian refused to give him face and ask.

“I will be leaving for a few days,” Lan Wangji said finally.

At that, Wei WuXian looked up. “What? Now?” he asked. Jiang Yanli’s wedding festivities began in three days, and Lan Wangji had agreed to attend.

“Do you wish me to stay?” Lan Wangji asked after a moment.

Wei WuXian turned away, not sure why the question hurt. “I don’t care,” he bit out. “Do what you want.”

Still, he didn’t realize he hoped that Lan Wangji would come back, would attend the wedding with him until the day GusuLan left for Koi Tower, and Lan Wangji still had not come home.

Notes:

i'm so gd tired w/ flight at 4a this morning and the first thing i do after getting back is post this \_('η`」  
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## Chapter 6: wei wuxian's worst fear

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

### Chapter Text

Although all the GusuLan cultivators attending the Jin-Jiang wedding could fly by sword, for formal events like this, they rode on horseback to uphold tradition, so even without Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian had no problem fitting in with everyone else.

All prominent sects were built in areas of beautiful scenery with good fengshui. LanlingJin, being the richest sect, had Koi Tower that was in the central part of Lanling City. They passed two new watchtowers that Jin GuangYao had set up in recent years before they reached the main road used to visit Koi Tower. This was a carriage path, and opened only for important events such as the wedding of the LanlingJin Sect's young master. According to LanlingJin Sect rules, anyone using this road was supposed to walk or ride slowly so as to admire the surrounding walls covered in murals telling stories of the Jin Clan's most distinguished cultivators.

In his time as a YunmengJiang disciple, Wei WuXian had visited Koi Tower a handful of times, usually when Madam Yu dragged the family to visit Madam Jin and Jin ZiXuan. When they were a little older, he'd come a handful of times during the Sunshot Campaign usually for quick reprieves before going back out to the warfronts since Koi Tower had always been well defended as one of their headquarters. After the campaign, he'd come another handful of times for sect alliance events like banquets and night hunts. Each time, upon approaching the road, LanlingJin disciples would come to meet them and recite for them all the great deeds of the Jin cultivators all the way up. When he was young, the stories had been fun to hear. Once he'd gotten older and seen the way Jin GuangShan wanted to wait to choose a winning side during the Sunshot Campaign, and the way Jin ZiXuan treated Jiang YanLi, he'd lost all interest in the walls.

But today, the two that met them at the base of the road were Jin GuangYao and Jiang YanLi.

"Maiden Jiang, Xiao Di, you didn't have to come meet us," Lan XiChen said, inclining his head to Jiang YanLi, and then drawing his horse close to Jin GuangYao's steed.

"Of course I had to come greet Er-Ge," Jin GuangYao said, smiling. "Please come," he said. "We have prepared rooms for you all."

"How is the child?" Lan XiChen asked.

Jin GuangYao smiled. "A-Song is still a bit weak, but we've been keeping him indoors so we hope he will be well soon," he said. "Enough about me, though, this week is to celebrate the wedding."

"Shijie!" Wei WuXian called, nudging his horse toward her.

Jiang YanLi, beautiful and smiling, had also ridden out of Koi Tower to meet them. “A-Xian,” she said. Although she greeted everyone else politely, she rode her horse up to Wei WuXian. “I’m glad you could come.”

“Of course there’s no way I would miss Shijie’s wedding!” Wei WuXian said. All of his worries, the tension between him and Lan WangJi, the problem with the Purification Stone, swept away the moment he saw his shijie. “The Jin clan better have made it the best wedding of the century!”

Jiang YanLi smiled. “They have been very good to me,” she said and then looked with more concern at him. “What about you, A-Xian? Has Second Master Lan been treating you well?”

“He’s busy for a few days so I’m not sure he’ll be able to come.” Wei WuXian shrugged off the question. “But when did you arrive? Is Jiang Cheng here yet? Where are all the other Yunmeng disciples?”

Jiang YanLi allowed him to steer the conversation, telling him how things were at Lotus Pier, how the disciples were doing, how busy Jiang Cheng and she had been both with running the sect and preparing for the wedding. The YunmengJiang party had arrived to Koi Tower two weeks ago to assist with wedding preparations. From Jiang YanLi’s descriptions of all her tasks and the important people she had been meeting and greeting, she was already beginning to settle in as the new Young Madam Jin.

As they made their way up Koi Tower, the path led to a long set of stairs that opened into a wide, brick-paved square, bustling with people. At the far end of the square, a magnificent palace, hung with red lanterns, overlooked the ocean of white peonies. Each peony had been tied with a red ribbon so that the effect was a sea of white and red. Every building and wall in the tower had been hung with red and gold gauze and banners, all with the peony decorating them. Truly a beautiful sight, and yet, Wei WuXian still thought there should be more. The flowers should be red, and there should be fanfare—music, fireworks maybe.

He said as much to Jiang YanLi who laughed.

“They’ve already gone to so much trouble,” she said. “I don’t need so much.”

“You deserve it, though,” Wei WuXian argued. “If I was in charge, I’d make this such a great banquet that everyone admires and praises it even after a hundred years. No one would be able to compare to it.”

Jiang YanLi smiled. “That’s very sweet, A-Xian,” she said. “But a wedding like that suits you more than me—I’m only sorry we couldn’t do it for you.”

Wei WuXian waved her apology aside. “I’m not so important,” he said. “This is Shijie’s wedding—it needs to be perfect!” If only he hadn’t ended up in so much trouble that the most he could do now was participate, he could have designed the best wedding for her.

“A-Xian, I am happy. This is more than enough,” Jiang YanLi said. “Besides, it hasn’t begun yet.” She smiled. “Honestly, I’m a little worried how tired we’ll be after it all.”

She explained to Wei WuXian the LanlingJin Sect’s wedding customs as they headed through the main square. The entire wedding would, in fact, be a five day celebration. They were on the first day now

when all the guests would arrive throughout the day. Wei WuXian felt a bit of pride that the only sect his shijie had come out to greet was GusuLan. On the second day, there would be a great ceremonial hunt in a back mountain close to Lanling City where the groom was expected to capture an animal to honor his new bride. Unlike the typical night hunt, this was a normal hunt—whatever the participants brought in were cooked and served for the wedding banquet the next day. Since others were allowed to participate, it made the hunt a competition where the groom had to perform well and bring in the biggest catch. On the third day, the actual wedding ceremony would be held, and then the banquet began and lasted for the next two days.

As they were heading toward the guest quarters, Wei WuXian heard the sound of barking and immediately broke into a cold sweat. “D-D-Dogs?” he yelped, only to hear the sound getting closer. Before he was aware of it, he’d crouched to hide behind Jiang YanLi’s skirt.

“Shijie, shijie, shijie, shijie!” He yelled at the top of his lungs as he saw the horrible creature running toward them. It might have been only a small dog, barely coming up to Wei WuXian’s knees with black fur, but logic knew no reason in the face of fear.

“Quick! Take the dog away,” Jiang YanLi said.

“Why?” Wei WuXian recognized Jin ZiXuan’s voice. “I thought you said your brothers like dogs so I thought I’d show her to them. She’s only a puppy.”

“A-Cheng likes dogs. A-Xian has always been scared of dogs,” Jiang YanLi said. Even at a time like this, she was gentle and patient. “Please take her away.”

“All right,” ZiXuan said. “Come on, Little Black!”

Wei WuXian huddled behind Jiang YanLi’s dress, shivering until he heard a sharp whistle, and the skittering of the dog claws on the tiling, its loud pants and excited whines, started moving in the opposite direction.

“It’s okay, A-Xian,” she said. “He’s taking her away.”

“What the hell? The great Yiling Patriarch still scared of dogs?”

Wei WuXian looked up from behind Jiang YanLi’s skirt to see Jiang Cheng raising an eyebrow, looking down at him. “Jiang Cheng!” he said, holding out a hand.

Jiang Cheng grinned as he pulled him back up from his crouch.

“Don’t worry, A-Xian, I’ll tell ZiXuan to keep them away while you’re here,” Jiang YanLi said, smiling at him.

“Thank you, Shijie,” Wei WuXian said.

“You are a shame to the Jiang clan,” Jiang Cheng said, snorting. “Still scared of dogs at your age?”

Wei WuXian sniffed. “At least I have a better naming sense than him and you,” he said. “Little Black?”

"I agree about Little Black. Most uncreative name of all time," Jiang Cheng said. "But what's wrong with my names?"

"Didn't you name your dogs things like Princess and Jasmine and Love?" Wei WuXian said. "They're not expensive courtesans."

"They're good dog names!" Jiang Cheng argued.

"A-Xian," Jiang YanLi said patiently, "Jiang Cheng and ZiXuan can name their pets anything they want."

"Even though they're bad names," Wei WuXian finished and grinned at her. "Just don't let either of them name your future kids," he said.

Jiang YanLi smiled. "I have you for that, A-Xian."

"A-Jie! You trust him with names but not me?" Jiang Cheng said.

Jiang YanLi smiled and changed the subject. "I'll show you your room," she said to Wei WuXian as they continued to walk. "Jiang Cheng is really very excited to see you."

"Like hell I am," Jiang Cheng said.

She led them to a spacious, ornate guest room. By the decor and the size of the room, it was definitely the residence of a guest-of-honor with its own sitting table and intricately carved wooden stools. It had a large single bed and an incense burner that wafted a flowery smell that made Wei WuXian wrinkle his nose. Most likely, someone from the Jin sect knew Lan WangJi used incense burners and had placed one in their room. Wei WuXian had gotten used to Lan WangJi's subtle sandalwood scent and preferred it to stronger smells like this one. He wondered if this room had been arranged because he was Jiang YanLi's shidi, or because it was to be occupied by the esteemed Hanguang-Jun.

Since all the guests would be arriving at different times that day, dinner was being brought to the guest rooms as they arrived. At least Wei Wuxian knew Jiang YanLi was being treated well, because no sooner had the three siblings entered the room than two servants were already carting in several trays of food and jars of alcohol.

Moving aside the incense burner, Jiang YanLi helped the servants set the table and scooped rice for all three of them, urging them to begin eating.

Jiang Cheng, meanwhile, opened up two jars of alcohol, handing one over to Wei WuXian. "I hate to admit it, but the alcohol here is pretty good," he said.

"I know you didn't want to speak about it earlier, but tell us how you've been, A-Xian," Jiang YanLi said after Wei WuXian had shoved a few mouthfuls of rice automatically into his mouth. She smiled at him, gentle, and it reminded him of all the times she'd comforted him after he'd been chased by dogs or scolded by Madam Yu. "Are you having a difficult time at the Cloud Recesses?" She reached out to touch his hand.



Wei WuXian suddenly felt like he was a kid again, being piggybacked by her after falling out of a tree. His throat closed up. "Everything's fine." His voice cracked at the end, and he took a deep breath, trying to smile convincingly.

"That's a lie if I ever heard one," Jiang Cheng said. "You fucking hate the rules there. If you're not complaining, there's something wrong."

"What kind of logic is that?" Wei WuXian protested. "I still had a good time back when we were studying even with the rules," he argued.

"Is Lan WangJi not being a gentleman?" Jiang Cheng demanded, frowning. "If he did anything to you—"

"It's not that." Wei WuXian sighed and picked at some of the food, putting some spicy meat inside his bowl. "He hasn't done anything to me. He's a perfect gentleman." Even though he was finally with his family, the people closest to him, who he'd grown up with, his brother and sister, he couldn't tell them the truth—not if he wanted Jiang Cheng to keep the golden core inside of him. "I'm just a little annoyed that he promised to come to the wedding but left for business a few days ago."

"That bastard! Did you yell at him?" Jiang Cheng asked.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Can you imagine someone yelling at Lan WangJi?" he asked.

Jiang Cheng frowned, pulling the jar of liquor to him and pouring out three bowls. "Well even if it's only a marriage of convenience, he should still have come," he said, pushing one of the bowls to each of them. "If he shows up, I'll break his fucking legs!"

"A-Cheng," Jiang YanLi said and then turned to Wei WuXian. "A-Xian," she said slowly. "If an arranged marriage is not what you want, you don't have to stay."

"What do you mean?" Jiang Cheng demanded. "Do you know how hard I worked for that? He has to stay!"

"A-Cheng," Jiang YanLi began.

"Maybe you should have arranged the marriage with someone who actually wanted to marry me," Wei WuXian said dryly, taking one of the bowls of liquor from Jiang Cheng, feeling more relaxed just being with his family and being able to complain, at least in part, about things. "Why the hell did you choose Lan WangJi?"

Jiang Cheng snorted. "You think I didn't try? I told them they could marry you to the lowliest maid if they wanted—"

"Hey!" Wei WuXian said, offended.

"Who the hell cares as long as you're considered a part of the GusuLan household," Jiang Cheng said. "That bastard Lan WangJi wouldn't agree, saying some bullshit about how you should marry the one you want."

“Really? Him?” Wei WuXian was surprised. He’d always thought that Lan WangJi just wanted him to stop demonic cultivation out of principle. At most, he thought that Lan WangJi might care about Wei WuXian’s well-being the same indifferent way he cared about all the random people he helped just because he was a good man. He’d never considered that Lan WangJi might care about his personal happiness.

Jiang Cheng shrugged. “Yeah, he wouldn’t let his older brother sign any kind of agreement until Lan XiChen suggested you marry him,” he said. “I was seriously surprised when he agreed.”

“Lan WangJi wanted to marry me?” Wei WuXian asked, even more surprised. He leaned forward in his seat. “Are we talking about the same Lan WangJi? The one who can’t stand me? The one I literally fight with every time we see each other?”

Jiang Cheng snorted and put a few pieces of meat into his own bowl. “Don’t read too much into it. It took him awhile to agree to that too for the same reason,” he said, gesturing with his chopsticks. “But it was either get you married or abandon you at the Yiling Burial Mounds, and who the hell knows what Jin ZiXun might have tried to do even if his cousin is marrying A-Jie. Even that ice king isn’t so heartless.”

Wei WuXian didn’t know why he felt a little disappointed hearing that. Of course he’d known from the beginning that it had taken a long time to convince Lan WangJi to agree to this marriage. He’d agreed because he was just the type of good person who helped other people because someone had to, and in this case, the person happened to be Wei WuXian. If Wei WuXian had been any other random person, Lan WangJi would have done the same.

At the same time, he felt a little better, a little more forgiving, that Lan WangJi had argued for his happiness in front of Jiang Cheng no less. It was kind of sweet and unexpectedly romantic of him that Lan WangJi wanted Wei WuXian to marry someone he loved.

“Anyway, he was the one who agreed to it so he better hold to his word,” Jiang Cheng said. “If that bastard Lan WangJi doesn’t come and show A-Jie some face, I’ll make Lan XiChen arrange another marriage!”

“A-Cheng,” Jiang YanLi chided again. “I don’t think that’s what A-Xian is upset about.”

“What do you mean? Of course I am,” Wei WuXian said, reaching out to help himself to some of the dishes. Whoever had served them had taken into account the Yunmeng palate and served almost everything spicy and red. “He can treat me however he wants, but he better give Shijie face.”

“A-Xian,” Jiang YanLi said, reaching for his hand and stilling him from getting more food. It forced him to look at her. “I know what it’s like to love and be loved,” she said. “If an arranged marriage is making you miserable—”

“Ugh, A-Jie, getting married is making you a sap,” Jiang Cheng said. “Most people who get married aren’t in love.” All three of them knew he was talking about Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan. His parents hadn’t been in love, but they had run their sect perfectly fine to the end. “You don’t even need to get along to make it work.”

“That’s my point,” Jiang YanLi said. “If A-Xian does want to marry for love, then let’s not force it.”

Jiang Cheng had worked hard to make this marriage alliance with GusuLan. And this was now Jiang YanLi's wedding that she was finally having after all the issues she'd had with Jin ZiXuan. In comparison, Wei WuXian's problems with Lan WangJi were minor.

"It's fine, really," Wei WuXian said and smiled. "I feel better just being able to say it out loud. You wouldn't believe how quiet things in GusuLan are," he said. "Anyway, without him here, we can enjoy ourselves! Let's celebrate Shijie's wedding tonight!" He held up his bowl of liquor. "To Shijie's happy marriage!" he toasted. "May Jin ZiXuan be torn to pieces if he isn't the perfect husband!"

"Ganbei!" Jiang Cheng agreed, knocking their bowls together, before all three of them drank.

Jiang YanLi coughed after drinking. She dabbed at her mouth and smiled.

"Let's drink through the night!" Wei WuXian cheered.

It felt good to be with family again.

When Wei WuXian woke the next morning, he ached all over because he'd fallen asleep on his chair with his head pillowed on an empty jar. Jiang YanLi was already gone, and only Jiang Cheng was left snoring where he had slept sprawled out horizontally on the bed.

"Jiang Cheng, wake up," Wei WuXian muttered, kicking his brother in the leg until he was punched in the thigh for his troubles.

"Shut the fuck up," Jiang Cheng groaned.

"It's the big hunt," Wei WuXian said. "Get up if you want to show up that stupid peacock," he said, wincing as he straightened his own robes and tugged on his boots.

"Let's just shoot him," Jiang Cheng said.

"You can if you want to deal with Shijie after," Wei WuXian said.

Jiang Cheng groaned but finally sat up, cradling his head. "What time is it?" he asked.

"Gong just rang for 9," Wei Wuxian said. "You better get back to your disciples. Sect Leader Jiang will have to be presentable when the hunt begins."

"Fuck you," Jiang Cheng said but pulled on his boots and staggered out the door.

A servant knocked on the door soon after, bringing breakfast, and Wei WuXian let her in. She had brought two sets of everything—bowls, chopsticks, congee. Wei WuXian didn't feel like explaining that Lan WangJi wasn't here again so he just gestured for her to leave everything. After he'd drank three cups of tea and eaten, he felt more human and in a much better mood.

Today was the start of the wedding festivities, and Wei WuXian had always loved the excitement of celebrations. Furthermore, it was the day of the hunt, which meant he would get to show off all his

skills—not having a golden core didn't mean his physical prowess had diminished. He'd beaten Jin ZiXuan at archery and night-hunting once at Phoenix Mountain, and he fully planned on doing so again. Jiang YanLi wouldn't mind if he did, and apart from her, there was no one else he cared about pleasing.

Once he'd freshened up, he checked the bow and arrows that Jiang Cheng had brought from Lotus Pier for him. It had been awhile since he did any shooting, but the bow string was taut and well-kept when he tested it. As the former head disciple of YunmengJiang Sect and now an honorary member of GusuLan Sect, he wouldn't lose face for either of them—at least not when it came to a hunt.

Then he set out to find his horse. Since he had officially married into GusuLan and the purpose of the marriage was to solidify his status, he was expected to ride out with his new sect, but given GusuLan Sect's usual morning habits, they were already in formation by the time Wei WuXian rode up to join them. Since he'd been busy night-hunting with Lan Wangji or else locked up in the library, and all his spare time spent with the Wen clan, he hadn't gotten to know many of the other GusuLan disciples apart from Lan XiChen. He also stood out like a sore thumb with his lack of a forehead ribbon and black robes—he'd been given a set of white GusuLan robes for the wedding, but he didn't intend to wear them on the hunt when he'd no doubt return with them dirty.

Lan XiChen didn't appear to mind his appearance, and motioned him up to the front.

"Wangji has not arrived yet?" Lan XiChen asked when Wei Wuxian drew his horse up alongside him. Wei WuXian was aware of the eyes on them and the whispers that had swept through the crowds.

He shook his head. "He told me he was going to be away for business."

Lan XiChen looked at him a bit strangely. "He didn't tell you where he was going?"

"Should he have?" Wei WuXian asked. "We're not in that kind of a marriage, Zewu-Jun."

Lan XiChen frowned. "What—"

But whatever he was about to say was cut off by the announcement from the platform that had been erected in the main square. Jin GuangShan and Madam Jin were sitting in the seats of honor beneath the shaded platform, and beside them were Jiang YanLi, Jin GuangYao, and Qin Su, his wife who was holding their baby son.

Jin GuangShan was the one who spoke. "Welcome all to the wedding hunt of my son, Jin ZiXuan," he said. At his words, the Jin Sect cultivators parted, and Jin ZiXuan rode out on horseback, wheeling his horse in a small circle to show off his equestrian skill. He drew the horse up to the platform, smiling at Jiang YanLi who inclined her head to him.

Jin GuangShan and Madam Jin both wore proud smiles on their faces, which was maybe the first time Wei WuXian had seen them agree about anything. While, as with most major events, their platform had been set with delicate sets of liquor and snacks, all the servants who stood to the side were male. Apparently, Madam Jin was taking no chances with Jin GuangShan's wandering eye at such an important occasion. It didn't stop Jin GuangShan from looking at some of the prettier female cultivators present, though.

“As per LanlingJin tradition, the groom will bring back a kill to honor his bride,” Jin GuangShan said, inclining his head to Jiang YanLi. Madam Jin reached to take her hand, smiling at her. Qin Su, on her other side, also reached out to touch her shoulder with her free hand.

“All who desire to participate may join him on Golden Cloud Mountain today,” Jin GuangShan continued. “Whoever brings back the fattest hunt will be rewarded a hundred jin of gold, and a seat of honor at the wedding feast. The mountain has been cleared of all creatures apart from game animals. Only animals hunted with bow and arrow will be honored in this hunt.” He finished laying out the conditions of the contest. That rule would eliminate the use of cultivation with hunting, or it would not be much of an event since even a non-cultivator could slap down a talisman and trap an animal. “You have until sunset to bring back hunt for the banquet tomorrow,” Jin GuangShan finished.

With that, he gestured and Jin GuangYao stepped forward to take over the announcements.

Like all major events, all the sects assembled would be announced one at a time. But whether because of his humiliation at Phoenix Mountain last time or for practicality’s sake, there would be no archery contest at the beginning to determine who left for the mountain first. Instead, the smaller sects would all be announced first, and then the major ones, and last of all, the LanlingJin Sect led by Jin ZiXuan. The purpose was to give Jin ZiXuan a chance to show off his skill—since all other competitors were given a chance to enter the mountain first, he would have the most difficult time capturing good prey, which would require him to be a good hunter. Vice versa, even if he didn’t return with the largest prey, he would still be able to save some face since others were allowed to hunt before him.

“You’re participating in the hunt?”

Wei WuXian turned to see Jin ZiXun sneering at him for a little distance away where he was waiting with the Jin Sect cultivators, as Jin GuangYao announced sect after sect.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Wei WuXian said. “It’s my shijie’s wedding, of course I’m bringing her the biggest prey.” Apparently, Jin ZiXun was still sour about their encounter in Yueyang City, or maybe it was his grudge from Phoenix Mountain.

Jin ZiXun sneered. “That flute won’t do you much good here,” he said. “You heard my uncle. There are no corpses up on that mountain—nothing but animals.”

Wei WuXian laughed. “And you think I would lose with that?” he said. “Want me to hunt blindfolded again?” He pretended to think about it. “But I wouldn’t want to humiliate LanlingJin on such an occasion.”

“You—”

“Cousin, not today.” Jin ZiXuan said, having returned to the LanlingJin Sect formation.

Though Jin ZiXuan didn’t exactly look pleased that Wei WuXian was here, he was apparently determined not to make a scene at his own wedding hunt.

“He’s not even wearing his sword!” Jin ZiXun said. “He’s not taking this hunt seriously at all!” Wearing a sword was considered basic etiquette in formal events like this, but Wei WuXian couldn’t wear his—not if he didn’t want to be challenged to a duel by someone like Jin ZiXun.

“I wouldn’t dirty my sword with the blood of animals,” Wei WuXian said dismissively. “But if you need yours, by all means.”

Jin ZiXun looked like he might actually try to challenge Wei WuXian on the spot even without a sword if not for Lan XiChen on one side and Jin ZiXuan on the other.

“Like I warned you last time, you’re bringing the wrong type of people into this family,” he bit out to Jin ZiXuan instead.

“Cousin, I would ask you not to insult my wife,” Jin ZiXuan said, narrowing his eyes and riding in front of Wei WuXian to come between them. “If you have a problem with Wei WuXian, you can take it up with him alone.”

Wei WuXian itched to take out Chenqing, but just then, the horn sounded for the first of the major sects to depart.

“We’ll settle this on the hunt!” Jin ZiXun flicked his sleeves and rode a little further away into the Jin formation.

“I’m sorry about losing face for GusuLan,” Wei WuXian ignored Jin ZiXuan to say to Lan XiChen.

Lan XiChen smiled. “I know he can be a little difficult to get along with,” he said. “Even Jin GuangYao has trouble with him. Don’t worry and enjoy the hunt.”

Wei WuXian felt he really was lucky to have Lan XiChen as an in-law even though it came with being married to Lan Wangji. Lan XiChen was the ideal type of sect leader unlike Jiang Cheng and his temperament, or Jin GuangShan and his philandering. Even Nie MingJue, as strong as he was, had a terrifying temper. Someone like Lan XiChen or even Jin GuangYao was much better suited for managing a sect. Unfortunately for Jin GuangYao, it would be Jin ZiXuan who took over the LanlingJin Sect who, though he showed none of his father’s women-chasing personality, was arrogant to the point of irritation.

The QingheNie Sect was the first of the major sects to be sent out to hunt. Nie MingJue immediately led his cultivators toward the road. Nie HuaiSang, riding beside his older brother, was dressed to the nines, but he looked harassed when they rode past and Wei WuXian overheard Nie MingJue telling him he’d better hunt something good or else. The next to depart was the YunmengJiang Sect led by Jiang Cheng who saluted Jiang YanLi before riding off as well. With GusuLan next, Wei WuXian rode out beside Lan XiChen, ignoring the whispers of all their audience though he heard, more than once, questions about where the Second Jade of Lan was. They had barely set out on the road toward the mountain when he heard the hoofbeats of the LanlingJin horses behind them.

Jin ZiXun immediately jogged his horse forward, breaking into a gallop to pull ahead of the GusuLan Sect formation. He and a group of cultivators raced past, bent on getting to the mountain before GusuLan did. A few of the younger GusuLan cultivators couldn’t resist the competition and also urged their horses

forward. But Jin ZiXuan and most of the other LanlingJin Sect kept their horses in formation behind the GusuLan horses.

The grounds selected for the hunt was Golden Cloud Mountain, which was a forested mountain close by Lanling City. In the daylight, the fog covering the mountain was lit a brilliant gold, giving the place its name. At the base of the mountain, there were already a group of horses waiting and as the last of the cultivators rode up, they also dismounted. From here on, either flying by sword or walking by foot would make hunting easier.

As they entered the hunting grounds, people broke off into groups or went off alone. Wei Wuxian left the GusuLan group as soon as he could, setting off alone. He knew that the GusuLan cultivators must feel more comfortable with him gone. Instead he began making his way up the mountain, pausing every so often to look for tracks. Wei WuXian used to do quite a bit of hunting and trapping when he had lived in Yunmengliang—mostly catching wild pheasants since they were plentiful in the forests around Yunmeng and he liked how they tasted best, but he'd caught enough other animals as well. It took him some looking before he finally found a stream of fresh water.

Here, he knew he would definitely be able to catch something good if he waited. The LanlingJin region was populated by primarily deer and wild boar, worthy animals for a wedding hunt and feast. He followed the stream until he found some tracks and droppings he recognized and then settled to wait. Deer were cautious animals and easily startled, and they wouldn't come drink water even at their thirstiest until they felt it was safe. After he caught a deer, which had more tender meat, he'd go find a boar.

Wei WuXian had good luck. Though he was so cold, his fingers and toes were starting to go numb in the chilly air, only an hour had passed when he heard a stir. When he looked, he could see a plump buck had walked out to the stream. At this time of autumn, most animals were fat and readying themselves for winter as this buck also looked. Wei WuXian grinned and quickly slid an arrow out of his quiver, drawing it back on the bow in one smooth motion and letting it loose.

The deer, taken completely by surprise, stumbled where the arrow protruded from its heart, and slowly buckled to its knees. Wei WuXian grinned as he came out, skipping over protruding rocks to get to the other side of the stream.

"One down," he said cheerfully. He was thinking about how he'd get the buck back down the mountain without using demonic cultivation or having any corpses around to help him carry it, when he felt the hairs on the back of his neck raise.

He recognized the sensation.

Here in the forest, surrounded by cool fog and under the shade of so many trees, it was dim even in the daylight. More importantly, the forest had none of the arrays set up at the Cloud Recesses or Koi Tower. On top of that, most cultivators today had foregone bringing any talismans or other magical protection since they couldn't use them for the hunt anyway.

As such, a familiar ghost hovered in front of Wei WuXian.

“Lady Yang? So you didn’t disappear,” Wei WuXian said, looking at her and relaxing. In the daylight, so wispy she was nearly invisible, she didn’t look nearly as startling any of the other times he had seen her—only sad. “What are you doing here following me?” he asked.

Although she had been strong enough to get through the barriers at the Cloud Recesses, after Xue Yang had cut through her with a spiritual sword, apparently she had been weakened enough that she could no longer break through barriers. Still, she had followed Wei WuXian all the way to Koi Tower, waiting outside until he was in a place without the spiritual barriers.

She turned suddenly to the left, and Wei WuXian automatically looked where she did. He was warned just in time when an arrow went whistling by him.

Someone was shooting at him.

Wei WuXian hadn’t expected this—he knew he was hated, but he’d already married into the GusuLan Sect and was now under their protection. On top of that, he was still the Yiling Patriarch. Although the hunt would certainly be a good time to disguise his death as an accident, he also hadn’t thought that anyone would have enough balls to try to kill him.

Much less that that person would be Jin ZiXuan who was standing on the other side of the stream, still holding the bow that had released the arrow.

“Jin ZiXuan!” Wei WuXian shouted, pulling Chenqing from his belt. “You fucking coward! You hate me? Well—”

“Watch out!” As he spoke, Jin ZiXuan had already notched another arrow to his bow and let it fly. Again, it went whistling past Wei Wuxian.

He wasn’t shooting at Wei WuXian.

This time, he heard the growl behind him. He turned just as a huge grey thing came thundering toward him. Wei WuXian reacted without thinking. He leapt up onto the nearest tree, dodging the creature as it came pounding past him, so heavy the tree trunk shook as it past. Up on the tree, he turned, trying to take stock of what kind of creature this was, and therefore, how to kill it. When he got a clear look at it, though, he wished he hadn’t.

“D-D-D-Dog!” Wei WuXian immediately lost all motivation to hunt and hugged the tree, shivering all over. This was not only a dog, but the largest dog he had ever seen in his life—larger than any dog had the right to be, and so horrifying that Wei WuXian had never even had a nightmare to compare to this. With thick black fur, glowing red eyes, and puffs of steam coming out of a mouth that was full of teeth each as long as Wei WuXian’s handspan, it stood growling at Jin ZiXuan who didn’t even reach its shoulders.

“What do you mean a dog?” Jin ZiXuan snapped, his arrow notched, though any idiot could see an arrow was not going to do anything against a creature like this. “No dog is that big! At least, it would be a wolf!”

Despite his words, he was pale.



The dog growled, the fur on its back rising as it glared down at Jin ZiXuan.

“No wolf is that big either! Why did you make it angry?” Wei WuXian forgot all about everything apart from the monster dog staring Jin ZiXuan down, baring its teeth and growling.

“Was I supposed to let it eat you?” Jin ZiXuan shouted. Slowly, he unnotched his arrow and reached for the sword at his waist. The dog growled again, letting out puffs of white in the cold air, but Jin ZiXuan moved so slowly that it didn’t attack. “If you’re not going to help, get out of here!”

“Y-Y-You’re not going to fight it, are you?” Wei WuXian said, clutching the tree. He felt like his limbs had locked in place, and he wasn’t even sure he could make an attempt at running right now. Even from up on the tree, Wei WuXian could smell the stench of the monster. “I didn’t even know dogs could get so big.” He was almost crying from fear. “Jiang Cheng, where the fuck are you?”

“Why are you shouting for Jiang Cheng?” Jin ZiXuan said. Beads of sweat were running down his forehead as he stared at the creature.

“He—he promised to keep dogs away from me!” Wei WuXian said. “Shijie!” he cried.

“Why the hell would you want Maiden Jiang here?” Jin ZiXuan shouted at him.

Which was when the monster dog had enough of their shouting and rushed forward. Jin ZiXuan met it sword-first. A normal animal would have been cleaved half by a spiritual sword, no matter how large, and particularly one wielded by a cultivator of Jin ZiXuan’s calibre. But if the size hadn’t been an indicator, the way the sword bounced off its hide proved it.

There were only one other beast Wei WuXian could compare to this dog in size—the Xuanwu Tortoise of Slaughter that he and Lan Wangji had killed so many years ago. This dog must be another legendary beast.

Wei WuXian remembered, all of a sudden, a story that Jiang Cheng had told him when they were kids. He was pretty sure it was in revenge to some prank or other that Wei WuXian had pulled on him, but Jiang Cheng had told him about the evil Tiangou, a giant dog beast that once ate the moon, causing the skies to be dark for days until a group of cultivators had teamed up to beat it until it spit it back out. He’d threatened to call the Tiangou down to swallow Wei WuXian, and Wei WuXian had been so scared that he’d hidden under the bed for a whole afternoon until Jiang FengMian found him and gave Jiang Cheng a strict lecture.

“Tiangou!” Wei Wuxian said. “It’s a Tiangou! What is a legendary beast doing here?” He almost cried. “I thought you said there were only normal animals up here!”

“There are only normal animals up here,” Jin ZiXuan snapped, reading himself as the Tiangou lowered its head and prepared for another attack. “I just came hunting two weeks ago, and there was nothing like this!”

“Do something! Make it go away!” Wei WuXian begged.

“Will you shut up?” Jin ZiXuan snapped.

The Tiangou attacked again, this time knocking Jin ZiXuan onto his back. He managed to keep the Tiangou away by using his sword, pressing the flat of its blade up as the dog beast bore down. But even Lan WangJi hadn’t been able to kill the Xuanwu by himself—there was no way Jin ZiXuan could win pinned to the ground like this. Seeing this, Wei WuXian had no choice. Between his fear of dogs and how his shijie would feel if he let her stupid husband die, the second won out.

Wei WuXian blew several loud tones with his flute, only to remember there were no corpses on this mountain either. “Of all times to clear a mountain!” he cursed, though he knew it was probably his own fault. LanlingJin remembered what had happened at Phoenix Mountain. Since all the participants to this hunt were cultivators and would have no need to fear supernatural creatures, the only reason they’d cleared the mountain was to make sure Jin ZiXuan wasn’t shown up by Wei WuXian again.

He had no choice but to pull out his own bow and arrow. The massive spiritual beast, at a cultivation level like this, would be incredibly difficult to kill. To make things worse, Wei WuXian had had Lan WangJi that time—Jin ZiXuan was nowhere near close to Lan WangJi’s cultivation level or strength.

Wei WuXian leapt off the tree and shot several arrows, only for them to bounce off the beast’s thick hide. The only good thing was that it successfully distracted the Tiangou from Jin ZiXuan, and it backed off of him, giving Jin ZiXuan an opportunity to scramble away. But it also drew the Tiangou’s attention toward Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian’s soul almost flew out from his mouth when the beast turned its head in his direction and looked at him. Its red eyes narrowed at Wei WuXian and it let out a bark that sounded more like a thunderous roar.

“Oh my god, oh my god I’m going to die,” Wei WuXian wailed and took off running.

He heard the Tiangou’s loud pants behind him, the thump of its heavy paws on the ground. It sounded like it was getting closer. He was really going to die for real. He was going to die and he hadn’t even seen Shijie married yet.

And then, Wei WuXian suddenly felt himself lifted up in the air and away from the beast.

Heart thundering so wildly in his chest that he felt faint, for a moment, Wei WuXian thought it was Lan WangJi—the only person so far in his life who had carried him on his sword. But when he looked at his companion, it was only Jin ZiXuan, sweating as his sword bobbed up and down in the air even as he tried to take them higher.

“Faster!” Wei WuXian yelled at him. “Go faster!”

When he glanced behind them, he could see the Tiangou gaining on them, its red eyes staring up at them and mouth open, showing rows of sharp teeth.

“Shut up!” Jin ZiXuan shouted back. “I don’t see you helping! Where’s your sword?”

“I didn’t think I’d need it!” Wei WuXian yelled. “Hurry!”

"I'm trying!" Jin ZiXuan snapped. But he was no Lan WangJi, and in the end, all he could manage was to get them up into the branches of a tree, high enough that the Tiangou wouldn't be able to reach them even if it jumped. Of course, if it was really able to fly as the legends said, that wouldn't help them.

Up in the tree, Wei WuXian prayed to every deity he could remember by name and willed his breathing and shaking to calm down. He wished Lan WangJi were there. When they'd killed the Xuanwu, it had been so easy to work with him, easy to come up with a plan when Lan WangJi was so cool-headed even when badly injured. Now that Wei WuXian was alone and facing a dog of all things, he wished Lan WangJi were here to help him think more clearly.

"Shut up! Why are you calling for Lan WangJi now?" Jin ZiXuan hissed, which was when Wei WuXian realized he'd been begging out loud.

"He's better to work with than you," Wei WuXian snapped but clamped his mouth shut.

Crouched on the branch beside him, Jin ZiXuan looked down where the Tiangou was still charging forward further into the surrounding woods, apparently too excited by the chase to notice that its prey had hidden. But though the Tiangou didn't notice where they'd gone, after a few minutes, it circled back, and began to sniff around, trying to catch their scent.

Wei WuXian finally willed himself out of his blank panic. "What the hell is a Tiangou doing here?" he whispered furiously. "I thought you said this hunt was a normal hunt! No creatures!" he hissed as quietly as he could in case the Tiangou heard.

"It is a normal hunt," Jin ZiXuan whispered back. "I don't know where it came from."

It took every ounce of willpower to stand in place, notching his bow again and looking for a weakness. "Do you have any talismans?" he asked.

Jin ZiXuan rummaged through his qiankun sleeve, but it held nothing but a bunch of extra arrows. "We couldn't use them on the hunt so I didn't bring any," he muttered. "What about you?"

"Same," Wei WuXian said, cursing his own arrogance. When he was night-hunting with Lan WangJi, he always laid out everything they might need—talismans, elixirs, medicine, herbs—for Wei WuXian to pick and choose from so he never had to worry about it. On this trip, without Lan WangJi there and expecting only an easy ordinary hunt, he hadn't come prepared. The only thing Wei WuXian had in his pockets were the two halves of his Yin Tiger Seal, and even in a situation like this, that seal was too powerful to risk using.

"Then we have no choice but to figure out another way," Wei WuXian said.

"We can wait for reinforcements," Jin ZiXuan said.

Wei WuXian wished. "We can't. We're too close to Lanling City. If we don't kill that beast before it gets off this mountain, who knows how many civilians it might kill."

Jin ZiXuan gritted his teeth. "Fine. What do we do then?"

"Find its weakness. Think of a plan," Wei WuXian said and glared at him. "What does my shijie even see in you?"

"Wei WuXian! I—"

"Shut up! Hearing your whiney voice is making it hard for me to think," Wei WuXian snapped, shivering at just the thought of having to go down to face that enormous dog. "Why couldn't you have been Lan WangJi?"

"Are you seriously so in love with him that you can't stop thinking about him?" Jin ZiXuan said. "God, and A-Li wasn't sure if you liked him."

"I'm not in love with him!" Wei WuXian said. "Has fear made you a complete lunatic? And don't call my shijie 'A-Li'!"

"She's my wife—"

"Not yet, she isn't! Not ever if we don't survive this stupid dog," Wei WuXian said. "Ugh, please shut up!"

Jin ZiXuan looked like he wanted to argue more, but at least he knew how to prioritize. He clamped his mouth shut though not without another glare at Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian turned away, trying to do his best to concentrate on his memory of the Tiangou. Like the Xuanwu, no matter how powerful, it still had a weakness. That time with the monster tortoise, Wei WuXian had dove and gone into its disgusting shell to find its weakness from within. This time, the Tiangou wasn't as big as the XuanWu, but more vicious. Its fur was impenetrable, but going anywhere near its mouth was asking for death.

"That time Lan WangJi and I killed the Xuanwu, it was vulnerable on the inside, but Lan Zhan still had to strangle it for six hours," Wei WuXian said.

"Six hours?" Jin ZiXuan's voice went up at the end.

"I don't expect you to be able to do it," Wei WuXian said. "But this time, we're armed. We have bows and arrows, and your sword."

"I already tried the sword," Jin ZiXuan said.

"You were just hacking it over its hide," Wei WuXian said. "Look at the direction of its fur—all the hair is flattened back right now, but when it gets agitated, its hair rises up. If you cut against the direction of the fur, you should be able to hit flesh."

Jin ZiXuan looked down at the Tiangou that was starting to sniff close to their tree. "You might be right," he said.

"I'll..." Wei WuXian regretted every word that came out of his mouth next. "I'll be bait. I'll shoot to distract it, and then you kill it."

"I can't let Maiden Jiang's brother be bait," Jin ZiXuan said.

"Ugh, stop pretending like you actually care about me," Wei WuXian snapped.

"You may not believe me, but I really lo—lo—I really like Maiden Jiang." Jin ZiXuan turned red, stuttering. "Do you think she'd ever marry me if you ended up dead on my watch?"

"It's do it or let that Tiangou kill everyone in Lanling City," Wei WuXian said. "Your choice."

Jin ZiXuan exhaled, but finally nodded. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"I won't let anything happen to me," Wei WuXian said. "I'm still the Yiling Patriarch."

"With what corpses?" Jin ZiXuan said, a shadow of his old attitude that time Wei WuXian had punched his stupid face in the Cloud Recesses.

"I'm going," Wei WuXian said and leapt down from the tree.

The next few minutes were spent screaming at the top of his lungs, and it wasn't only because he was trying to lure in the Tiangou. Wei WuXian's fear of dogs knew no size—it could be the smallest puppy that couldn't even bark yet and he'd still be reduced to shivering behind his shijie—but this was by far the scariest dog he'd ever encountered. His fear was entirely justified when he heard the bone-chilling howl so loud that even his yelling couldn't drown it out.

And now that the Tiangou had its full attention on Wei WuXian, the barks only got louder as did the thump of heavy claws behind him, traveling at a far faster speed than a human could ever hope to outrun.

It took every ounce of Wei WuXian's courage to stand in place, turn, and notch an arrow to his bow. The first one glanced off the Tiangou's forehead. The second one nearly hit its eye only for it to leap up suddenly so it bounced off the fur of his chest, and then it was too close for Wei WuXian not to run.

"Kill it, kill it, kill it!" Wei WuXian screamed, running, and then the beast was on him.

He felt a giant paw stamp down on his back and he fell hard to the ground. He was going to die. After surviving his golden core being cut out, being thrown down into the burial mounds, the Sunshot Campaign, everything—he was going to die because of a dog.

"Hang on!" he heard Jin ZiXuan shout.

He heard the thunk of arrows but saw them fall to the ground beside him. He could feel the Tiangou's breath, the stench of rotting meat oozing in the air around him. Wei WuXian shut his eyes, grabbing for anything he could reach, but the Tiangou had knocked the rest of his bow and arrows away, and he could feel nothing but the papery fallen leaves and moist dirt beneath his fingers. Then his fingers touched smooth, familiar wood—Chenqing had been knocked loose from his belt.

Wei WuXian didn't care that there weren't any corpses left on this mountain—he raised the flute to his lips and blew.

The sound that came out was a hideous, inhuman screech, a tone so piercing that the Tiangou let out a howl so loud that Wei WuXian's ears ached. He couldn't even remember a song to play—what came out of the flute was a series of disjointed notes, dissonant and awful, as he begged for anything to come and help. But where he expected the sharp teeth to come down on him at any time, it never did.

Amidst the din, he heard the dull thunk of a knife cutting meat, and then a ear-splitting yowl. The sound stopped with another sudden thunk. Then he felt a warm spray of liquid cover his entire head and back.

The paw on his back went limp.

Wei WuXian scrambled out from beneath the Tiangou, crawling on the forest floor until he knocked headfirst into a tree, trembling uncontrollably.

When he finally dared look behind him, the scene wasn't anything in the realm of what he expected. Jin ZiXuan was there, hacking the Tiangou's head off with his sword. The Tiangou, or what was left of it, was covered in corpses—but they weren't the corpses of humans.

Covering the Tiangou were boars half-rotted with their ribs showing through, squirrels so long dead they were barely bones and matted fur, pheasants and other birds missing feathers with carcasses half eaten, even that fat buck that Wei WuXian had shot earlier with the arrow still in its heart. The animal corpses had bitten onto the Tiangou, every limb, every piece of fur they could reach, keeping it immobile as Jin ZiXuan's spiritual sword cut through the beast.

When the Tiangou's head finally completely left its body, the animal corpses surrounding the Tiangou finally backed away and then dropped again, dead and immobile.

Jin ZiXuan stood, covered in blood up to his elbows, and panting.

"What the fuck?" Jin ZiXuan was the first to speak.

The huge corpse of the headless Tiangou lay immobile on its side, fur matted with blood now, and surrounded by the flesh and bones of other dead animals.

"You controlled them," Jin ZiXuan said, staring at Wei WuXian. "Animal corpses—how did you raise them? When did you learn this?"

"I didn't—" Wei WuXian said, staring at the glassy eyes of the dead Tiangou. "I've never—"

"Since when could you control animals? If you can even control animals, then—" Jin ZiXuan broke off.

If Wei WuXian's powers had even extended to animals, this was a whole new branch of demonic cultivation. While human walking corpses were exorcisable if the cultivators could figure out what the source of their resentment was, animals should not be controllable in theory. Animals didn't have souls—they only had spiritual energy like all living things did, but usually returned dust to dust when they

died. On rare occasion, if influenced by outside spiritual energies or resentful energies, animals could turn into yao or monsters like the Xuanwu or Tiangou. But no one had ever heard of someone actively raising animal corpses before much less controlling them.

Wei WuXian had barely escaped enmity by the cultivation world when he married Lan Wangji. When the clans found out about his new ability, if GusuLan didn't throw him out first, it might be that even marrying Lan Wangji wouldn't be enough to save him.

"I won't tell anyone," Jin ZiXuan said.

"What?" Wei WuXian stared at him. He and Jin ZiXuan had never gotten along. From the beginning, Jin ZiXuan had been such a stupid, arrogant male princess that Wei WuXian couldn't stand the sight of him, made even worse when he dared to insult Jiang YanLi. He knew that Jin ZiXuan, likewise, only tolerated him because he had finally realized how amazing Jiang YanLi really was, even though he was still entirely unworthy. He didn't expect Jin ZiXuan to cover for him.

"Like I said earlier, you're Maiden Jiang's brother," he said, eyes shifting away from Wei WuXian. "I won't do anything to harm her family." He looked down at the Tiangou. "I'll say we killed it together."

Wei WuXian tried to wipe his face, but his hands and clothes were also so covered in blood, it barely made a difference. He frowned as he looked down at the dog.

"Wait. Hand me your sword," he said.

Jin ZiXuan hesitated but handed his sword over.

Wei WuXian bent and cut into the beast's abdomen. He parted the thick fur and reached inside until he'd pried open its stomach. A host of disgusting half-digested bits of meat came pouring out. But along with all of that was a stone about the size of a peach pit.

"A beast core?" Jin ZiXuan said, looking at it. It was the same type of core that Wei WuXian had originally crafted the Yin Tiger Seal out of. Every legendary beast had one if it had grown to this size, whether it was good or evil.

Like humans, legendary beasts could also cultivate cores, but it took hundreds of years for these types of cores to develop. Most animals simply didn't live long enough or grow big enough to be able to grow a beast core, which was why they were highly unusual. Beast cores, while they also ensured immortality for the beast, were also highly sought after, because they could be made into all sorts of magical tools and elixirs. Most of the sect treasures, like Wei WuXian's own Yin Tiger Seal, were made from beast cores, and so seeing a live legendary beast was even more rare.

They had never heard of a Tiangou in this area—if it had been here for long, Golden Cloud Mountain would have long since been overrun by hordes of cultivators competing to catch it first. Which must mean someone had somehow captured the Tiangou alive and unleashed it at this crucial time, or that something else was at play here.

Wei WuXian's hypothesis turned out to be correct. Before their eyes, the Tiangou began to shrivel, expelling clouds of steam, as soon as Wei WuXian removed that beast core. It shrank from an enormous

beast whose crouched height was taller than a grown man, down to a regular sized dog—one they recognized.

“Little Black?” Jin ZiXuan said, staring down at his own dog. His eyes filled with tears as he dropped to his knees beside her small corpse. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

Wei WuXian stared down at the dead puppy. “Someone fed that dog this beast core to turn it into a Tiangou,” he said, looking at the stone in his hand. “Someone is trying to kill you.”

Notes:

please let me know what you think!!! this is one of the top chapters i’ve been looking forward to writing since the beginning of this fic!!

Chapter 7: drunk for wei wuxian's honor

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

After a quick discussion about how to proceed, Wei WuXian and Jin ZiXuan agreed to bury the corpses and go their separate ways to complete the hunt. Since the culprit must have left immediately after setting the Tiangou into the forest, it was unlikely there would be a second attempt. They’d pretend like they never met with the Tiangou, proceed with the wedding, and watch the guests carefully to see who might be surprised to find Jin ZiXuan returning alive.

Jin ZiXuan’s eyes were still red and he looked unsettled as he left, but he wasn’t in danger and Wei WuXian had enough of his own problems to care about his at the moment.

After they parted ways, Wei WuXian stayed by the stream and washed his face, neck, arms, and hair as well as he could. He was thankful he’d decided to wear his own black robes and not the GusuLan white ones today. There would be some bloodshed expected on a hunt, of course, but there was no way he could avoid questions if he returned drenched in blood.

Having lost all appetite for the buck he’d brought down earlier, Wei WuXian waited and shot the first deer he saw, which was a fat doe this time. Deciding he’d had enough of the mountain and the hunt, he dragged it back to the base of the mountain. Leaving his catch with the Jin servants who would ready it for the banquet, Wei WuXian returned to Koi Tower and immediately went back to his room where he called for a bath.

A large wooden tub was brought into his room and filled with steaming hot water and flower petals, the most luxurious bath Wei WuXian had seen in a long time. He lost no time stripping and submerging himself in the water.

Only then did he finally begin to relax.



After just sitting in the bath for awhile, wild thoughts running through his mind, he began scrubbing the crusted bits of blood off of himself and rinsed his hair three times before he felt clean again. By the time he was done, the water had been tainted red.

When he finished drying himself off, Wei WuXian wrapped his underrobe around himself before calling for a servant to take away the bath. Someone had refilled the incense burner with that heavy, floral incense that Wei WuXian could not stand today, so he put the entire burner outside the door. Then he called for another servant to bring him some alcohol. It was brought in with a delicate liquor set that Wei WuXian absently played with for awhile. Wei WuXian drank and went to sleep alone, curled up on the big, empty bed, feeling unusually cold even after the hot bath.

The next morning, the wedding preparations began early. All morning, Wei WuXian watched servants rushing back and forth. Wei WuXian himself spent some time getting ready and changed into a set of white GusuLan robes for the occasion. Though Lan WangJi let him wear whatever robes he wanted usually, the purpose of the entire arranged marriage was for Wei WuXian to appear as one of the GusuLan clan, so he had to look the part. While wearing dark robes for a hunt was acceptable, appearing as a member of the GusuLan clan would be doubly important for the next few days during the wedding banquet.

Wei WuXian had never worn white robes before, and felt a little self-conscious and more than a little paranoid at accidentally staining or wrinkling the clothes. There was a reason he chose black robes, after all, now that he worked with corpses all the time. Wei WuXian developed a whole new admiration for the GusuLan Sect for doing this to themselves.

He replaced the Yin Tiger Seal in his pockets and took out Jiang YanLi's gift, turning it over in his hands to look at it again. She would surely like it, he thought.

After he'd dressed, he had nothing more to do so he poked around the room, going through different drawers though all he found were the usual stationary materials, and a few unused tea sets. He wished someone, even Lan WangJi, was here so he could talk and sort out the jumble of his thoughts.

But he forgot about everything else when afternoon came, and he was summoned to Jiang YanLi's room where he could not stop smiling at how beautiful his shijie looked in her wedding outfit and bridal makeup.

"What do you think?" Jiang YanLi asked, smiling as she turned in a circle for him. Apart from the veil, she was already fully dressed and looked like a delicate doll with her face powdered white, her eyes lined with black, and red staining her lips and cheeks.

"Shijie, you're beautiful," Wei WuXian said to her.

"That's what I said too," Jiang Cheng said, looking proud from where he sat at her dressing table, already dressed in his formal purple sect leader robes.

"You're both biased," Jiang YanLi said.

Wei WuXian grinned. "It just doesn't count until a certain person agrees with us, huh," he said.

"That's not what I meant," Jiang YanLi said, blushing, and smiled. "I'm only sorry that you couldn't have had a real wedding banquet," she said to Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian shook his head. "Mine was more than I could ask for," he said, and finally presented her with his gift.

He opened the box, holding it out to her. "A gift for my favorite shijie," he said. "From me...and Lan WangJi," he added since Lan WangJi had been the one to commission the comb, and now that he thought about it, had paid for it as well since Wei WuXian had entirely forgotten about it.

Jiang YanLi's eyes widened when she saw the comb. "A-Xian," she said. "This..." Even with Jiang YanLi's low cultivation level, she could tell how powerful the comb was. She picked it up, tracing the petals of the lotus flower with a fingertip. "It's beautiful," she said.

"I designed it myself," Wei WuXian said proudly. "It will protect Shijie from any lower level creature, since I can't be here to do it anymore."

"She's got Jin ZiXuan to do that now," Jiang Cheng commented.

"Well some added protection doesn't hurt," Wei WuXian said, glaring at his brother. "And even if not for the protection, it's still pretty."

"Thank you, A-Xian. I will wear it always," she said, and held the comb out to him again. "Help me put it on."

Wei WuXian took the comb from her and began looking for a place to put it in her hair. While the servants had certainly done a good job of making up his shijie until she looked like a regal princess, she had so many hairpins stuck into her hair he had to pull one out to make room for his comb.

"I have something for you too," Jiang YanLi said, turning to take a large lacquered box out from one of the cabinets.

Seeing her struggle with it, Wei WuXian rushed to help her place it on the table.

"A-Xian, since father and mother are no longer here, I'd like you and A-Cheng to carry their tablets," Jiang YanLi said and opened it. Inside, there were two wooden memorial tablets that must have been brought from Lotus Pier for this occasion.

Wei WuXian didn't cry easily. He preferred to stay optimistic, take action when possible, and he just didn't think most things were worth crying over. But seeing those tablets and her smile, his vision blurred with tears for the first in a long time. "Shijie, I..."

"A-Xian, you are my younger brother," Jiang YanLi said, reaching to cup his face. "You always will be."

Like so many times he'd done as a child when he was scared of dogs or had hurt himself falling out of trees, he wanted to let himself be held and comforted by her. But he couldn't ruin such a beautiful wedding dress on her big day so he reached to wipe his face. "Thank you, Shijie," he said.

Jiang YanLi smiled. "Mother and Father would be proud," she said. The three siblings who had grown up chasing each other as children were now all adults, each of them dressed in the robes of the different sects they were in now, but they would be family forever.

Jiang Cheng groaned. "You're both saps," he said. "Stop crying. What kind of a manly guy cries so easily?"

Wei WuXian wiped his face, sniffing as he smiled, and reached out to punch Jiang Cheng.

The wedding ceremony itself was held within the Fragrant Palace in the Jin clan ancestral hall with high vaulted ceilings and tablets of every dead ancestor who had come out of the clan. Since the Jin-Jiang wedding banquet would be enormous and for political reasons, as future sect leader, Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi needed to stay at the banquet themselves, Jiang YanLi had come weeks in advance instead of being carried in a wedding sedan from her mother's home to her husband's house. As such, the actual wedding ceremony itself wouldn't take long since the only ones invited to attend were the immediate family members. All other guests would only see the groom and bride at the three-day wedding banquet, which would be the main event.

The Fragrant Palace, the most magnificent building within Koi Tower and the residence of LanlinJin Sect's leaders, had been hung with layers and layers of red gauze curtains that cascaded to the ground. Incense burners exuded clouds of aromatic fragrance so heady that Wei WuXian felt a bit dizzy in the building, wishing again that they'd just burn a simple sandalwood.

Jin ZiXuan met Wei WuXian's eyes when he came in and gave him a tiny nod.

Then firecrackers were being set off as Jiang YanLi came into the hall, her face covered with the red veil. Jin ZiXuan blushed bright red, grinning from ear-to-ear, and reached out to take her hand as she came near, helping her up to the altar. The couple exchanged bows before heaven and earth, before Jin ZiXuan's parents and then the tablets of Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan, and then to each other. Watching them, Wei WuXian thought it was maybe the happiest he had ever seen either of them. Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu would surely be looking down on them and pleased, Wei WuXian thought as he held his tablet tightly and watched.

When Jin ZiXuan lifted Jiang YanLi's veil, the smile on his face was warm and the most genuine Wei WuXian had ever seen Jin ZiXuan look. "You're beautiful," he breathed out.

Even beneath the makeup, Wei WuXian could see the blush and the smile that came over his shijie's face. "Thank you," she said.

He pressed one chaste kiss to her lips. Her black eyelashes fluttered when she opened them again, and they just stared, smiling at each other. Growing up, Wei WuXian could remember little of his childhood before being taken in by Uncle Jiang. He had a handful of fond memories of his own parents, but most of his memories of couples were dominated by those of Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu who had run the YunmengJiang Sect well, but whose relationship had been primarily defined by veiled dissatisfaction or else openly aggressive spats. Seeing the way Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi gazed at each other now, Wei WuXian felt an unexpected knot of wanting curl up in his stomach. Only now did he understand how Madam Yu felt being in a marriage where her own husband did not love her.

Then the ceremony was over and the task of the great banquet began.

With an event as big as this one, Koi Tower's Glamour Hall had been taken over and decorated with fluttering red banners and the white peony. Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan sat at the head table with the heads of the other leading clans at the honorable tables closest to them. Rows of cultivators and other guests lined the huge hall, each with their own tables lining the main walkway where acrobats, dancers, swordsmen came in act-after-act to perform in front of the guests.

Jiang Cheng, surprisingly or maybe not so surprisingly, had been declared the winner of the hunt with the huge boar he'd shot down, and was given the seat of honor at the table beside his sister. Jin ZiXuan had apparently also taken down two deer before retiring off the mountain, probably as shaken as Wei WuXian was. But today, no trace of anything but joy and pride could be seen on his face as he put food into Jiang YanLi's bowl, attentive to her every need. Jiang YanLi, as usual, also poured tea for Jin ZiXuan, urged him to eat, and pointed to the corner of his mouth when a bit of soup stuck there.

Madam Jin spent the entire time eyeing them with a wide smile on her face, undoubtedly already planning for the future grandchildren.

Wei WuXian had been relegated a table further down with the rest of the GusuLan cultivators. He was still at a high place of honor because of Lan WangJi, though there was a conspicuous empty seat beside him where the Second Jade of Lan should have been. Still, he enjoyed himself just being able to watch how happy Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan looked, and all the people honoring and celebrating his shijie's wedding.

As the banquet progressed, course after course of fine food was served, by servants hurrying back and forth between the tables. Guests were given unlimited liquor of different kinds, so Wei WuXian kept calling over more refills of Emperor's Smile. Entertainment came as well, an abundance of acts with beautiful dancing girls, talented musicians, acrobats and performers. It was fun to watch, Wei WuXian thought, admiring the prettier girls with a bowl of liquor in his hand, and relaxing when no one paid any attention to him. It was all excellent, he thought, though the positions of every sect and even the placement of the entertainment had clearly been organized. The performers always performed in front of the head tables in front of the bride and groom, and the rest of the important sect leaders. The most good-looking of the servants also stayed up front. It was clearly a political act, making sure the most important guests felt honored.

He was admiring a young swordsman's skill in performing when two familiar cultivators came to his table and saluted.

"Young Master Wei," the first said.

Wei WuXian's eyes widened. "Chang ShiRei? Chang HaoLin? You're both here?" he asked, smiling at the two cultivators as he got to his feet to greet them.

Chang ShiRei gave a short nod. Chang HaoLin looked a bit reluctant until Chang ShiRei glared at the young man. "Greet your elder," he said.

"He's not that much older than me," Chang HaoLin muttered but saluted Wei WuXian. "Thank you for helping us the other day," he said. "I didn't get a chance to thank you properly."

Wei WuXian laughed and shook his head. “No need for thanks,” he said.

“There is a need,” Chang ShiRei said. “We are indebted to you and your husband,” he said. “No matter your methods, you are a good man, Wei WuXian.”

Wei WuXian’s eyes widened and he smiled. “Thank you,” he said.

“Where is Hanguang-Jun anyway?” Chang HaoLin asked, looking around the hall. “He’s the one who actually saved me. I’d rather thank him.” Clearly, the young man was still a bit leery of Wei WuXian’s demonic cultivation, but seemed to genuinely admire Lan WangJi.

“Manners,” Chang ShiRei barked.

Wei WuXian laughed. “He’s not here,” he said. “Away on some business.”

“He must be saving more people,” Chang HaoLin said.

“Then we will come to pay our respects another time,” Chang ShiRei said.

“How are you all doing?” Wei WuXian asked. “Has the matter with Xue Yang been taken care of?” he asked.

“The clan is as well as can be expected,” Chang ShiRei said with a sigh. “Recovering from all that will take some time, but we would not have a chance to recover at all if not for you,” he said. He went on to update Wei WuXian—the LanlingJin Sect had taken Xue Yang in for a trial and had executed him for his crimes, though the execution itself had been held privately. Chang ShiRei hadn’t been entirely happy being barred from watching the execution, but he’d been too busy to give it much more thought as the new head of the Chang clan. The Chang sect itself had been kept busy giving each one of their departed people proper burials so they would not be infected by resentment any longer. There was still the matter of purifying the Chang estate to take care of, and then rebuilding the clan itself with so many of their family now dead. There was still much to be done, which was why only Chang ShiRei and Chang HaoLin had come to attend the Jin-Jiang wedding to show respect, while the other clan members were taking care of business.

“How long will you be here?” Wei WuXian asked.

“We may stay a day or two after the wedding banquet,” Chang ShiRei answered. “I’d like to speak to Sect Leader Jin about Xue Yang’s remains,” he said. “But I wouldn’t bring that up on his son’s wedding day.”

“Then maybe we’ll have some time for a drink later,” Wei WuXian invited, feeling like they were friends after this conversation.

“It would be our pleasure,” Chang ShiRei said with a smile of his own.

Although Wei WuXian had not particularly liked the Chang cultivators the first time he’d met them, he respected what the small clan was doing now. Furthermore, it had been such a long time since he met

someone who didn't look disapprovingly down on his demonic cultivation, he'd enjoy just having a normal conversation with a few cultivators

It was several hours into the banquet when Jin ZiXuan's catch from the hunt the day before was finally served. He'd shot down two fat bucks that had been roasted and took four servants to carry in on two big platters. When it was brought up to the head table, Jin ZiXuan gave Jiang YanLi the first platter and the official toasts began as servants began carving up the rest of the bucks to pass out to the rest of the guests.

Wei WuXian found his mind wandering as Jin ZiXuan gave an extremely flowery, boring speech thanking guests for coming. As the banquet continued, Wei WuXian began to observe.

He knew that somewhere in this banquet hall was the person who had placed that beast core inside Jin ZiXuan's pet dog. With everyone congregated, this should logically be the easiest place to pick out a cultivator of high enough calibre to handle a beast core. But if anyone was surprised that Jin ZiXuan had come back in one piece, or that no one had mentioned seeing the Tiangou, they didn't show it. Everyone at the banquet looked entirely happy for Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi.

Closest to their table, Jin GuangShan and Madam Jin sat at their own table. Madam Jin was glaring with disgust at Jin GuangShan when the sect leader called over a few of the prettier dancing girls. Wei WuXian couldn't help grinning when he saw Madam Jin reach over to pinch Jin GuangShan hard in the side. The sect leader winced and waved the girls away though his gaze followed them.

Jin GuangYao, Lan XiChen, and Nie MingJue were also seated up front at three tables close to each other. Lan XiChen had, of course, rejected every offer of alcohol. Usually, Lan QiRen would be sitting up there too, but with both Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen away, and a group of new Wen clan members at GusuLan, he had elected to stay behind and supervise. Lan XiChen was smiling gently at something Jin GuangYao had just said after Jin ZiXuan concluded his speech, but winced when Nie MingJue leaned over onto Lan XiChen's table to growl something at Jin GuangYao. Everyone knew the three had taken brother vows soon after the Sunshot Campaign, so Wei WuXian had always assumed they got along well. It looked like that might not be true from the way Nie MingJue was pounding the table and glaring at Jin GuangYao who was giving him a pained look.

Nie HuaiSang, sitting on Nie MingJue's other side, happened to glance over as Wei WuXian was watching and gave him a helpless shrug. As former schoolmates in the Cloud Recesses, Wei WuXian was glad that Nie HuaiSang, apparently, had no problem with him. Nie HuaiSang winced when Nie MingJue whirled around and said something to him, shrinking behind his fan, which only made Nie MingJue more angry. Even back when they were in school, Nie HuaiSang had been terrified of his older brother and dreaded him finding out about his bad grades. Apparently that hadn't changed even now.

A cultivator dressed in white approached Jin GuangYao's table while Nie MingJue was distracted. Something about him looked familiar. His uniform was also white and looked similar to the GusuLan Sect uniform though maybe because of the way the robes were cut or the way the cultivator himself wore it, it looked like a shadow of a copy. The man had his hair styled similar to Lan WangJi's style, but since he was smaller in stature and not even a shade as handsome, he looked like someone's first draft of the real thing.

Lan XiChen seemed to recognize him and said a few words in greeting which made twin spots of red appear on the cultivator's face.

If Nie HuaiSang hadn't been sitting right beside them, Wei WuXian might not have recognized him, but as he was, Wei WuXian finally recalled the man was also a former classmate during the time he was at GusuLan.

"Su She," Wei WuXian finally recalled the name. He'd once been a part of the GusuLan Sect, though it looked like he'd since left the sect and established his own by the looks of it. He'd been the one who Lan WangJi had saved from the waterborne abyss when they were still schoolmates, and also the one who had accidentally shot Wei WuXian in the arm in the Xuanwu Cave, Wei WuXian now remembered. It looked like he'd done well enough for himself since then since he returned to a table also near Jin GuangYao's own, indicating him to be an honored sect leader.

As the night wore on and different sect leaders began to approach the head table to offer gifts and congratulatory words, Wei WuXian slipped out to relieve himself. The air outside was crisp and he felt the liquor in his system cool the longer he stood outside in the fresh air.

The rest of Koi Tower was nearly entirely silent with all the occupants busy in Glamour Hall or the kitchens so Wei WuXian took a short walk around the quiet grounds, enjoying the chilly air as he digested all the food he'd been eating. Usually, Koi Tower was so well-guarded that it was impossible to walk anywhere without running into patrolling cultivators. Although he could see several of them by the main walkways, the Jin-Jiang wedding banquet was so big that even more of their guard were at Glamour Hall as well, leaving Wei WuXian free to wander down some of the lesser used corridors.

He had no particular destination in mind, intending just to walk around and clear his head before heading back inside. He stretched as he admired the near perfect full moon that shone down on Koi Tower that night. He was just preparing to head back to the main hall when he heard the sound of footsteps coming in his direction. Maybe he really had done too many bad things in his life, because although Wei WuXian had ever right to be there, he automatically ducked into some bushes to wait until the people passed.

He recognized the voices as they came close, though—it was Jin GuangYao and Nie MingJue, which was curious because they had clearly been arguing earlier in the main hall, he thought.

"Da-Ge, please, it's my cousin's wedding," Jin GuangYao was saying as they passed. "Let me play you the Sound of Clarity."

"I don't need it from you," Nie MingJue growled.

"If not for me, then for Er-Ge," Jin GuangYao said, a harassed look on his face. "He sent us out so I could play for you. Or do you wish me to return to the banquet and ask him to come out?"

Nie MingJue glared at him, but he clearly still respected Lan XiChen enough not to make Jin GuangYao return and fetch him. "You might be able to fool him, but you don't fool me," he said instead. "Wipe that fake smile off your face."

Looking harassed, Jin GuangYao's smile trembled, but he ushered Nie MingJue down the corridor.

Wei WuXian had never had much interaction with either Nie MingJue or Jin GuangYao. Of course everyone knew of their exploits during the Sunshot Campaign, but they had always been on different fronts. The Nie Sect's primary battlefield was Hejian, the border between the Qinghe and Qishan, so both Nie MingJue and Jin GuangYao, when he'd still been Nie MingJue's deputy, had spent most of their time there. Wei WuXian, on the other hand, stayed in the Yunmeng area, taking back territory in Jiangling and other nearby regions. After Jin GuangYao had infiltrated the Wen Sect, they had even fewer opportunities to meet. With Lan QiRen defending the Gusu area, Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi could often travel to assist other territories. From what Wei WuXian could remember, Lan XiChen primarily assisted the areas to the north and passed by Hejian often, whereas Lan WangJi was not picky about where he went, and had often ended up on the same battlefields as Wei WuXian back then.

After the Sunshot Campaign, Wei WuXian had met Jin GuangYao and Nie MingJue at sect alliance events every once in awhile. But since he wasn't particularly close to any of the Venerated Trio to begin with, and sect leader business was Jiang Cheng's problem, Wei WuXian never paid much attention to them.

But even not knowing much about them, seeing the two of them together like this, Wei WuXian was curious and followed as they walked down the halls.

It took some time before they reached their destination, a modest but beautiful set of buildings within Koi Tower.

"You left the banquet early?"

A female voice spoke when Jin GuangYao entered the room. It was Qin Su.

"Mm, I'm just going to play Da-Ge the Sound of Clarity," he said. They had entered the Blooming Garden, Jin GuangYao's own living quarters, Wei WuXian realized, crouching beneath the paper-plastered windows.

"A-Song is already asleep," Qin Su said softly.

"I will play out here. We will be quiet," Jin GuangYao said. "Please, Da-Ge. To calm yourself. You don't want to go into qi deviation."

The QingheNie Sect was known for a particular type of cultivation. The founder of the sect, Nie MingJue's ancestor, had been a butcher, which was why all the cultivators from the sect used sabers and not swords like the other sects. Their sabers were possessed with evil spirits and beasts, which was why their sect, though powerful, was considered unclean. Even the QingheNie Sect's estate was called the Unclean Realm. Unlike Wei WuXian's demonic cultivation that used human corpses and their resentful energy, the Nie Sect used evil beast spirits, which were incredibly powerful. The sect leaders, naturally, had the most powerful spiritual swords, but with such heavy killing intent, almost every past sect leader suffered from irritable tempers and died suddenly from qi deviation explosions.

"Fine. Play," Nie MingJue said.

Wei WuXian heard the sound of someone sitting, and a moment later, the strum of a guqin. It was an unfamiliar melody to him. Jin GuangYao played well, though Wei WuXian thought it was still a few



degrees inferior to Lan WangJi's skill. After a few minutes, the song concluded, and he heard a sigh come from Nie MingJue.

"We won't be disturbing you anymore, Madam Jin," Nie MingJue said.

"Get some rest, A-Su," Jin GuangYao said.

"How much longer will it be?" Qin Su asked.

"A few hours maybe," Jin GuangYao answered. "I'm sure Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi are tired and will want to leave soon. Father already left the banquet, so I'll have to stay until the guests are ready to retire."

"Don't stay up too late," Qin Su said with a sigh. "There are still two more days."

"Good night, Madam Jin," Nie MingJue said.

Wei WuXian heard the shuffle of chairs, and didn't stay to listen more. He hurried back down the corridors before the two cultivators came out only to bump into another.

"Wei WuXian? What are you doing out here?" Chang HaoLin demanded when Wei WuXian hurried around a corner and nearly ran right into the young cultivator.

Wei WuXian paused, a lie on the tip of his tongue, before he remembered that Chang HaoLin was his junior. "What am I doing here? What are you doing here, young man?" he asked. "Where's your uncle?"

Chang HaoLin stiffened up. "I'm looking for him now," he said. "I've got urgent business."

Wei WuXian rolled his eyes. "You don't have to lie to me." He gave him an exaggerated wink. "Did you sneak off by yourself?" he asked. "With a cute girl?"

Chang HaoLin turned a few shades darker. "H-How—"

"What else would a young man be doing so far from where the good food, drink and entertainment is?" Wei WuXian said and brushed by the kid, putting a hand on his shoulder. "That and the huge kiss mark you have on your neck," he said and walked away laughing.

Chang HaoLin stuttered as he straightened up his clothes. "That's not—I—I really saw—I really saw—"

"Saw what?" Wei WuXian asked, turning, and grinned when Chang HaoLin stood stuttering. "Saw a girl's..." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"It's none of your business!" Chang HaoLin said.

"I know it's not," Wei WuXian grinned. "Have fun while you're young," he said with a wave as he made his way back into the banquet hall. He was still in a good mood, chuckling as he walked to his table, only to come to a stop when he saw someone else sitting there.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei WuXian asked, his laughter dying away as he stared at him.

Lan WangJi was indeed sitting at the seat that had been empty beside Wei WuXian's all afternoon. He looked as immaculate as he always did, and Wei WuXian felt as though the air in Glamour Hall instantly became more refreshing.

"I thought you weren't going to come?" Wei WuXian said, sitting down beside him. His heart beat fast, and he felt an unexplainable sense of excitement. While the tables were wide to accommodate the numerous dishes that were brought to them, their two seat cushions were close together like all the other couples in the room. Wei WuXian could feel Lan WangJi's clothes brush against his own when he sat.

Lan WangJi looked over at him. "I told you I would come," he said calmly.

"I know, I just thought..." Wei WuXian shook his head and smiled. "It's nothing."

"Did you already give Maiden Jiang the gift?" Lan WangJi asked.

Wei WuXian nodded. "I wanted her to wear it at the ceremony," he said. "Sorry, I didn't wait for you." He suddenly felt ashamed of doubting Lan WangJi. No matter what they fought about and all the times they'd disagreed in the past, if Lan WangJi said he would do something, he always followed through.

Lan WangJi shook his head. "It is my fault for being late." He looked up at the platform where Jiang YanLi sat. "It looks good on her," he said.

Wei WuXian beamed at him. "It really does, doesn't it?" he said. He suddenly noticed that Lan WangJi's plate was still clean and empty, and he hurried to put things onto it. "You haven't eaten yet," he said. "Try this one, it's really good and spicy," he said, picking up a few things from the dishes placed out before them to put onto Lan WangJi's plate.

"How was the hunt?" Lan WangJi asked.

"Lan Zhan, I have to talk to you about that..." Wei WuXian leaned closer only to hear Lan WangJi inhale sharply. "I think someone is trying to kill Jin ZiXuan," he whispered.

Lan WangJi turned his head slightly, just enough to look at him. This close, Wei WuXian could see the gold of the lamplight reflected in Lan WangJi's pale eyes. There was a small frown on his handsome face, clearly requesting more details.

Wei WuXian was about to say more when a loud call came from further up in the hall. "A toast to my cousin, Jin ZiXuan, and his new bride!"

Jin GuangYao had returned sometime during their conversation, and was now facing the head table with a bowl of liquor in his hand. Nie MingJue, likewise, was at his own table again, though he looked calmer than he had earlier. The song must have worked, Wei WuXian thought.

"Should we wait for Sect Leader Jin?" The one who spoke up was Jin ZiXun who hadn't bothered looking at Jin GuangYao. "This should be his toast to the new couple."

Indeed, Jin GuangShan's seat by Madam Jin was empty. Wei WuXian recalled him summoning over some of the dancing girls earlier, though he couldn't recall when he'd left the banquet hall.

"Don't bother looking for him," Madam Jin said with a look of disgust. Given Jin GuangShan's reputation, no one in the hall had any doubt where he'd gone. She nodded to Jin GuangYao. "Go ahead."

Jin GuangYao inclined his head and help up the bowl again, toasting Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi. Almost everyone in the hall did the same. Wei WuXian, likewise, lifted his own bowl. Amongst the people in the hall, only the GusuLan cultivators did not touch their bowls.

"Wait," Jin ZiXun called out.

A few people had already drank from their bowls, but others paused.

Jin ZiXun turned to Lan XiChen. "Surely, Sect Leader Lan would give face on this occasion and drink," he said.

Wei WuXian frowned. They'd already gone through this once when he'd stormed in to ask where the Wen clan had disappeared to, and Jin ZiXun was trying to pull this challenge yet again. What exactly did he have against GusuLan?

Nie MingJue looked ready to smack the man, but Jin GuangYao spoke first.

"Cousin, please," Jin GuangYao said. "The GusuLan Sect rules forbid—"

"If not Sect Leader Lan, then Hanguang-Jun," Jin ZiXun interrupted him and turned around to stare straight at their table. "Hanguang-Jun didn't even give face to arrive on time. We all know that he might have been forced into the least convenient marriage, but in the end, isn't Young Madam Jin still his cultivation partner's sister?" he said. "The least he can do is drink." He raised his bowl to Lan WangJi, but his eyes were pinned on Wei WuXian.

This wasn't about Lan XiChen or even Lan WangJi—it was entirely directed at Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian reached for Lan WangJi's bowl, intending to drink it for him again when he felt slim, strong fingers wrap around his wrist. The entire hall had gone silent watching—the quietest it had been all evening. Lan WangJi pulled Wei WuXian's hand away, and with his other hand, raised the bowl.

"To Young Master Jin and Young Madam Jin," Lan WangJi said in the silence of the hall. He glanced at Wei WuXian, a brief brush of his golden gaze, and then lifted the bowl to his lips.

Wei WuXian felt his heartbeat speed up and the skin of his wrist warm under Lan WangJi's gentle grip.

After Lan WangJi put his bowl down, Jin ZiXun, looking utterly disgruntled, quickly lifted his own bowl to toast. Slowly, conversation resumed in the hall.

Lan WangJi had emptied the bowl when he drank and put it down on the table, a small frown on his face.

"Lan Zhan, you didn't have to do that," Wei WuXian rushed to say. "Jin ZiXun just hates me. I'm sorry he insulted you."

As he apologized, Lan WangJi put his hand to his forehead.

"Are you okay? Lan Zhan...?" Wei WuXian paused as he looked at Lan WangJi who had shut his eyes. His lips were slightly parted and he was breathing evenly. "Lan Zhan, did you fall asleep?" Wei WuXian's eyes widened. "No way, are you actually a one-cup drunk?" He had never met anyone who could get drunk after one cup, and furthermore, Lan WangJi had skipped the drunk stage and immediately gone to sleep.

No wonder he always refused to drink, Wei WuXian thought. But this time, Lan WangJi had, and for his sake no less. Wei WuXian swallowed hard and got to his feet, hauling Lan WangJi up with him. He made eye contact with Jiang YanLi still up at the head table, shrugging helplessly.

She smiled at him and gestured for him to go.

Wei WuXian hauled Lan WangJi out of the hall, trying to be as inconspicuous as he could. Lan WangJi was an utter dead weight draped against his side, and Wei WuXian internally winced at what this was going to do to Hanguang-Jun's pristine reputation. As though Wei WuXian hadn't already blackened it for him enough. Even though Wei WuXian was by no means either weak or small and was nearly as tall as Lan WangJi, Lan WangJi, like his sword, was a lot heavier than he looked. By the time Wei WuXian had made it back to their guest room, he was sweating and sorely tempted to use demonic cultivation to help him.

Wei WuXian hauled Lan WangJi through the doors and headed for the bed. Someone had put the incense burner back in their room and lit it too. Thankfully, whichever servant had done it, had finally caught on and switched out the strong flowery scent for a softer, woodsy one though it still wasn't sandalwood.

Too tired to care, Wei WuXian hauled Lan WangJi to their bed and dumped him on it.

"Lan Zhan, you really can't hold your alcohol," Wei WuXian said, breathing a sigh of relief. Lan WangJi sprawled on the bed like a dead weight, none of his usual pristine, perfect sleeping posture to be seen.

Wei WuXian sighed, looking down at him, and then bent and began pulling off Lan WangJi's boots for him, tossing them aside when he was done. Likewise, he helped strip him of his outer robes, bringing up the scent of sandalwood. Wei WuXian inhaled deep and felt something inside him calm down.

He tossed those outer robes aside too.

"It's not my saying this, Lan Zhan," he said as he got to work maneuvering Lan WangJi's long legs beneath the blankets so he could tuck him in. "For someone who's usually so perfect, you sure drop all of that when you're drunk." It was kind of funny and cute, Wei WuXian thought, starting to smile as he finished covering him with the blanket.

"I have to go back to the banquet, but if you're still asleep when I come back, don't think I'm going to let you go without a little payback," Wei WuXian said, grinning as he looked down at him. He reached out to brush aside a strand of hair that had gotten loose.

He got back to his feet and was just about to leave again when he felt his wrist caught for the second time that night.

"Lan Zhan? Did you wake up?" Wei WuXian asked, looking down at him.

Lan WangJi stared up at him with those golden eyes, glimmering under the warm lamplight.

"I brought you back to our guest room," Wei WuXian said, assuming he must be confused about where they were. "You got drunk after one bowl, Lan Zhan," he said, teasing him. "If you're tired, you can rest. I'm going to go back to the banquet—"

Before he could finish, Wei WuXian was suddenly yanked with enormous strength so he fell right on top of Lan WangJi.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei WuXian said, trying to struggle upright, but Lan WangJi's arms circled around his waist, trapping him in place.

Wei WuXian frowned. "Lan Zhan, are you still drunk?" he asked when he struggled and Lan WangJi still didn't let him go.

"Not drunk," Lan WangJi denied.

Wei WuXian snorted. "What drunkard would admit it?" he said. "Fine, my bad. I shouldn't have asked a silly question." He tried struggling out of Lan WangJi's arms again only for the hold to tighten. Unless he used cultivation, there was no way he'd be able to free himself, so Wei WuXian tried a different method. "Lan Zhan, your forehead ribbon is crooked," he said, wiggling one arm out of Lan WangJi's death grip to reach for it.

Lan WangJi frowned, his eyes following Wei WuXian's finger, but made no move to stop him as though the frown alone would keep him away.

Seeing Lan WangJi apparently torn between keeping his grip on Wei WuXian or stopping him from touching the ribbon, Wei WuXian began to enjoy himself. "Lan Er-Gege, if you don't stop me, I'm going to touch your forehead ribbon," he teased. "I might even take it off if you don't let me go," he threatened.

Lan WangJi's frown intensified, but he still made no move to loosen his grip around Wei WuXian's waist.

Surprised, Wei WuXian really did reach out to touch it. The last time he'd accidentally pulled it off during the archery competition, Lan WangJi had been so upset he actually left the field early. Once A-Yuan's friend had told Wei WuXian what the forehead ribbon meant, it made a lot more sense why he'd gotten so upset.

Wei WuXian was so surprised he laughed. "You'll let me touch it now?" he asked. "What if I asked you to take it off and give it to me?"

To his surprise, Lan WangJi did as told, reaching up with one hand to pull off the ribbon altogether and hand it to Wei WuXian before putting his arm right back around Wei WuXian's waist again.

"Wow, and you got so mad at me for pulling it off that one time, you broke your bow," Wei WuXian said, smiling as he experimentally smoothed over the ribbon. Even having heard JingYi's explanation, he half expected some mysterious power to activate when he touched the ribbon, but it really was just an ordinary, well-made ribbon. Since Lan WangJi did absolutely nothing but continue watching him, Wei WuXian pushed him a little further. "Lan WangJi, Hanguang-Jun, will you do anything I ask you right now?" he said.

"Mm," Lan WangJi agreed.

So he was a cooperative drunk, Wei WuXian thought, delighted. "Then will you let me go back to the banquet?" he asked.

Lan WangJi stared at Wei WuXian as though he hadn't said anything.

"Are you pretending you didn't hear me?" Wei WuXian demanded and Lan WangJi turned his face so he was looking elsewhere. "Wow, what a little tyrant, only hearing the things you want to hear," he said, only to have Lan WangJi move one of his hands up on Wei WuXian's back so he could push him face down against his chest and muffle his words.

Wei WuXian wiggled until he could free his head again. "Lan Zhan, that's very immature," he said. "Are you really not going to let me go?"

"No," Lan WangJi said.

Wei Wuxian sighed, but it was too funny and cute seeing the normally serious Lan WangJi acting so childish. Furthermore, it was really Wei WuXian's fault he'd gotten drunk in the first place. "Will you at least let me get up and take my robes off?" he asked.

Lan WangJi frowned.

"Please, Lan Er-Gege, I don't want to sleep with my boots on," Wei WuXian said. "I promise I won't go anywhere."

He felt Lan WangJi's hands slowly withdraw from his waist, allowing him to sit up.

Wei WuXian sat up and began pulling off his boots. Lan WangJi watched him like a hawk, as though readying himself for action if Wei WuXian suddenly bolted for the outside. "I said I'm not going anywhere, Second Master Lan," Wei WuXian said, grinning, as he kicked his boots off and then shed his outer robes, tossing them to the ground to join Lan WangJi's own. "See? As promised."

He had barely finished speaking when he was pulled back down onto Lan WangJi again. He only loosened his grip briefly to pull the blankets over the both of them.

Wei WuXian laughed this time. "Aren't you uncomfortable like this?" he asked, balancing his chin on Lan WangJi's chest and looking up at him.

"Comfortable," Lan WangJi said, his hands a warm presence at Wei WuXian's waist again.

"Comfortable for you, maybe," Wei WuXian said, grinning. "Lan Zhan, you're really not going to let me go?" he asked.

"No," Lan WangJi said.

"You're going to make me stay like this all night?" Wei WuXian asked.

But having dressed down like this, wrapped in the warmth of the blankets and Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian was beginning to feel tired as well. He was full from the banquet, relaxed from the food and liquor, and happy. He could smell the woodsy scent of the incense of the burner, but more than that, the sandalwood on Lan WangJi's skin and clothes.

"Stay," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian sighed, pillowing his head on Lan WangJi's chest. It wasn't that late yet. The banquet would still be continuing for hours, he thought. But comfortable and content, Wei Wuxian drifted off to sleep, the best he'd slept in weeks.

Notes:

sorry for the delay since i just got back from traveling and immediately spent all day writing and posting this!! lolol wrote this so fast listening to wangxian on repeat i can't believe this song is real

Chapter 8: chaos at koi tower

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian could hear the sound of screaming, growls and groaning, and the pounding of feet running down the wooden slats of the corridors. His head felt like it had been stuffed full of something and he tried to press a little closer into the warmth beneath him.

But as the screaming grew louder and nearer, Wei WuXian began to realize the noises weren't a dream. Prying his eyes open took too much effort, and his head throbbed like he had a hangover, except he hadn't drank that much, and by the end of the night, he had been more or less sober. He hadn't felt this horrible in a long time, he thought, squinting in the dim light. Beneath him, Lan WangJi stirred and opened his eyes.

Lan WangJi's eyes widened when Wei WuXian made groggy eye-contact, and he startled so badly he nearly threw Wei WuXian off as he scrambled upright.

"Don't move, my head hurts so bad," Wei WuXian groaned.

“Wei Ying?” Lan Wangji asked, looking at him. Then his attention turned to the door and his eyes narrowed.

In a show of strength, Lan Wangji suddenly lifted Wei Wuxian by the waist like it was nothing and moved him gently from on top of him to the side of the bed before he got to his feet. Still, his movements seemed a little slower than usual, a little clumsier as he pulled on the outer robes that Wei Wuxian had tossed on the floor the night before.

The way he kept glancing at the door made Wei Wuxian realize he hadn’t imagined the sound—there was something going on outside. With sheer willpower, he also stumbled off the bed. Since the white robes he’d shed the night before were closest, he reached for them and pulled them on.

Wei Wuxian winced as he moved, his head swimming.

Lan Wangji, seeing he was following, spoke. “Do you have enough talismans and spells?”

Wei Wuxian grimaced, the words too loud. “I didn’t bring any.”

“You—” Lan Wangji looked like he wanted to say more but thrust a qiankun pouch at Wei Wuxian instead.

As they left the room, the air outside was cooler and cleaner, and Wei Wuxian’s head began to clear more and more rapidly as the scene in front of them unfolded.

The sun hadn’t risen yet, though the horizon was just beginning to lighten. They were a little distance from the Fragrant Palace and the Glamour Hall, but both complexes were visible from where they were.

All of Koi Tower was overrun with fierce corpses. People were screaming, drunken and hungover cultivators yelling at one another as they did their best to battle them. But each human that was killed would in turn rise up again, turning to attack the people they had just been fighting side-by-side with. A thin veil of clouds had dimmed the moon which made it even more difficult to see by just the light of lanterns, half of which were being dropped to the floor or destroyed as people and corpses ran through the corridors. All of Koi Tower stank of blood and vomit and the sickly sweet smell of rotting flesh.

Wei Wuxian heard a female cultivator sobbing as a male fierce corpse advanced on her.

“Please, San-Ge,” she cried, her sword trembling as she held it in front of her. “Don’t make me. I can’t—”

The male corpse lunged at her only for the strum of the guqin from beside Wei Wuxian to send strong ripples of power out. The male corpse flew back and hit another fierce corpse, tumbling to the ground in a heap where they stopped moving. Lan Wangji couldn’t move in the corridor where they were more cultivators and servants were running and the fierce corpses following. He stood, strumming the guqin over and over, with power and precision that became stronger with each strum.

Wei Wuxian reached for his flute to help. Even with Lan Wangji’s guqin, there were too many corpses, with more of them being made with each passing moment. Peoples’ screams and cries rang in Wei



WuXian's ears. But when he raised Chenqing to his lips, the corpses nearest to him only stared for a moment before continuing to move forward. Not one of them obeyed him.

"I can't control them..." Wei WuXian's hands lowered.

The scene was familiar. Wei WuXian had seen it only once before—the first time he had ever used the Yin Tiger Seal during the Sunshot Campaign. Things during the rebellion against the QishanWen Sect had been so desperate, their forces too small even combined. Demonic cultivation was exhausting since it depended solely on Wei WuXian to control hundreds of corpses, so he had hoped to create a magical tool to aid him. He thought he'd found the solution when he forged the seal from the beast core of the Yin Tiger that he had found in Dusk-Creek Mountain. But although it had brought them victory in that battle, it was too powerful to be used, and even Wei WuXian had to admit he couldn't control it. Corpses under its command knew no reason and killed indiscriminately. Worse, it raised any corpse within its vicinity, infusing them with resentful energy regardless of the way they'd died or were buried. In other words, it was a corpse-creating machine that would not stop until everyone living had been killed.

The Yin Tiger Seal knew no master, so Wei WuXian had decided to destroy it. But a beast core like this, forged under hundreds of years of cultivation and corrupted by the resentful energy of hundreds of cultivators that had died by the Xuanwu, was not easy to destroy, and it had taken him three days just to split it into two halves. He'd ended up keeping the two halves separate in the two sleeves of his outer robe, waiting until he had time to finish destroying it. He made sure to keep it on him to keep it from falling into the hands of a less-discerning person. Even the day before, he'd made sure to transfer it to his new GusuLan robes.

Shoving his flute back in his belt, Wei WuXian hurriedly felt inside his sleeves, and began turning them inside out, the qiankun pouch Lan Wangji had handed him, accidentally dropping a handful of elixirs and talismans in his hurry.

"Lan Zhan! The Yin Tiger Seal is missing," Wei WuXian said, panicked, when, as he suspected, he could not find either of the two halves. Someone had stolen it.

He thought back to their headaches when they'd woken, how it had been so difficult even though Wei WuXian was neither drunk nor hungover. The only thing that had changed last night apart from the presence of Lan Wangji was the scent of the incense burner. At the time, Wei WuXian had been too distracted by Lan Wangji's surprising behavior and his sandalwood scent to pay attention, but now he remembered where he'd smelled that same scent not too long ago—agarwood, the same herbal compound that had been used to put Chang Ping and Yang FeiFei to sleep when Xue Yang had tortured and killed them. They had been drugged last night. With Wei WuXian's outer robes shed, and both of them in deep sleep, it would have been easy for a thief to sneak in and take the Yin Tiger Seal.

"All of these corpses are being controlled by it. I can't—I can't do anything," Wei WuXian said, eyes wide and panicked. It was the first time since discovering demonic cultivation that he'd lost such control of a situation.

"Stay close," Lan Wangji said. He glanced at Wei WuXian but continued playing the guqin and knocking a dozen corpses away with each note. Strum after strum, power emanated from him, blue light shooting out with every pluck of his fingers. It felt as though his power was getting stronger as he played so that

not one corpse could get close to them. With no weapons he could use, Wei WuXian had no choice but to stand behind him, letting Lan WangJi protect him. He hadn't felt so helpless since he was thrown down into the Yiling Burial Mounds by Wen Chao so many years ago, with no golden core, severely injured, and only the resentment and thirst for vengeance keeping him alive.

From the distance, Wei WuXian saw more lights from other cultivators—blue that must be the other GusuLan disciples, gold from LanlingJin cultivators, and then the strokes of purple he recognized so well.

“Jiang Cheng...Shijie!” Wei WuXian said, shaking out of his stupor. Jiang Cheng could protect himself well enough with Zidian now, but Jiang YanLi had never been a strong cultivator. During the Sunshot Campaign, she'd only ever helped support cultivators with nursing or cooking since she was unable to be of use on the battlefield. With this many fierce corpses, she would not be able to defend herself for long.

Wei WuXian swept up the qiankun pouch he'd dropped and every talisman on the ground he could use for attack and began throwing them in every direction. Since they were Lan WangJi's talismans and not his own, none of them housed any ghosts that would be of use. But some burned bright blue flames at the corpses they hit. Others wrapped corpses in suppression nets so they froze in place. There were a handful of more powerful talismans that could blast away two or three corpses when he used them. But Lan WangJi had only brought the usual amount of talismans for a cultivator of his calibre since he wouldn't need these most of the time anyway, and Wei WuXian quickly ran low. He felt like they'd barely made it a few strides away from their room—still too far from the Fragrant Palace where Jiang YanLi would be.

“Senior Wei! Help!” Wei WuXian turned to his left to see, a short distance away, Chang HaoLin was trying to fight off a group of corpses. There was a large gash over one eyebrow and blood streamed down half his face. He was holding up Chang ShiRei who was covered in blood. The older cultivator had one arm slung around Chang HaoLin's shoulder but looked unconscious, sagging against his nephew as Chang HaoLin did his best to defend them both against the corpses just one hand.

But it was clear Chang HaoLin's cultivation level wasn't high enough, and more and more corpses were pressing at him no matter how he tried to hack at them with his sword. “Help!” he called again, his voice hoarse. “Please...”

Wei WuXian glanced at the Fragrant Palace, hesitating for a moment. He couldn't leave them to die. But as he changed directions to help Chang HaoLin, he saw Chang ShiRei stir. Even from that distance and by only the light of the moon, Wei WuXian had seen that type of jerky movement too often for him not to recognize it.

“Let him go!” Wei WuXian shouted, his heartbeat thumping loud in his chest. “HaoLin, let him go!”

But it was already too late.

Chang ShiRei lifted his head, his teeth bared and his features twisted with the resentment of the dead.

Chang HaoLin turned, a look of wide-eyed surprise written over his face, right before his dead uncle tore into his exposed throat.

“No!” Wei WuXian ran, throwing talismans as he went, but by the time he reached Chang HaoLin, it was already too late.

The young cultivator lay on the ground, bleeding out from his neck, face ghastly pale.

Wei WuXian knelt by him, pressing his hands to his neck, but the blood gushed from between his fingers. A blue pulse of power sent Chang ShiRei’s corpse flying away, but Wei WuXian barely took notice.

Chang HaoLin stared up at him. “I-I-I really did see,” he said, a weak whisper. Blood bubbled from between his lips, staining them black.

“What did you see?” Wei WuXian asked. He pressed his hands more firmly to the young cultivator’s neck. “HaoLin, what did you see?”

But the gushing blood had slowed to a trickle. Chang HaoLin’s eyes would never see anything again.

“Wei Ying!” He heard Lan Wangji say behind him, and only then did he realize Lan Wangji had been behind him all this time, keeping the corpses at bay.

Just last night, Wei WuXian had spoken to them both. They were so hopeful about rebuilding their clan, about moving forward from the tragedy that had occurred, and now...

Wei WuXian straightened up.

He couldn’t hesitate anymore.

He pulled out his flute and blew. He tried to remember the series of shrill, dissonant notes, the feeling of panicked desperation back on Golden Cloud Mountain.

At first, nothing happened—the courtyard filled only with the sound of people screaming and corpses growling.

And then a rumble came from the building behind them.

Wei WuXian saw Lan Wangji’s eyes widen and whirled around as an entire wall began to crumble. A large chunk of plaster came hurtling down toward Wei WuXian, only for Lan Wangji’s quick guqin strum to break the piece of wall to pieces.

Wei WuXian felt his skin prick with the debris and dust that sprayed him from the blast.

“Are you hurt?” He heard Lan Wangji’s voice through the dust.

“No,” Wei WuXian said. He inhaled some of the debris and coughed, holding a sleeve up to his face, trying to take a lungful of air.

Then, through the clouds of dust, the corpses came pouring—not of humans, but of animals. Dried corpses of tiny mice, of birds, of cats, of dogs, of horses came at his call, trampling on human corpses or

burying them in numbers. Carcasses came from the direction of the kitchens of chickens, deer, boars, pigs, sheep—some cooked already and others in varying states of meal preparations.

Wei WuXian took a deep breath and began to play again. The animal corpses responded to his command and finally, Wei WuXian began pressing forward, emerging from the clouds of gray dust and debris, as before him, a path was slowly cleared by the animal corpses fighting the human ones.

Wei WuXian walked forward step-by-step beneath the moonlight, the shrill, eerie sound of his flute echoing through courtyard as the snarls of the human corpses were joined by the howls and growls of the animals obeying him.

As he walked forward, he could see other cultivators staring in his direction before beginning to fight again. But even then, Wei WuXian knew it wouldn't be enough. Too much damage had been done, too many people slain. The number of humans at Koi Tower vastly outnumbered the animals, and those who had already been fighting were quickly running low on their spiritual energy. The Yin Tiger Seal wanted every living person dead, and with his limbs growing colder, and the resentful energy flowing through him to control the animals, he felt more and more hopeless, like they'd never get there in time.

Even the animals Wei WuXian had summoned only helped him reach about two-thirds the length of the field to reach the Fragrant Palace. There were too many dead humans, more corpses being made with every passing moment, and no more animals. The mice and chickens and rabbits were easily torn to pieces by the humans, and the larger animals had already been half-cooked and fell apart just as easily.

He could see the steps up the Fragrant Palace not too far away, but still a horde of corpses standing between himself and those steps, and his animal army had dwindled almost to nothing.

Wei WuXian blew more desperately on Chenqing, urging any dead thing to rise up and obey him. Anything, as long as it would allow him to get into that building. His heart pounded in his chest, and his breath came short.

Then, just for just a moment, it worked. The horde of corpses in front of him froze in place. He could see their limbs tremble as though unsure which master to obey. He could tell it wouldn't last long, but this was his chance. He lowered his flute and ran.

"Wei Ying!" he heard Lan Wangji shout behind him.

Wei WuXian had just reached the outer steps of the palace when he heard the growl of corpses behind him again.

If he'd hoped that he'd be safe inside the Fragrant Palace, that hope was quickly dashed once he entered.

Here, the situation was even worse. There were servants, still dressed in the same clothes he'd seen at the banquet last night, now growling and reaching for any living person crowding the corridors. Blood smeared the formerly pristine white and gold walls, staining ornate woodwork and darkening the red wedding banners. The corridors were packed with corpses, many of them cultivators in dirtied Jin uniforms, their white peonies stained red with blood and their own entrails. With much more limited

space in the corridors and rooms of the palace than out in the courtyard, it made fighting through the packs of corpses even more difficult.

Worse, he didn't know which direction to go—the palace was so big, filled with a variety of rooms, and every way he turned, there seemed like there were only more of the dead.

Then, the air in front of him shimmered and he saw a familiar person.

“Yang FeiFei?” Wei WuXian said, staring at the ghost. After appearing briefly in the woods, he hadn't seen her again. But then, she wouldn't normally be able to appear at Koi Tower with all of its protective arrays after she'd been weakened. But now, with corpses and blood smeared everywhere, the arrays and protections had been broken and she had snuck inside.

“My shijie,” Wei WuXian said breathlessly. “The bride. I have to find her. Can you help me?”

Yang FeiFei, like she had that time in the inn, seemed sympathetic, and she nodded before she disappeared again. Moments later, she reappeared and gestured for him to follow.

With no more animal corpses left to obey him, Wei WuXian tried to stop the corpses in front of him again. But this time, no matter how he played the flute, the corpses did not obey him. Instead, he grabbed a sword off a dead cultivator. He was able to hack at corpses and keep them away from him, at least, even without spiritual energy. But it was taking too long. There were too many corpses packed here, and it felt like there were endless corridors stretching in front of him.

No matter what he did, more corpses rose up. The ones he pushed aside stood again, surrounding him from all sides, trying to tear at his clothes, his hair, his limbs.

As he followed Yang FeiFei, up and down more corridors, just trying to stumble past corpses now, they turned the corner and the ghost pointed. At the far end of the hallway, there was an enormous mass of corpses, so many that Wei WuXian couldn't even see the walls or doors on the other side. Instinctively, he knew Jiang YanLi would be on the other side.

He had to fight through this.

A fierce corpse caught hold of his arm, and Wei WuXian hacked it off, but two more were grabbing him by the shoulders, pushing him down. When he twisted out of their grip, more had caught hold of his ankles. All around him, he could smell only blood and rotting flesh, see their features twisted with resentment as they reached for him. Each footstep was heavier than the last as hands dragged at his limbs and clothes, pulling him down. Was this what it was to lose control, he thought. Was he going to die this way?

And then he heard the guqin strum, a clear, bright note cutting through the darkness. The hands on his shoulders, his arms, his legs loosened. His body, suddenly light again, Wei WuXian stumbled upright as the corpses that had held him fell to the side. Behind him, Lan WangJi was standing there, his forehead ribbon a bit crooked, but unhurt.

“My shijie,” Wei WuXian said to him, desperate.

He didn't need to explain more. Lan WangJi gave him a short nod and strode over. With Lan WangJi's guqin keeping every walking corpse at bay around them, it was easier, if not much faster, to make their way through to the end of the corridor.

Then they were there. In front of them, Wei WuXian saw the crowd of fierce corpses, all fighting to get at something—someone. And in that crowd came a weak pulse of golden light, feeble.

Lan WangJi strummed his guqin, the waves rippling out from it so that fierce corpses flew aside, slamming into the walls as they advanced.

As corpse after corpse fell away, in the center of them all, was Jin ZiXuan.

He was barely standing. Dressed in just his under robes, they were stained with so much blood, Wei WuXian mistook them for wedding clothes for a moment. Jin ZiXuan's hair matted to his face that was likewise smeared with blood, and he panted hard, dripping with sweat or maybe blood since it ran red down his face. Jin ZiXuan looked at them as though he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Where is she?" Wei WuXian said.

Panting, Jin ZiXuan stood only by using his sword as a walking stick, and turned to the door behind him. It had been sealed shut.

Wei WuXian pushed past Jin ZiXuan to kick it open. "Shijie! Shijie!" he shouted as soon as the doors opened.

Jiang YanLi stared at them from where she was standing in the middle of the room, her face pale. She, like Jin ZiXuan, seemed to have pulled on just one of the outer layers of her wedding dress to be decent, and her hair had been let down, cascading down her back. The only item she was still wearing apart from her loose upper robe was Wei WuXian's lotus hair comb.

"A-Xian? ZiXuan?" she said, her voice trembling.

Jin ZiXuan, seeing his new wife was unharmed, cracked a smile. "Thank god," he said. Then his eyes rolled up and he collapsed into a dead faint.

"ZiXuan?" Jiang YanLi gasped, rushing to his side. "ZiXuan?"

Wei WuXian also rushed over, flipping Jin ZiXuan onto his back and checking his pulse. Only once he had found it and seen the shallow inhale-exhale of his chest did Wei WuXian relax. "He's only out of spiritual energy," he said, though his heart was still beating fast. "He just needs to rest. Lan Zhan—" He'd intended to ask him to guard the room, but Lan WangJi was already there, standing in the door and strumming the guqin to keep away any fierce corpses.

Wei WuXian threw his sword aside and grasped Jin ZiXuan instead, pulling him up with one arm around his shoulders and the other under his knees to lift him up and carry him to the bed.

Jiang YanLi sat on the bed beside him as soon as Wei WuXian had put him down.

Wei WuXian left Jiang YanLi there while he went to fetch the basin that had been left to one side of the room and the washcloth, bringing both over to the small table close by.

"Thank you," Jiang YanLi said, giving him a small smile before she dipped the washcloth into the basin and began to wipe off Jin ZiXuan's blood-drenched face.

His skin, beneath the crusty blood, was ashen and white, and Jiang Yanli's hand trembled as she worked.

"Shijie, what happened?" Wei WuXian asked.

Jiang YanLi continued to tend to her husband, wiping cuts and scratches clean. "We came back here not too long after you and Second Master Lan left," she said. "It was late, so we went to sleep. We only woke when they—they were already here."

"Who?"

"The fierce corpses," Jiang YanLi said. "A-Xian, your comb saved our lives," she said, reaching up to touch the comb stuck haphazardly in her hair. "I took it out for the night, but it was still close enough that it kept the first corpses away from us," she said, gesturing to the table the basin was on. "It bought us enough time for ZiXuan to get his sword. He forced them out and locked me inside." Her eyes filled with tears. "There were so many."

Wei WuXian had never been so relieved at giving Jiang YanLi a present before.

"How long ago was it?" Wei WuXian asked.

Jiang YanLi shook her head and quickly wiped her face. "Three, maybe four o'clock," she said, her voice steady again.

Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had gone to sleep around nine, and now, glancing at the sun that had come up now, it was maybe seven o'clock or so. That meant Jin ZiXuan had been fending off this hoard of fierce corpses alone for four or so hours alone.

It was all Wei WuXian's fault. His shijie had nearly died along with her new husband who was still unconscious. And it was all because he'd been foolish enough to make a magical seal that was too powerful to be controlled. "Shijie, I..."

"A-Xian." He felt a gentle touch to his cheek and focused on her. Jiang YanLi was looking at him, gentle and beautiful. "What is it?"

Wei WuXian began to shake his head, only for her to rub her thumb over his cheek, soft. "Silly child, haven't I watched you grow up? What is it?" she asked again, and this time, Wei WuXian broke.

He confessed that he'd kept the Yin Tiger Seal in his sleeves all this time, that he hadn't thought to destroy it even though he knew it was dangerous. He confessed that he'd been stupid enough that he'd let someone drug him and Lan WangJi, been stupid enough to shed his outer robe without a care that allowed that person to steal the Yin Tiger Seal. It was his fault that Jin ZiXuan was now lying so still on

the bed. And it was going to be his fault when they all died. It wouldn't be possible for them to escape unscathed with the amount of fierce corpses here, and the new ones being made constantly.

That time with the Sunshot Campaign, it had only been considered a victory because Wei WuXian had gone alone to massacre those Wen Sect cultivators. If other cultivators had been present, the seal wouldn't have cared whether it was friend or foe and killed everyone. But as it was, because only Wen Sect cultivators were present, they had killed one another, raising more fierce corpses once they were dead until there was not a single living person on that battlefield apart from Wei WuXian.

It would be just like that time he used it on the Wen battlefield—there would be no survivors. He and Lan WangJi had made it into the deepest part of the Fragrant Palace, but none of them would be able to make it out.

"A-Xian, listen to me," Jiang YanLi said, cutting through his thoughts as they spiralled into despair. She reached out to take his hand. "It is not your fault," she said firmly.

"It is," Wei WuXian whispered. "I should never have come."

"I wanted you here," Jiang YanLi said. "I want you here. The person who stole the seal is at fault—not you."

"If I didn't come, none of this would have happened," Wei WuXian said. "I should have stayed in Yiling. I should have—"

"They are contained," Lan WangJi said suddenly.

It took him a few moments to process what Lan WangJi had said. Then he shook his head. "That's impossible," Wei WuXian said. "Corpses controlled by the Yin Tiger Seal can't be suppressed."

"Look," Lan WangJi said. "Listen."

Automatically, he did as told. Though his ears were still echoing with the sound of battle, Lan WangJi was right. Outside, Wei WuXian could no longer hear the sounds of groaning corpses and screams. It was quiet.

Wei WuXian got up from Jiang YanLi's side and went to look past Lan WangJi. In the corridor, all the fierce corpses had collapsed, unmoving on the ground. But under the control of the Yin Tiger Seal, unless they had been broken to such small pieces that they could no longer move, the corpses should continue to throw themselves at Lan WangJi again and again. None of these corpses were so damaged as to be completely immobile, so why had they stopped?

"Impossible," Wei WuXian repeated. "The only way they would stop is...if the person controlling them has stopped." He exchanged a glance with Lan WangJi.

Lan WangJi nodded once.

"But why?" Wei WuXian asked.



He was still thinking about it when he heard shouts and the sound of rapid footsteps in the corridor. A moment later, a group of LanlingJin Sect cultivators burst into the room led by Jin ZiXun and Madam Jin.

Madam Jin took one look at the scene and rushed over. "A-Li, what happened? Are you hurt?" she asked before her eyes settled on the bed. The blood drained from her face. "Is he—"

"ZiXuan is fine, Madam Jin," Jiang YanLi said quickly. "Only exhausted," she said and began recounting her story again.

Outside, none of the corpses stirred. Wei WuXian could hear the sounds of people, though, calling out to each other to see who needed immediate medical attention. Beside him, Lan WangJi stood vigilant and staring out at the hallway, guarding them all from anything that might try to come in again.

"So that little brat is good for something," Madam Jin said when Jiang YanLi finished with how Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had come in. She looked proud Jin ZiXuan, though, and relieved as she sat down down in the space Jiang YanLi had vacated. "I didn't raise him to be so fragile that a few corpses would kill him. He'll be all right," she said.

"But you won't be!"

With the sharp sound of sliding metal, Wei WuXian suddenly felt a cold point at his throat. Jin ZiXun was pointing his sword right at Wei WuXian. The blade itself was still dripping with blood from the corpses he must have cut down on his way in. Jin ZiXun was in no better state than anyone else, also covered in blood and bits of flesh, but his eyes burned with fury.

"This is the work of the Yin Tiger Seal," Jin ZiXun said. "And that seal belongs to only one person. Wei WuXian, how dare you attack the LanlingJin Sect at your own shijie's wedding banquet," he snarled.

Behind him, the dozens of LanlingJin cultivators stood, each as battle-weary as the others. All of them had been suddenly attacked that night, probably seen friends and family killed before them, probably had to fight them when they'd risen as corpses again. Like this, it took no time at all for low murmurs to spread through the room. Jiang FengMian had taken Wei WuXian in and raised him. How could he betray the shijie he'd grown up with? But of course the Yiling Patriarch had no conscience. Marrying Hanguang-Jun was supposed to have straightened him out, but even Hanguang-Jun couldn't reform a demon who would kill his own brother-in-law.

"Take him," Jin ZiXun ordered and the Jin Sect cultivators around him unsheathed their swords as well, surrounding Wei WuXian in a half circle.

Wei WuXian knew in that instant, no matter how he tried to explain himself, these peoples' minds were already set. Everyone here was already convinced that he had orchestrated the attack.

Then suddenly, white obscured his vision, hiding all the hateful stares from him.

"He did not." Lan WangJi's low voice commanded silence as it always did.

Lan WangJi stood in front of him, tall and still as an icy mountain.

"You don't have to defend him anymore," Jin ZiXun spit out. "Everyone knows you were forced into this arranged marriage as a favor to the Jiang clan. Hand him over," he ordered.

"Wei Ying was with me all night," Lan Wangji said, immovable. With Bichen unsheathed, even with his usually pristine robes stained with splotches of blood, any cultivator would still think twice before confronting him.

Wei WuXian's heartbeat thumped in his chest. Slowly, that tight net around his heart began to loosen.

"You've been ensnared by him," Jin ZiXun accused. He shot a disgusted look at Wei WuXian and then smirked. "This demon has blinded you. Is he that good in bed?"

Wei WuXian could stand people insulting him, but Lan Wangji had never done anything wrong apart from defend him. "How dare you," he said, stepping out from behind him. "Say what you want about me, but if there is anyone righteous in the world, it's Hanguang-Jun," he said. "Even a rat like you should know."

Jin ZiXun's eyes flashed. "You—"

"Young Master Jin." From where she had been hovering by the bed, Jiang Yanli took a step forward and swayed. She looked paler than before, like the exhaustion of the night was catching up to her. Wei WuXian rushed to steady her, but she held out a hand to stop him, holding herself tall. "My brother had nothing to do with this," she said. "It is true that he had the Yin Tiger Seal—"

"See?" Jin ZiXun interrupted, triumphant.

"But it was stolen from him," Jiang Yanli said.

"How can you believe his words? Do you have anyone as witness?" Jin ZiXun demanded.

Jiang Yanli stood straighter. "My brother may not be the type of cultivator you wish he were," she said. "But he is not a liar. I believe what he said. If you check the incense burner in his room, you will find it was filled with a sleeping compound."

"Agarwood," Wei WuXian said.

Madam Jin gestured to a cultivator. "Go," she ordered and he quickly backed out of the room to do as told.

"Young Madam Jin, you didn't see what happened outside," Jin ZiXun said. "He raised animal corpses."

Wei WuXian swallowed hard, eyes darting to Lan Wangji. He already hated demonic cultivation so much—there was no way he'd react well to Wei WuXian's new ability. But thanks to that, he'd gotten into the Fragrant Palace in time to help save Jin ZiXun and Jiang Yanli.

"His abilities aided the fight," Lan Wangji said, surprising Wei WuXian yet again.

"It's heretical! Such a thing has never existed before now! When has anyone ever heard of raising animal corpses?" Jin ZiXun snapped. "They don't have souls!"

"Demonic cultivation did not exist before he invented it," Lan WangJi answered impassively. "Just because it has not been attempted does not mean it is impossible."

Jin ZiXun's face went to a deep shade of red. "What spell has he put over you?" He exploded. "So even the great Hanguang-Jun can be controlled by him! Is this another demonic cultivation ability?"

"Young Master Jin, I would ask that you watch your words," Jiang YanLi said. "Second Master Lan is my brother's husband. Does he not have the right to defend him?"

Jin ZiXun looked between Jiang YanLi and Lan WangJi who were both standing in front of Wei WuXian, and sensed he was losing the battle. "Young Madam Jin, you can't possibly defend a demonic cultivator," he tried. "Look at what's happened to your own husband."

"My brother would never wish for my unhappiness, or for any harm to come to our family," Jiang YanLi said, unflinchingly. "If Young Master Jin doubts this, it is the same as saying he doubts I am a suitable wife," she said.

"A-Li, I'm sure that's not what he means," Madam Jin was quick to say. Although she'd stayed out of the argument so far, her focus on her unconscious son, it had caught her attention now. Everyone knew that Madam Jin had been ecstatic when Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXun were finally re-engaged. It was obvious she cared far more about her beloved daughter-in-law's happiness than that of anyone else including her own son as the many times she'd yelled at Jin ZiXun had proven. "Is it, ZiXun?" she said.

Jin ZiXun shot a furious look at his aunt, but had no choice but to apologize. "It is not my intention to imply such a thing," he said stiffly. "But the fact remains that someone attacked us tonight! If not him, then—"

He was interrupted when a second group of cultivators came pouring into the room. This time, Lan XiChen, Nie MingJue, and Jin GuangYao were there with cultivators from all three sects. Although Jin ZiXun's bedroom was large, with so many people coming inside, the Jin cultivators had to move aside to make room for the newcomers, and even then, it was crowded. The newcomers looked worse for wear, but Jin GuangYao, especially, looked pale. His hat was missing so he looked smaller than usual, and with his hair down, and the way both Lan XiChen and Nie MingJue hovered around him, there was definitely something wrong.

"GuangYao, where have you been?" Madam Jin demanded as soon as she saw him. "Jin ZiXun was attacked! What about the defenses? Where is that idiot husband of mine?"

Jin GuangYao lifted his head, but stared hollowly at her without responding. His hand, still wrapped around the hilt of his sword, Hensheng, was sticky with blood.

"Madam Jin," Lan XiChen spoke for him. "Qin Su and Jin RuSong are dead."

His somber announcement froze everyone in place. Out of all of Jin GuangShan's illegitimate children, the only one he'd acknowledged thus far was Jin GuangYao, and only because of his accomplishments

during the Sunshot Campaign. Since Jin ZiXuan had only just married Jiang YanLi and they had no son yet, Jin GuangYao's months-old son, Jin RuSong, was, as of now, the only heir to the LanlingJin Sect. Wei WuXian remembered, just a few months ago when he'd married Lan WangJi, Lan XiChen had come to Koi Tower for Jin RuSong's full-month celebration.

He felt sick thinking about a baby having died tonight.

Even Nie MingJue, who Wei WuXian had overheard arguing with Jin GuangYao last night, was looking at him with worry.

Madam Jin stared at them and pressed a hand to her chest. "How," she said finally.

Jin GuangYao exhaled and Lan XiChen immediately turned to him. "A-Yao, don't push yourself," he said. "A chair please."

Nie MingJue grabbed one of the chairs by the table, glaring at the cultivators crammed into the room to make space, but Jin GuangYao shook his head.

"I will speak," Jin GuangYao said, holding up a hand. "It was my fault," he said.

"It was not your fault, A-Yao," Lan XiChen said.

"No, it was." Jin GuangYao's lips trembled. "I left them when the attack began. I thought they'd be safe inside, and went to help fight, but—" A tear slid down his pale cheek.

"They were already dead by the time we could reach them again," Nie MingJue finished for him and inclined his head to Madam Jin. "I'm sorry."

Jin GuangYao and Qin Su had been the perfect couple in the cultivation world. Although everyone knew that Jin GuangYao was a prostitute's son, the way he'd climbed through the ranks, the dangerous risks he'd taken to secure victory for the Sunshot Campaign, the way he'd proven himself worthy to join the LanlingJin Sect had been admired by everyone. Qin Su was the beautiful daughter of the Laoling Sect leader, a subsidiary of the LanlingJin Sect. When Jin GuangYao saved her life during the Sunshot Campaign, she'd fallen in love with him, and he with her. By all accounts, they were a perfect match, and even more so when they had been blessed with a son.

Wei WuXian remembered losing his own family within the span of a few hours. Though it had been years now, he could remember with absolute clarity the way Madam Yu had ordered him to protect Jiang Cheng with his life no matter the cost. He remembered the way Zidian felt wrapped around himself and Jiang Cheng, the stench of blood and rotting flesh when they'd snuck back to Lotus Pier. He remembered Jiang Cheng's tear-streaked face as he cried for his parents, and his own hollow helplessness at being unable to protect them. Wei WuXian took a step closer to Jiang YanLi and Lan WangJi.

Even Jin ZiXun who usually took every opportunity to insult Jin GuangYao seemed to have nothing to say in the face of such tragedy and stood to one side.

"A-Yao, maybe we should go rest," Lan XiChen said, putting a hand on Jin GuangYao's shoulder.

Jin GuangYao shook his head. "I only want to find who did this," he said and began to straighten up. "Who was responsible for the deaths of my wife and son."

"We might have an answer to that."

Wei WuXian turned toward the door when he heard the familiar voice coming in the direction of the door. The room was now so crowded that it took some shuffling of cultivators before Jiang Cheng was able to squeeze through. He shot Wei WuXian a glance, but Wei WuXian was staring at the two young men who had followed him in. One of them carried a large wooden box with a scroll set on top of it.

"Liu FengYa and Guo Yi?" Wei WuXian blurted out. They were the two young Tang Delivery Service couriers he and Lan WangJi had met so long ago in Caiyi Town. He hadn't expected to ever see either of them again, much less at Koi Tower and at such a time.

Both the young cultivators stared at him.

"Senior Wei?" Liu FengYa yelped. "What are you doing here?"

"I should ask you two the same thing," Wei WuXian said. "What brings you all the way to Koi Tower?"

"You know them?" Jiang Cheng asked, frowning as he looked between Wei WuXian and the young cultivators.

Wei WuXian nodded. "Lan WangJi and I met them before," he said and turned to Lan XiChen. "They were the ones who found the landborne abyss at Beiluo Bridge."

"Yes, thank you for that time," Guo Yi said. He was the one holding the box so he could only incline his head to Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi in the imitation of a bow.

"But why are you here?" Wei WuXian asked. He hadn't noticed any of the Tang clan present at the banquet the night before—they weren't a big enough clan to be invited to such an event, much less for two young couriers to attend.

"They have a delivery, of course," Jiang Cheng said. "Show it."

Liu FengYa reached for the scroll balanced on the box. "We have a letter for the esteemed cultivator, Jin ZiXun," he said.

The cultivators around Jin ZiXun parted. Jin ZiXun was frowning, but he took a step forward and held out his hand for the letter.

"Not so fast. Tell them who it's from," Jiang Cheng said, standing between Guo Yi and Jin ZiXun. He, like everyone else, looked exhausted, so his temper was shorter than usual.

"You don't have to be rude about it," Liu FengYa muttered, getting an elbow in the side from Guo Yi.

"It's from the LuozhuangWang Clan and HedongFu Clan," Guo Yi said.

"You mean Wang Xiao from the Luo Zhuang Wang Clan? And Fu Jin Zhong from the Hedong Fu Clan?" Jin Guang Yao asked. His eyes suddenly looked much more alert and he straightened up.

Murmurs swept through the room once more.

Wei Wu Xian remembered now that for as bad as his own memory was, Jin Guang Yao had an unusually good one. He could remember anyone's names, their family background, everything about them after having heard it just once. Wei Wu Xian couldn't recall hearing about either of the two clans before, so they must be small ones. But from the way the Lanling Jin cultivators were speaking and looking at one another, these were familiar names. Most likely, then, they were smaller subsidiary sects in the Lanling region.

Liu Feng Ya nodded. "You know them too?" he asked.

"Cousin, why are you in contact with them?" Jin Guang Yao asked, frowning as he turned to Jin Zi Xun. "They are enemy sects of Lanling Jin," he explained for the people in the room who didn't know. "They have long been angry at us, since the Sunshot Campaign," he said. "They've tried to attack us twice—they've been paying reparations to us since we won."

"Aren't they some of the ones who opposed to your watchtower project?" Lan Xi Chen asked.

Jin Guang Yao nodded. "They do not wish for us to set up watchtowers in their territories," he said. He looked at the scroll still held by Liu Feng Ya.

Jin Zi Xun shook his head. "I haven't contacted them," he said. "Let me see the letter." He snatched it from the boys and ripped the seal off. His frown deepened as he read.

"We also have this," Liu Feng Ya said, gesturing to the large box that Guo Yi still carried. "Shall we deliver it to your room?"

"Yes," Jin Zi Xun bit out, his eyes scrolling over the words in the letter.

"Where is it?" Liu Feng Ya asked.

"Just put it anywhere!" Jin Zi Xun roared.

Liu Feng Ya recoiled and in doing so, bumped into Jin Guang Yao who stumbled into Guo Yi. The box itself must be heavy, Wei Wu Xian realized, because that was all it took for Guo Yi to drop it where it fell to the floor and broke open with a crash. Inside the box, loads of gold and jewelry spilled out, so dazzling that Wei Wuxian couldn't help staring at it along with everyone else.

"What is all this?" Jin Guang Yao asked. His voice shook as he looked between the treasure and Jin Zi Xun who had turned a deathly pale. "Could it be..."

"Let me see that letter!" Madam Jin demanded, snatching the scroll from Jin Zi Xun's hand.

"Auntie, no, it's not what it looks like!" Jin Zi Xun said.

But Madam Jin was already reading the letter. Her knuckles, gripped around the paper turned white, and her eyes flashed. "Jin ZiXun, you've been taking bribes from other clans?" she said. "You—a few days ago, you brought corpses in for the disciples to practice. Was this all a part of your plan?"

"No!" Jin ZiXun said, his face white. "That really was just practice! I didn't let them out!" The Yin Tiger Seal wouldn't be able to do much without any corpses for it to control, but if there had already been corpses present in Koi Tower, even one or two would be enough for the Yin Tiger Seal to use its power.

"Did you plan to steal Young Master Wei's Yin Tiger Seal while we were all celebrating?" Madam Jin asked, ignoring Jin ZiXun's protests. "You've held a grudge against him since the Qiongqi Pass incident," she said, glancing at Wei WuXian. "But at your own cousin's wedding?"

"Then he must have also been the one to attack Jin ZiXuan on Golden Cloud Mountain," Wei WuXian said, frowning.

"What?"

All eyes turned to him again.

Wei WuXian briefly told them how he and Jin ZiXuan had encountered the Tiangou during the hunt, and how it had turned out to be Little Black. "He took the beast core." He gestured to Jin ZiXuan on the bed. "Check his pockets."

Madam Jin reached into Jin ZiXuan's pockets, and after feeling around, indeed produced that core stone that Wei WuXian had cut out of the dog. She handed it to Jin GuangYao who turned it over in his hand and then looked at Jin ZiXun.

"That's the first time I've seen it," Jin ZiXun blurted out, turning even paler. "I had no idea about the dog!"

"But didn't you train it together with A-Xuan?" Madam Jin said. "A-Xuan has trained enough spiritual dogs in his life—that dog wouldn't follow a stranger, but she'd follow someone she knew."

"You've been accusing Young Master Wei of attacking us, but it was just to draw attention away from you, wasn't it?" Jin GuangYao said. The hand holding Hensheng shook. "You've always been jealous of our cousin. You've never been supportive of my watchtower plan either," he said. "Was this your way of stopping me? How long have you been conspiring with them? You would betray your own clan for money?"

"You are no family of mine," Jin ZiXun snarled, turning on him. "What right does a prostitute's son have to speak?"

"One whose son was just killed by your friends," Jin GuangYao answered.

The room went silent.

Jin ZiXun turned pale, looking between one hostile face to the other. He shook his head and took a step back. "Cousin, you have to believe me. I didn't—"

"You almost killed us all! You killed your cousin's wife and son," Madam Jin said. "How dare you call yourself a member of the Jin clan!"

Jin ZiXun shook his head. "It wasn't me," he said. He looked from one face to another, but even the Jin cultivators standing closest to him backed away when he came close. "I never—"

"Take him away," Jin GuangYao ordered.

The LanlingJin cultivators who had all obeyed Jin ZiXun just minutes ago now turned on him.

"I didn't," Jin ZiXun said, his voice going high-pitched and reedy as the cultivators converged on him. "I swear I didn't!"

Then he was being escorted away even as they could hear his protests, screamed more and more desperately. When finally, they could no longer hear him, Madam Jin turned to Wei WuXian and then Lan WangJi, inclining her head toward them both. "You were framed for a crime you did not commit," she said. "The Jin clan will take care of the traitor. And we will take care of those enemy sects as well." She turned to Jin GuangYao. "GuangYao, until your father gets his worthless self back here, you are in charge," she said, every inch the lady of Koi Tower. "Take all the people you need and go to LuozhuangWang and HedongFu." Her eyes flashed. "Not a single one of them may live."

Jin GuangYao inclined his head to her. "Yes, my lady," he said.

"GusuLan will fly with you," Lan XiChen said. He reached out to touch Jin GuangYao's shoulder. "We are sorry for your loss."

Jin GuangYao shut his eyes and took a shuddering breath and nodded. "Thank you, Er-Ge," he said.

"The Nie Sect is behind you as well," Nie MingJue grunted. "No one deserves to lose a child."

Jin GuangYao looked up at him for a moment and inclined his head. "Thank you, Da-Ge."

"YunmengJiang will also support you," Jiang Cheng said next. "The Jin clan is now family."

Jin GuangYao nodded. "Thank you then, Sect Leader Jiang," he said. He took a deep breath and seemed to gather himself. "Find Sect Leader Jin and inform him." He ordered a cultivator who hurried out of the room. He looked at Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian. "Will you come as well?" he asked them.

Lan WangJi turned to exchange a glance with Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian turned to Jin GuangYao and spoke for them both. "We will stay and guard Koi Tower while you are away," he said. "I do not wish to leave my shijie and Jin ZiXuan alone right now."

Jin GuangYao nodded. "Then the Jin clan thanks you for your service," he said. He turned to Lan XiChen, Nie MingJue, and Jiang Cheng. "Let us prepare," he said and his eyes narrowed. "We leave tonight."



## Chapter 9: cheap bootleg version of lan wangji

### Chapter Text

It took until the afternoon for two clear parties to form within Koi Tower. The first, led by Jin GuangYao, began to prepare for departure to Luo Zhuang and Hedong. Almost all the LanlingJin, GusuLan, QingheNie, and YunmengJiang cultivators would fly with them. The second, led by Madam Jin, would stay behind in Koi Tower and begin the clean up process. Once Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian announced their intention to stay at Koi Tower, only a few handfuls of the LanlingJin guard would need to stay behind for protection, and most of the others left behind were the very old, very young, or the weaker cultivators.

With the injured to be taken care of, the dead to be accounted for, preparations for battle going on around Koi Tower, Wei WuXian felt like he'd returned to the Sunshot Campaign. Lan WangJi was almost immediately asked to help patrol while everyone was busy. Since Wei WuXian couldn't use a sword, he didn't try to cause extra trouble by volunteering to patrol with raised corpses. Since no one dared ask Wei WuXian to do anything, he ended up following Madam Jin around and helping where he could instead.

Madam Jin was a formidable leader, and she directed both cultivators and servants throughout Koi Tower to aid in the effort. She also cursed Jin GuangShan every three sentences, but as the clean-up progressed, she also seemed a little relieved and a little angry every time a new body was identified and it wasn't her husband. But for all his personal life left much to be desired, Jin GuangShan was a strong cultivator as the sect leader of LanlingJin—and as the clean up progressed, since the defense arrays had all been re-erected, it seemed increasingly likely that Jin GuangShan hadn't died, but more likely, had run off with another woman who had caught his eye during the banquet.

"I will wring his neck myself if he dares come back," Madam Jin cursed when they turned over another cultivator in golden robes and it wasn't Jin GuangShan. "You two." She gestured to two servants. "He's still alive. Carry him to the infirmary."

"Maybe something happened to Sect Leader Jin?" Wei WuXian suggested as he helped lift the groaning cultivator up before passing him to the servants.

"Something better have happened to him," Madam Jin said darkly. "I'd like to hear his excuse for not being here when we've been attacked."

By nightfall, preparations were completed and Jin GuangYao led his small army of cultivators headed for Luo Zhuang and Hedong.

After visiting Jiang YanLi who was helping in the infirmary, and Jin ZiXuan who still hadn't regained consciousness, Wei WuXian finally had a chance to go see Lan WangJi. He brought a bowl of soup noodles to Lan WangJi who was standing guard at the main entrance to Koi Tower.

"Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian said as he approached. "I brought you food."

Lan WangJi stood as tall and straight as always, though Wei WuXian was sure he must be exhausted as well. Still, with almost all the more capable cultivators gone, Lan WangJi was the strongest cultivator left at Koi Tower and it helped raise the morale of the other cultivators when they saw Hanguang-Jun standing guard. Though Wei WuXian knew Madam Jin had ordered a rotation of the patrol, even during the Sunshot Campaign, Lan WangJi was the type who was always where the action was—if there was still more to be done, people who weren't safe, Lan WangJi didn't rest, which was why he'd earned himself such a good reputation.

As Lan WangJi turned to look at him, Wei WuXian held out the tray he was holding. "It's not much—just some soup and noodles, but everyone else is too busy to cook."

"You made this?" Lan WangJi asked.

Wei WuXian nodded. "Eat while it's hot," he said. In fact, there wasn't much left undamaged in the kitchens to cook. Since he'd raised the animal corpses, they'd trampled through the kitchens and storerooms, destroying much of the food. With many of the cooks and servants dead now, it made the situation worse. A handful of people had been sent out to buy new ingredients, but getting enough for all those still left at Koi Tower was taking some time and they hadn't returned yet. Instead, a handful of available people had been cooking whatever they could find in the kitchens, and sending the food to those in the infirmaries first.

There were no chairs or tables at the entrance, so Wei WuXian gestured to the steps and sat down first, still holding the tray.

Lan WangJi hesitated for a moment before sitting beside him and taking the tray. "Have you eaten yet?" he asked.

"Of course," Wei WuXian lied. His stomach chose just then to betray him and growled.

Lan WangJi frowned and moved the tray closer to Wei WuXian. "You eat," he said.

"I'm fine, really," Wei WuXian said. "I'll go eat after." He smiled. "I made it for you."

Lan WangJi looked at him for a moment and Wei WuXian did his best to look genuine until Lan WangJi began to eat.

Wei WuXian had never seen someone eat a bowl of soup noodles so carefully and neatly. When he ate, there was always some slurping and little droplets of soup that might spray out, but Lan WangJi ate noiselessly and slowly.

"Is it good?" Wei WuXian asked, balancing his chin on his hands as he watched. "A lot of the spices were destroyed too, so I couldn't add much."

"It's good," Lan WangJi answered.

Wei WuXian smiled. He had originally come during this brief reprieve to discuss last night with Lan WangJi—with Jiang Cheng gone and Jiang YanLi occupied, Lan WangJi was the only one Wei WuXian

could talk to about it. But under the bright moonlight, the backdrop of voices coming from inside, Wei WuXian found himself enjoying just this moment of peace watching Lan WangJi eat the food he'd made.

The steam from the soup rose up in the night, carrying with it, the smell of the spicy broth. Although it wasn't very late yet, Wei WuXian suddenly felt bone-tired, and he yawned.

"You should eat and rest," Lan WangJi said, glancing at him.

"Mm, later," Wei WuXian said. "I want to—" He cut himself off with another yawn. "I want to talk to you first."

"Here."

Wei WuXian suddenly felt the bowl pressed into his hands and saw that Lan WangJi had left about half the noodles and soup for him.

"You have not eaten yet," Lan WangJi said.

"I already said I'd go eat after," Wei WuXian said.

Lan WangJi raised an eyebrow as though to question that statement and Wei WuXian laughed. "All right, all right, you know me too well," he said and began to eat. Since he knew Lan WangJi didn't like speaking while eating, he ate as fast as he could, finishing off the noodles. He did feel better once he'd eaten. "I'm done," he said when he'd finished and put the bowl on the tray. "Lan Zhan, you noticed too, didn't you?" he asked. "They never returned the Yin Tiger Seal."

Lan WangJi looked at him and nodded.

While Wei WuXian did want to stay behind to make sure Jiang YanLi was safe, his other reason for staying behind was this. Though, at the time, everything seemed to have fit together perfectly—Jin ZiXun had reasons to want Jin ZiXuan and Jin GuangYao's family dead, might even be rat enough to corroborate with enemy sects, but if Jin ZiXun really had stolen the Yin Tiger Seal, why had he not used it again when he was being dragged away?

For that matter, why had the thief—Jin ZiXun or not—stopped using the seal in the first place?

"We need to speak to Jin ZiXun," Wei WuXian said. "And do it before Jin GuangYao and the others get back." He exhaled and glanced up at Lan WangJi before looking back down at the empty bowl again.

He knew Lan WangJi was busy patrolling. And while Wei WuXian knew that his own temper had been a bit volatile lately, he didn't think it was so bad that he couldn't control himself even if Jin ZiXun insulted him—after all, the insults, he was used to. While Lan WangJi's protection was nice if Jin ZiXun truly did still have the Yin Tiger Seal, Wei WuXian could sense that his own demonic cultivation had strengthened even from the night before, and he would at least be able to fight long enough for backup to come if it came down to it. The truth was, he simply didn't want to speak to Jin ZiXun alone.

"I will go with you," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian looked up at him. “Aren’t you busy, though?” he asked. “I can handle it on my own.”

Lan WangJi hesitated. “Would you like me to come with you?” he asked after a moment.

Wei WuXian opened his mouth to tell him he didn’t need to—that he should stay here to patrol, that Wei WuXian could do this himself, but what came out instead was, “Yes.”

Lan WangJi nodded once and got to his feet, picking up the tray and walking over to signal a cultivator further inside the gates. The other cultivator came out and nodded at Wei WuXian before taking Lan WangJi’s place.

Wei WuXian followed Lan WangJi inside. They made a quick stop by the kitchens to drop off the tray first, and then headed for dungeon.

Koi Tower’s dungeon was famous for being the most secure one in the cultivation world, second only after Nightless City’s dungeons until the QishanWen sect had fallen. Imprisoning cultivators was significantly more difficult than the normal civilian, so the Koi Tower dungeons were built entirely underground. Rumors were that the original founder of the LanlingJin sect had spent two years building the dungeons and then gathered twelve elders to spend 120 days putting up reinforcement after reinforcement of magic-cancelling arrays and qi defenses. Koi Tower’s entire defensive barrier was, in fact, just a broader extension its dungeons’ defenses. And to ensure the captivity of anyone imprisoned along with the security of Koi Tower, the whole thing was qi-linked to the LanlingJin Sect Leader’s life energy.

In other words, the LanlingJin Sect Leader would always need to be a strong cultivator—strong enough to withstand controlling all of Koi Tower’s defenses. The only problem was that the sect leader also needed to be present at Koi Tower for the defenses to stay strong—the further he went, the weaker the defenses grew like stretching a piece of rubber. It was the reason Jin GuangShan claimed to need to stay at Koi Tower nearly all the time during the Sunshot Campaign instead of taking to the battlefield. If he’d left Koi Tower with a woman last night, and during that time, the Yin Tiger Seal had been activated, there was blood everywhere which naturally disrupted magical arrays, then it wouldn’t have taken much more to dismantle the rest of the defense arrays.

After QishanWen had fallen, almost all the more dangerous criminals of the cultivation world were sent to Koi Tower for trial and imprisonment until a sentence was passed. Since the defenses had gone down the night before, the prisoners in the dungeons had, of course, escaped. Wei WuXian was sure that quite a few would probably be found amongst the corpses, and anyone who had gotten out alive was definitely long gone by now.

So as expected, when Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi made their way down to the dungeon, only Jin ZiXun was present. The dungeons had quite a few rooms, some larger to hold multiple prisoners, and others smaller for solitary confinement. Jin ZiXun, maybe because he was the only one present, had been put in a large prison room, but in a particularly devious prison device.

He was shackled by the ankles and made to stand inside something that looked like a chicken coop often seen at street markets if it had been built human-sized. There was just enough space for Jin ZiXun to stand inside the wicker bamboo cage with his arms raised up, but on top of his outstretched hands was a large square stone as wide as the cage itself and about three-quarters the height of a grown man. It

would be nearly impossible for a civilian, no matter how strong, to lift a stone of that size and weight. To keep it from crushing himself, Jin ZiXun needed to exert constant spiritual energy to keep that rock above his hands. He could not sit and could not lower his arms, which meant he was stuck constantly exerting spiritual energy, unable to rest either physically or to recover spiritual energy. It ensured that any prisoner caught in that cage would slowly ebb in spiritual energy, and their only hope was for their trial date to come before they completely ran out.

Jin ZiXun was clearly a weaker cultivator than he would have everyone believe, because he was red-faced and sweating, his back stooped and elbows pressed to the sides of the cage to help him keep the stone above his head, though he had been imprisoned for less than a day.

“What are you doing here?” Jin ZiXun snapped when he saw them and had to take a few deep breaths when his arms wobbled. “Here to gloat?”

Wei WuXian smirked. “I’d have the right to it, wouldn’t I?” he said. “After how many times you’ve accused me?” He leaned closer to the cage and grinned. “But lucky for you, I’m not so petty.”

Jin ZiXun snorted.

“I’ve got a few questions for you,” Wei WuXian said.

“Why would I answer any of your questions?” Jin ZiXun snapped. Another bead of sweat ran down his face and dropped to his shoulder.

“Because I’m the only one who isn’t completely convinced it was you who stole my Yin Tiger Seal,” Wei WuXian answered. “Don’t worry, it’s not because I don’t think you’re dishonorable enough to be a thief—I just don’t think you’re brave enough to have done it.”

“You—”

“And if you had stolen it, you would have used it to escape when you were accused,” Wei WuXian said. “I didn’t hear anything about it being found on you after your arrest, so I think it wasn’t you who took it.”

Jin ZiXun shut his mouth, opened it, and then shut it again, as though unable to decide if he wanted to agree or argue with Wei WuXian.

“You’ve already lost all face for yourself, so save us the trouble and tell the truth,” Wei WuXian said. “You weren’t the one to take the seal. You’re being set up.”

“I’ve already told everyone a thousand times I’m being set up!” Jin ZiXun exploded. The stone slipped a little lower and Jin ZiXun’s face turned redder as he exerted more spiritual energy to straighten it up again.

“What’s going on down here?”

A new voice drew Wei WuXian’s attention and he turned to see Su She, that ugly copycat from the banquet, come into the room. Once again, Wei WuXian felt like this Su She was trying to look like Lan

WangJi, but just wasn't succeeding. He even had a guqin strapped to his back and a sword worn at his waist the way Lan WangJi usually carried his weapons.

"No unauthorized people may visit the prisoner," Su She said, though he looked surprised to see Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian there.

"We are here to ask the prisoner questions," Lan WangJi answered.

"We cannot bend the rules even for Hanguang-Jun," Su She said, standing as tall as he could. It looked like he was trying to stretch himself to Lan WangJi's height, though it was clearly physically impossible for him. "As a GusuLan cultivator, you should know how important rules are." He cast a condescending glance at Lan WangJi that made Wei WuXian bristle.

"What do you care about rules?" Wei WuXian demanded. "It's not your sect. Why are you here anyway? Who are you?"

Su She looked taken aback. "I'm—I'm Sect Leader Su MingShan of the MolingSu Sect," he said proudly.

"Never heard of it," Wei WuXian said.

Su She's face turned red. "We might be a small sect now, but we've been growing! We've accomplished many deeds on night hunts."

"Like what?" Wei WuXian asked. "You're probably one of those who only takes jobs that you can brag about," he said, knowing he'd hit the mark when Su She turned a deeper shade of red. "Lan Zhan accomplished more by the time he was fifteen than you'll ever accomplish."

"Lianfang-Zun put me in charge of the prisoner!" Su She snapped. "I'll ask the two of you to leave."

"Strange," Wei WuXian said, leveling his most condescending look at him. "Last I checked, Jin GuangShan is still sect leader. And as for you, you're not even a part of the Jin Sect."

"Will you all just shut up?" Jin ZiXun shouted. His arms were trembling.

Although Jin ZiXun had done his fair share of dishonorable deeds, Wei WuXian felt a bit alarmed at how much he was struggling. "Well, if he's really your prisoner, don't you think that punishment's a bit too much for him?"

"Of course I can handle it!" Jin ZiXun snapped. His arms trembled more, but he refused to admit it.

"There, he said it himself!" Su She said triumphantly. "Now I'll have to ask you both to leave. Even Hanguang-Jun cannot do whatever he wants in another sect's jurisdiction."

"We'll be back," Wei WuXian said and turned. "Let's go, Lan Zhan."

"Well, don't come back until you get permission from Lianfang-Zun!" Su She shouted behind them. "I'm in charge until he gets back!"

“Can you believe that guy?” Wei WuXian asked once he and Lan WangJi were outside and out of earshot. “He’s obviously trying to copy everything you do!”

“Is he?” Lan WangJi said mildly.

“Yes! And he’s not even doing a good job of it!” Wei WuXian said, annoyed. “I mean, he’s obviously jealous.”

Lan WangJi just looked at him and Wei WuXian frowned. “He is! Can’t you tell? His uniform is white, he has a guqin and a sword just like yours. Back when we were fighting the waterborne abyss, you had to save us both because he was trying to copy you and sent his sword into the lake!”

“You remember,” Lan WangJi said.

“Of course I remember!” Wei WuXian said, although truthfully, he’d forgotten all about that particular incident until he’d seen Su She again. “He’s probably just trying to get influence with the LanlingJin Sect since he obviously couldn’t cut it in GusuLan. His own sect? Please, I bet you that sect falls apart within a year! Two at most! And then I hope he comes crawling back to GusuLan, and Uncle can throw him out!”

“You’re upset,” Lan WangJi said.

“Of course I am!” Wei WuXian said. “I mean, you’re my—” He cut himself off abruptly.

Lan WangJi was looking straight at him, waiting for him to finish that sentence.

It was too late to take it back, so Wei WuXian thickened his face and plowed on. “You’re my husband,” he said, determinedly not looking at Lan WangJi’s face. “I mean, it’s only a title, but I am technically a part of GusuLan now. Of course him copying everything you do is insulting to me too, right?”

“Mm,” Lan WangJi said after a short pause.

“Anyway, we have to get the seal back as quickly as possible,” Wei WuXian said, changing the subject. “Whoever has it can still use it at any time.”

“Mm,” Lan WangJi agreed.

“Let’s try to talk to Jin ZiXun again tomorrow,” Wei WuXian said. “Maybe Su She will be gone by then.”

But their chance never came.

During the night, Jin ZiXun, maybe because he knew he couldn’t withstand the torture much longer without running out of spiritual energy completely, or maybe because he dreaded the trial when Jin GuangYao returned, or maybe because it was only a matter of time before he died anyway when they discovered his body riddled with holes from the Hundred Holes Curse—he let the stone drop and committed suicide.

By dawn, Jin ZiXun’s remains were being carried out of the dungeons along with the other corpses.

It seemed Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi were the only ones who suspected Jin ZiXun's possible innocence, because the mood was visibly better in Koi Tower the next day. It really seemed that Jin ZiXun had few friends in Koi Tower, since not one person seemed to care about his death.

In the morning, Lan WangJi went to patrol again, and with their sole lead dead, Wei WuXian could only search bodies for the Yin Tiger Seal as he continued helping the clean up effort inside. Although the possibility was small, there was a chance that the reason the attack had stopped was because the user of the Yin Tiger Seal had been killed, after all. Now that the injured were being taken care of, the dead had to be identified and organized for proper burials to keep them from rising again.

As he headed down a corridor to help carry bodies out, Wei WuXian caught sight of two familiar cultivators.

Liu FengYa and Guo Yi had their heads bent as they furiously whispered about something while standing over a particularly large male corpse.

"We can't tell them that," Liu FengYa was saying.

"Well the boss is going to find out eventually," Guo Yi said.

"Or we could not tell him and he'd never find out," Liu FengYa wheedled. "Come on, we already got scolded enough for the Beiluo Bridge incident, my ears are still ringing. I'll treat you to a jar of liquor later!"

"Just one jar?" Guo Yi said. "Cheap of you."

"Two jars," Liu FengYa said.

"I had to bribe you with three jars to get you to take Beiluo Bridge last time, and you still wouldn't until Senior Wei and Hanguang-Jun came along!" Guo Yi said.

Liu FengYa waved him away. "That was then, this is now," he said. "Come on. Two jars. Fine, two jars and dinner."

From down the hallway, Wei WuXian saw Nie HuaiSang looking over at them from where he was grimacing at a fallen corpse, as though debating whether to dirty his hands and pick it up or not. Wei WuXian winked at him and held a finger up to his lips.

Nie HuaiSang watched wide-eyed as Wei WuXian snuck up to the two boys.

"What's this about two jars of alcohol and dinner?" Wei WuXian asked, coming up right between them to ask. "Am I invited?"

Liu FengYa let out a high-pitched squeal and Guo Yi jumped.

Wei WuXian laughed so hard he was nearly bent in two.



“What are you two still doing here?” Wei WuXian asked after he’d finally recovered enough to speak without gasping for breath.

“Don’t sneak up on people like that!” Liu FengYa shouted.

“You two need to work a bit on observation,” Wei WuXian said. “If it’s that easy to sneak up on you, I don’t want to see you two ever night hunting.”

“It was unexpected!” Liu FengYa said.

“You always need to expect it,” Wei WuXian said, grinning.

Nie HuaiSang, seeing that Wei WuXian was just playing a prank, came over to join them. “Wei-xiong, you’re helping out here?” he asked.

“Yeah, you didn’t go with your older brother?” Wei WuXian asked, though truthfully he wasn’t surprised.

Nie HuaiSang cringed. “No, no, I convinced him to let me stay and help here, thank goodness,” he said. “Can you imagine me being on the battlefield?” He fanned himself with the fan he pulled from his waist.

Nie HuaiSang, since their school days, had never been a talented cultivator. Wei WuXian was willing to bet that he was a student who had repeated the classes at the Cloud Recesses a record number of times. In fact, he had been the reason Wei WuXian had been sentenced to copy rules in the library for a whole month with Lan Wangji back in the day because Wei WuXian had let Nie HuaiSang cheat off of him during an exam. Nie HuaiSang liked the finer things in life—art, painting, nice clothes, nice wine—he was almost a complete polar opposite to Nie Mingjue who was one of the strongest cultivators of his generation, spent more time on the battlefield than off of it, and had one of the most volatile tempers.

Liu FengYa gave him a disgruntled look. “Aren’t you from the QingheNie Sect?” he asked. “You mean you’ve never been in battle?”

“Goodness no!” Nie HuaiSang said, eyes wide. “I mean, it’s not like I’d be of much use, and I’d really only make Da-Ge lose face,” he said.

During the Sunshot Campaign, Nie HuaiSang had spent most of his time hiding in the Unclean Realm where the QingheNie Sect was headquartered, and very rarely joined his brother on the battlefield. While the reason the QingheNie Sect gave for this was that Nie HuaiSang had to stay behind to hold the fort, everyone knew the real reason was because Nie Mingjue was worried what might happen to his little brother since he was such a low level cultivator. Even during sect alliance night hunts, Nie HuaiSang attended only to show face, but he could spend an entire hunt without once drawing his sword.

“Have you no pride?” Liu FengYa demanded as though personally offended.

Nie HuaiSang’s eyes widened even more. “Of course not,” he said. “What good is pride when you’re dead?” he asked. “No, no, I’d much rather stay where it’s safe and let better cultivators do their job.”

"Anyway, aren't you two slacking on the job?" Wei WuXian asked the two youth. "Already talking about dinner when it's not even lunch yet."

"It's not like he was doing any work either," Liu FengYa said, glancing at Nie HuaiSang.

"That's not polite," Guo Yi said, elbowing Liu FengYa.

"We were just taking a break," Liu FengYa said. "Do you see how big this corpse is? I swear I've never even taken a package that weighed so much." He looked at Wei WuXian. "Hey, since you're here, can you just order this guy to walk outside on his own? He's so heavy."

"FengYa, you can't just ask him to do that," Guo Yi hissed. "Sorry, Senior Wei." He bent and grabbed the corpse by the legs.

"Why not? Demonic cultivation's got to be good for something useful," Liu FengYa said, but he also bent to haul up the corpse by his armpits.

Wei WuXian laughed. "You sure have changed since being so scared of me," he said.

Liu FengYa turned red. "Well, well, we know you're not going to do anything," he said. "So can you help or not?"

"Oh, that's a great idea," Nie HuaiSang said. "Can you command them? Look at how dirty my robes have gotten from hauling corpses." He gestured to the hem of his spotless green dress robes. Wei WuXian wasn't an expert on cloth, but judging by the pattern and quality, Nie HuaiSang had definitely spent quite a bit of money on that outfit.

Wei WuXian laughed louder. "Sorry, I barely escaped being accused of this whole thing, and half these people have friends and family here who probably wouldn't be too happy if I raised them as fierce corpses," he said.

Nie HuaiSang wilted. "Oh right, I guess that's true," he said.

"Here, hand him over," Wei WuXian said and grabbed the large corpse around the waist.

Nie HuaiSang, Liu FengYa, and Guo Yi all stared wide-eyed as Wei WuXian heaved the corpse over his shoulder and began carrying him out.

"Wow, you're actually really strong," Liu FengYa said.

Wei WuXian had to stop himself from laughing so hard he dropped the corpse. "Do I look weak? I'll have you know, during the Sunshot Campaign, I could be cut open and still stuff my intestines back in and keep fighting," he said.

"Well, no, just...with Hanguang-Jun, you know," Liu FengYa said.

"Oh, I see how it is," Wei WuXian said, wagging a finger at him. "You think I'm weaker than Hanguang-Jun!"

"That's not what he meant," Guo Yi said quickly.

"I mean not as a cultivator," Liu FengYa said, digging himself a deeper hole. "Just, you know, physically."

"You think I'm physically weak?" Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow as the two young cultivators quickly scrambled to apologize. He feigned offence and shoved the corpse back at them. "Too late!" he declared. "You already showed your true colors. See if I help you now," he said.

"No, Senior Wei," Liu FengYa whined, grunting under the effort of carrying the corpse again. "Please."

Wei WuXian shook his head. "No, I think the two of you could do some strength training," he said. "If weak, little me could carry that body, the two of you are far too weak if you can't carry it between the two of you."

Liu FengYa and Guo Yi both sighed but obediently lifted the body again, grunting as they made their ways down the hall.

Nie HuaiSang, seeing the other two had given in, sighed and bent to grab his corpse by the hands before beginning to drag it out in the most undignified manner.

Wei WuXian wanted to wince at how Nie HuaiSang was treating the corpse, though he also had his doubts about whether Nie HuaiSang would actually be able to lift it even if he wanted to. Instead, he picked up another corpse and followed the others out. "So why are you two still here?" he asked the young cultivators as they walked.

"We have another job we have to leave for tomorrow, so we thought we'd stick around and help today like everyone else," Guo Yi said, his face turning red from exertion as they walked.

"Oh how noble of you," Nie HuaiSang said and paused. "By the way, how exactly does your delivery service work? Do you see your clients?" he asked.

"It depends," Guo Yi said. "We might not always see the clients—we have civilians who work the shops most of the time, so they're the ones who accept the jobs and the packages," he said, pausing to catch his breath. "We usually just cover the delivery part."

"So with the job this time, you didn't see who asked you to deliver the letter and the goods?" Wei WuXian asked.

"No, we actually did see them this time," Guo Yi said. "We happened to be in the office at the time, so that's how we ended up with the job."

Wei WuXian caught onto that. "Then you knew the cultivators who brought that package and letter in?"

"Not personally, but yeah, we knew their uniforms," Liu FengYa said. "The cultivation world is huge. Unless they're one of the top cultivators, why would we recognize them? And if they were that important, they wouldn't be delivering their own packages in person to our office."

Wei WuXian tilted his head. "Did you recognize Jin ZiXun when you delivered them to him?"

Guo Yi shook his head. "Should we have?"

Wei WuXian thought if Jin ZiXun had been alive, he might have thrown another fit at that. "I guess not," he said.

But this new information did nothing to assuage Wei WuXian's suspicions.

Late in the afternoon, the other cultivators returned, exhausted but triumphant from wiping out the LuoZhuangWang and HedongFu clans in vengeful justice. Though the clean-up effort still continued, a hasty feast was thrown together, much smaller than the wedding banquet though the alcohol flowed liberally. Wei WuXian attended to show his face, though he was still tired from the past couple of days and didn't want to stay long. But since Lan WangJi was still patrolling, one of them had to make an appearance to represent them both.

Madam Jin was present at the feast, but everyone looked to Jin GuangYao for direction after their short but successful campaign. Nie MingJue, Lan XiChen, and Jiang Cheng sat at the tables of honor beside Jin GuangYao. Watching them, apart from Jiang Cheng who seemed tired but proud, Lan XiChen's smile seemed more strained than usual. Nie MingJue, likewise, hadn't said a word since they returned though he downed bowl after bowl of liquor. Nie HuaiSang was shrunk on his side of the table and didn't seem to dare speak a word to his older brother when he was in this kind of a temper.

It wasn't until a servant scurried up to Jiang Cheng and whispered in his ear, that Jiang Cheng looked across the room at Wei WuXian and indicated that he get up.

Wei WuXian was all too eager to leave the Glamour Hall and meet him out in the hallway.

"Jin ZiXun is awake," Jiang Cheng said as soon as he made it out. "A-Jie wants us to come visit."

"Great!" Wei WuXian said as they both headed in the direction of the Fragrant Palace. "How was it at the clans today?" he asked as they walked. "Lan XiChen looked a bit funny in there."

"You know how the Lans are with killing," Jiang Cheng answered.

Wei WuXian frowned. "Well no one enjoys killing," he said. "But they never had a problem with it if it had to be done." He'd fought enough times with Lan WangJi and even Lan XiChen during the Sunshot Campaign to know that from firsthand experience. Anyone who thought the GusuLan Sect balked at killing hadn't seen them in action on the battlefield. When there was no other way, none of them hesitated. The only reason he could think of that would have Lan XiChen reluctant to kill was...his eyes widened. "Don't tell me you killed civilians," he said.

Jiang Cheng balked. "Of course not! Jin GuangYao led the campaign—do you think Lianfang-Zun would do such a thing? Even with his own wife and son dead, he had more mercy than those bastard cultivators did on him. We didn't touch any women or children."

Wei WuXian slowly relaxed. "Good. So then what was the problem?" he asked.

Jiang Cheng sighed. "It was a little too easy," he said. "Two clans wiped out within a day? We didn't have that many cultivators with us either, and only a day to prepare. It was just...unexpected."

"You mean they weren't prepared at all?" Wei WuXian asked.

"I wouldn't say unprepared," Jiang Cheng said. "If you're a cultivator, you better always be ready," he said. "They just weren't as prepared as we thought they'd be—they should have expected that there was the possibility we'd find out the truth. That Jin ZiXun wasn't exactly a genius."

"Do you think he might have been framed?" Wei WuXian tried his theory.

Jiang Cheng snorted. "By who? Anyway, Jin ZiXun was always jealous of Jin ZiXuan," he said. "I wouldn't put it past him to attack him while he was distracted. Particularly if he could blame it on you." He shot a glance at Wei WuXian. "He's been trying to accuse you of things since the Sunshot Campaign ended. The whole Jin clan has been trying to get at your Yin Tiger Seal. This would have been the perfect opportunity to pin this on you."

"Yes, but Jin ZiXun was also a coward," Wei WuXian said. "Do you really think he had the balls to sneak into my room with Hanguang-Jun there, steal the Yin Tiger Seal, and then unleash it on his own cousin?" he asked. "So many of their own people died."

"I wouldn't put it past Jin ZiXun to be so fucking stupid that he didn't know how to use your seal," Jiang Cheng said. "Anyway, isn't that why he committed suicide? Good riddance," he said. "Jin ZiXun's dead, we wiped out the rebel clans, things are fine," he said in a tone that said the conversation was over. "Stop causing more trouble."

Wei WuXian frowned, but they had reached Jin ZiXuan's rooms by then, so he let it go for now.

When they knocked, Jiang YanLi opened the door, looking much better than she had before. She was properly dressed now in a simple robe, and her hair was done up and adorned with just Wei WuXian's hair comb.

She smiled when she saw them. "A-Cheng, A-Xian, come in," she said. "We were just eating. I'll get some bowls for you."

Jin ZiXuan, likewise, looked much better where he was sitting up in bed, propped against pillows. Though he was still pale and gaunt, he was drinking lotus and rib soup that Jiang YanLi had apparently made. "Maiden Jiang told me what happened," Jin ZiXuan said, putting down the soup when he saw them. He inclined his head. "We are indebted to you, Wei WuXian," he said. "If not for your gift and for you getting here when you did, we might not have survived," he said seriously.

Wei WuXian rolled his eyes and punched Jin ZiXuan in the shoulder, eliciting a wince and Jiang YanLi sighing.

"A-Xian, be gentle," she scolded him.

"He could handle a couple hundred corpses on his own, he's fine, shijie," Wei WuXian said. "Thank you for protecting my shijie," he said more seriously to him.

"Of course, I would die first before letting anything happen to Maiden Jiang," Jin ZiXuan blurted out and immediately went red.

Jiang YanLi also blushed, turning away from him.

Wei WuXian laughed. "You're married and still so shy?" he said. "And why are you calling her Maiden Jiang? Shouldn't you be more intimate now?"

"You—" Jin ZiXuan's face went through three different shades of red, remembering how Wei WuXian had yelled at him on Golden Cloud Mountain for calling her 'A-Li.'

"Me what?" Wei WuXian feigned ignorance and wiggled his eyebrows. "I've been calling my husband Lan Zhan since we were fifteen."

"That's because you're shameless," Jiang Cheng snapped. "Anyway, how can you compare your marriage to A-Jie's?" he said. "They actually like...each other..." He looked like the words were reluctantly being dragged from him, and turned even redder than Jin ZiXuan and Jiang YanLi, making Wei WuXian laugh even more.

"If you like someone, just say it, no big deal!" Wei WuXian said cheerfully.

"Maybe if you hadn't been such an idiot since you were fifteen, Lan WangJi would like you more," Jiang Cheng snapped and elbowed him in the back.

Wei WuXian winced, rubbing his waist. "So rough," he complained. "This is why me and shijie are happily married and you're not."

"What happily married?" Jiang Cheng roared.

"A-Cheng, please not so loud," Jiang YanLi said.

Jin ZiXuan winced, looking pained.

"Okay, okay, we just wanted to see you, but since you're clearly doing fine, Jiang Cheng and I will let you two rest," Wei WuXian said with a wink, and shoved Jiang Cheng out of the room ahead of him. "Have a nice night!"

"So you're okay with him now?" Jiang Cheng asked once the door had shut behind them again.

Wei WuXian shrugged. "He protected shijie with his life," he said. "At least I can trust him to do that." He eyed Jiang Cheng. "What about you?"

Jiang Cheng exhaled. "It's A-Jie's choice," he said. "Well, since they're fine, I'm going back to the banquet. What about you?"

"I'll turn in for the night," Wei WuXian said, stretching. "See you tomorrow! Don't drink too much!"

"You drink more than me every time!" Jiang Cheng said.

Wei WuXian laughed and parted ways with him, making his way back to his own room. He considered going to see Lan WangJi again, but now that more cultivators were back, Lan WangJi would be relieved soon and they could talk when he came back. So once inside, he called for dinner and a bath. When the servants returned, he left the tray of foods on the table for Lan WangJi, and once the bath was filled, he tied up his hair, got in and began scrubbing himself clean from the sweat and blood from moving corpses that day. He heard the door open at some point during his bath.

"Lan Zhan, is that you?" he called.

"Mm," he heard Lan WangJi murmur in agreement.

"I figured you wouldn't want to go to the banquet, so I had servants bring you dinner," he said. "It's on the table. I'm almost done. You can use the bath after me," Wei WuXian said, and finished washing before drying himself and wrapping his underrobe around himself behind the screen. He came out, drying his face.

"You didn't attend the banquet?" Lan WangJi asked.

"I went earlier," Wei WuXian said, reaching up to undo his hair again, finger combing through the strands. "But Jin ZiXun woke up so Jiang Cheng and I left early to go visit."

"How is he?" Lan WangJi asked. He was sitting at the table and drinking a steaming cup of tea. Unlike Wei WuXian, he still looked perfect despite having spent the day patrolling.

"He's recovering," Wei WuXian answered, coming to sit by him as Lan WangJi began to eat.

Lan WangJi averted his eyes. "Dress properly," he said.

Wei WuXian looked down at himself and chuckled. "It's just a loose robe. You don't have to be so uptight," he said. "It's nothing you haven't seen before." He gathered up his hair to pull back into his usual ponytail. "Lan Zhan, I was talking to Jiang Cheng earlier, and I don't think it's as simple as Jin ZiXun betraying LanlingJin for money," he said.

"First, dress properly," Lan WangJi said, frowning, refusing to look in his direction.

Wei WuXian sighed. "Fine, you win, Hanguang-Jun," he said, rolling his eyes as he tied up his under robe properly and then put on his outer robe, letting that one hang loose on his body. "Can we talk now?" he said, sitting back down. "Anyway, Jiang Cheng told me when they went to those sects, they weren't prepared for a fight, which is why it only took a day for them to wipe them out," he said. Since Jiang Cheng hadn't come to the same conclusion as himself, he waited to hear Lan WangJi's response.

"They should be prepared if they paid Jin ZiXun to attack Koi Tower," Lan WangJi said.

"That's what I think!" Wei WuXian said, encouraged by his agreement. "It was too easy—the clans weren't prepared when we came. And Jin ZiXun, although I could see him doing it, I can't figure out the

reason he'd go so far," he said. "Even if he really was jealous of Jin ZiXuan, even he hated me and wanted to frame me, would he really risk his entire clan?"

"The benefit is not proportional to the risk," Lan WangJi said.

"Exactly!" Wei WuXian nodded. "Jin ZiXun didn't gain anything from attacking Koi Tower like this. This was his home, he was a spoiled prince here. If he did it for money, would he really have committed suicide?"

"It could have been an accident," Lan WangJi said.

"His death?" Wei WuXian asked and nodded. "He was already struggling with the stone when we visited him—he probably couldn't have kept it up for much longer, and Su She was determined to wait until Jin GuangYao came back before doing anything with Jin ZiXun." He looked at Lan WangJi. "If Jin ZiXun really didn't do it, it would work out better for the real culprit if he died."

"Su She follows Jin GuangYao's orders," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian nodded, pleased that Lan WangJi was following his thoughts. "Exactly! After all, if Jin ZiXuan had died in the attack, Jin ZiXun wasn't next in line to be sect leader. That would still be Jin GuangYao—even though he's illegitimate, he's still Jin GuangShan's son."

"Mm," Lan WangJi agreed.

"Eat," Wei WuXian said, realizing that Lan WangJi had stopped eating to converse. "I'll keep talking. You can just listen." He smiled and waited until Lan WangJi had begun eating again to continue. "The only one who would stand to gain from Jin ZiXuan's death is Jin GuangYao," he said, thinking out loud. "Actually, he would gain from Jin ZiXun being accused of the crime too—Jin ZiXun insults him all the time. Any normal person would hold a grudge. And since Su She was working for him, he could either make sure Jin ZiXun had an accident...or maybe even speed up him having an accident," he said. "But would Jin GuangYao really risk his own wife and child's lives to frame Jin ZiXun?"

Out of everyone here, undoubtedly, Jin GuangYao had been the one to lose the most from the attack. "Have you ever heard of Jin GuangYao having any problems with Qin Su?" he asked Lan WangJi who shook his head. "Me neither," Wei WuXian said. "I mean, I don't know either of them well, but they always seemed happy. Your brother has never mentioned anything?"

Lan WangJi shook his head again.

Wei WuXian leaned on the table, thinking for awhile as Lan WangJi silently ate. When Lan WangJi finally finished, Wei WuXian had also thought through his options and made up his mind.

"Lan Zhan, I'm going to take a look around," Wei WuXian said, getting up.

Lan WangJi shook his head. "Dangerous," he said.



"I'll use paper metamorphosis—I won't get caught," Wei WuXian said. "The Yin Tiger Seal is still missing," he said. "The attack this time was only stopped because the culprit stopped it," he said. "Until we find it again, the world will be at risk."

Lan WangJi still looked reluctant.

"Almost everyone will be asleep tonight after these last few days," Wei WuXian said. "It will be fine. Watch over my body, keep me safe here, okay?"

Lan WangJi still didn't look happy about it, but he didn't stop him from taking some paper from the writing desk. Wei WuXian made a few quick cuts with a pair of scissors, and painted most of the paper black except for one big eye that he left white. When he was done, a slim, black paper man with a round head and unusually long sleeves like wings lay on the table.

This was one of the dark arts techniques Wei WuXian learned in that time after the Sunshot Campaign had ended and Jiang Cheng was rebuilding the YunmengJiang Sect. During that time, Wei WuXian was left bored and alone a lot of days to do research and experiment. Once his paperman was complete, he lay on the bed and a moment later, the paperman on the table tottered to its feet, blinking its big eye at Lan WangJi.

"Be careful," Lan WangJi said.

The paperman walked over and patted Lan WangJi on the hand a few times before it saluted and slipped beneath the door.

## Chapter 10: paper material witness

### Chapter Text

Despite having rid themselves of their enemies, Koi Tower still had as many cultivators as it could spare on guard, and they patrolled the halls in pairs. As a small, dark scrap of paper blending into the nighttime shadows, though, Wei WuXian could flutter with the wind, slipping up against walls or through cracks in doors when guards turned his way. He stuck to the black boots of some passing cultivators, letting them carry him down corridors. When they switched directions, he let his thin paper body carry him with the wind.

While this paper metamorphosis technique was useful, it was also, like Lan WangJi said, dangerous. Wei WuXian could only possess the paperman for an hour or so at a time, and the scrap of paper had to return to his body in perfect condition within that time limit. If he didn't return in time, his soul would be stuck outside his body that would slowly waste away and die. If the paperman was damaged, his soul would receive the equivalent degree of harm which could vary from lunacy to death.

So Wei WuXian had to travel quickly but carefully.

By the time he reached the Blooming Gardens, the moon was high in the sky, and though it wasn't very late yet, he could tell from the cultivators leaving Glamour Hall that the banquet was slowly petering out. Most people were tired from the last few days, and although they had fought successfully, even the most triumphant of the cultivators would be exhausted.

Wei WuXian was a little annoyed to find he'd waited a bit too long, and from the Blooming Gardens, he could hear the sound of voices. If people were there, he'd have to be even more careful in investigating to keep from discovery.

Using a few flaps of his sleeves and the cool breeze, he plastering himself against a pillar and peered around the side. In this way, he had a good view of the open living room where he could see two people sitting by the light of the moon and the lamps lit inside. Though they must have just come from the banquet, Jin GuangYao was pouring a small cup of liquor for Nie MingJue.

"You've been tougher on HuaiSang lately. Even though he didn't want to join us on the battlefield, I heard he was helpful here," Jin GuangYao commented as he also poured himself a cup.

"Nie clan business is hardly yours to question," Nie MingJue answered, downing the cup.

Jin GuangYao refilled it again. "Is it the saber spirit?" he asked mildly. "Your cultivation level—when we were fighting—hasn't it increased?"

Nie MingJue slammed down the cup. "Explain what happened today," he said, glaring at Jin GuangYao. "You said those clans set this up, but not one person was prepared when we came. You killed the sect leaders before we could question either of them—one, I could have understood. Two is too many to be coincidence."

Jin GuangYao sighed. "Wen RuoHan broke your father's saber, caused him to be killed on a night hunt, torn to pieces in front of you." He met Nie MingJue's eyes. "If Wen RuoHan were to appear in front of you the next day and you had the chance to avenge him, wouldn't you have taken it?"

Nie MingJue was silent, looking down at his cup. "All I know is I've been on battlefields all my life, and not once has the fighting ever concluded so quickly," he said finally.

"So we were lucky," Jin GuangYao said. "Count it as a blessing that none of our cultivators were killed," he said and reached to uncover his guqin. "Let me play for you. You'll be able to think more clearly after you've been calmed."

Nie MingJue didn't speak, downing his second drink. This time, he reached for the jar of liquor and refilled his own cup.

Wei WuXian watched as he drank a third cup. Even by lamplight, Nie MingJue didn't look well. Maybe it was the long battles he'd fought during the day, but everyone knew that when at risk for qi deviation, it was best not to consume alcohol which could lead to tempers rising. Yet, Jin GuangYao didn't try to stop Nie MingJue, and only began to pluck at the strings.

He began to play that same song Wei WuXian had overheard just a couple of days ago. As he played, Nie MingJue's eyes closed. Seeing Jin GuangYao's concentration was fixed on the guqin strings, paperman Wei WuXian took the opportunity and slipped into the room.

Sticking to the shadows, Wei WuXian slipped into the study just behind the living room. Here, the window was open, letting in the moonlight so Wei WuXian could see the sketched designs that covered

the entire desk. A large bronze mirror sat at one end of the room, and an incense burner wafted the flowery incense. Wei WuXian hadn't been able to stand in his own room. On the walls were paintings of the four sceneries of spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

The blueprints covering the desks appeared to be for the watchtowers that had begun to be erected in the Lanling region that the LuoZhuangWang and HedongFu clans had been opposed to. Only two had been built so far, but apparently, Jin GuangYao's plan was to spread them throughout the entire cultivation world so that civilians wouldn't need to travel all the way to sect headquarters to ask for help. There were sheafs of paper on the desk as well, and when he slipped between the pages, he found that they were letters and correspondence—many of the smaller sects in or around the Lanling region saw the watchtowers as the LanlingJin Sect trying to expand their territory and take over the region just as the QishanWen Sect had once done. Jin GuangYao had stacks of complaints that he meticulously answered, apparently, trying to convince the opposition of the value of his project. Judging by the letters, though, his reasoning hadn't helped.

The two most outspoken clans were LuoZhuangWang and HedongFu, so getting rid of them certainly helped Jin GuangYao if he wanted to build these watchtowers. But his own wife and son had died—did a handful of watchtowers really mean enough that he would kill his own family?

Wei WuXian poked around the room some more, but apart from the blueprints and letters, he couldn't find anything else strange about the room.

He was about to start looking at the shelves when he heard a crash and a roar come from the other room.

Startled, Wei WuXian flew to the door and slipped through the crack in time to see Jin GuangYao pale as a sheet, looking terrified at a Nie MingJue who had just upended the entire table. The guqin had landed facedown on the floor. Alcohol pooled on the ground where the cups and liquor had spilled.

Jin GuangYao scrambled back when Nie MingJue drew his saber. The sect leader's eyes had taken on a red hue and he was sweating as he stumbled forward, swinging his saber wildly.

"Jin GuangYao!" he shouted.

"Da-Ge! Calm yourself! You're going into qi deviation!" Jin GuangYao said. He hadn't yet drawn his own sword, but only dodged Nie MingJue's attacks.

While every cultivator knew about the risk of qi deviation, this was the first time Wei WuXian had seen it happen in person. Most of the time, cultivators were careful to cultivate slowly, and to practice only their particular brand of cultivation so as to avoid qi deviation.

Nie MingJue's cuts were nothing like his usual swordsmanship, but seemed aimless and desperate. His pupils had shrunk down in his eyes and he seemed to stare at nothing in particular, only swinging his sword wildly, aiming for a paper screen first and then a table next. Drops of dark blood began leaking from the corners of his eyes, and then both his nostrils and ears.

Still, his attacks were quick and powerful, and not easy for Jin GuangYao to dodge. Wei WuXian couldn't get anywhere near for fear of having his paper body cut to pieces, and he hugged the walls, trembling.

He could feel the qi pouring off of Nie MingJue. Since his spirit possessed only a paper body, Wei WuXian had no defense against spiritual energy like he would in his own flesh-and-blood body. So much killing energy poured from Nie MingJue that his paperman body felt like it might burn and shrivel up.

Nie MingJue's next slash dislodged Jin GuangYao's black cap, sending it rolling to the ground. Eyes wide, Jin GuangYao scrambled for his sword, Hensheng, only to have it knocked out of his hand by another powerful blow that sent it skittering in Wei WuXian's direction.

Jin GuangYao, seeing his sword too far away, reached for the guqin instead. He sent one strummed note out. But though Lan XiChen had taught him the Sound of Clarity, he had not gone so far as to teach Jin GuangYao the secrets of the GusuLan musical defensive arts. Despite his attempts to infuse the notes with energy, the strums of guqin were only sound and did nothing to stop Nie MingJue.

At least, that was what Wei WuXian thought until he realized Jin GuangYao was not playing random notes on the guqin, but a song.

This song was not the Sound of Clarity, but sounded similar to one of GusuLan's corpse suppression attacks that Lan Wangji played so well. When Lan Wangji played it, he could suppress a crowd of corpses at once. At first, Wei WuXian thought Jin GuangYao simply wasn't that skilled at guqin, because there were so many dissonant notes that didn't fit with the melody. But the more he played, the more Wei WuXian felt Nie MingJue's heavy spiritual energy subside until, all at once, it entirely disappeared. Wei WuXian was no longer flattened to the wall by that heavy energy and found he could move again.

Instead, he watched as Nie MingJue stood in place, swinging his sword in the air but with none of the spiritual energy that gave his attacks so much power.

Seeing the spiritual energy gone, Jin GuangYao's face changed, suddenly losing that scared expression he'd been wearing. Calmly getting to his feet, he walked in Wei WuXian's direction.

Jin GuangYao reached down. Wei WuXian thought he was going to touch him and leapt out of the way, only for Jin GuangYao to reach for the sword that had been knocked out of his hands earlier.

Unfortunately, that movement gave him away.

"Who's there!"

Jin GuangYao's attention, thus far on Nie MingJue, immediately pinned on his paperman body. That was all the warning Wei WuXian got to leapt out of the way as Hensheng came striking at him. Although the blade of Hensheng looked soft and flexible, in reality, it was sharp and deadly. Using spiritual power, Jin GuangYao could wrap that sword around an enemy and sever their body to pieces. He had even cut up other swords this way. As his eyes set on Wei WuXian's paperman body again, Wei WuXian knew he'd stand no chance anywhere near that sword.

Except, strangely, as Jin GuangYao advanced on him, slashing at him, Wei WuXian found himself able to dodge. In fact, Jin GuangYao didn't use any spiritual energy at all. Lucky for Wei WuXian, the strange music that had cut off Nie MingJue's spiritual power was apparently also effective on Jin GuangYao as well. Hensheng did not exhibit any of its unusual spiritual qualities, only slashing at Wei WuXian like an ordinary sword.

Paperman Wei WuXian darted back and forth, dodging the attacks. But even without spiritual power, Jin GuangYao was a lot bigger than a paperman. Though he could keep himself away from the blade, Wei WuXian could get no closer to the door. Jin GuangYao apparently also realized this because as he continued slashing at the paperman, he pulled a talisman from his sleeve that ignited.

The sword slashed to the right, and Jin GuangYao threw the talisman to the left. He would only be able to dodge one.

In that split second, trapped between the heat of the talisman and the wind from the sword, Wei WuXian thought of Lan WangJi sitting in their room right now. He'd be beside the bed where Wei WuXian's body lay, keeping watch over him. In that moment, all of a sudden, he wanted nothing more than to see Lan WangJi's face.

A dark shadow fell over Wei WuXian.

Nie MingJue stood in the way. With one hand, he blocked the blow from sword with his saber. The talisman fell to the ground and burned out.

Although Jin GuangYao's strange music had cut off Nie MingJue's spiritual power, thanks to that spiritual block, it had also cut off Nie MingJue's qi deviation—with his qi suppressed, he had begun to return to his senses. And those few moments Jin GuangYao had spent trying to cut paperman Wei WuXian had bought enough time for Nie MingJue to wipe the blood from his eyes. He still bled from his seven apertures, but as he squinted, breathing hard and sweating, he could once again tell who his enemy was.

With a roar, he charged at Jin GuangYao who was forced to abandon Wei WuXian to counter the blow.

Without waiting, Wei WuXian flung himself out of the room. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, he had to leave while he could. He couldn't care less about hiding himself anymore, flying all the way at full speed back to the guest residences.

As he flew down the final corridor, Lan WangJi opened the door. He was holding a stick of incense in a lighter that had almost burned out, keeping track of the time for Wei WuXian, he realized. He must be coming to look for him.

"Wei Ying—"

Wei WuXian threw himself bodily on Lan WangJi's face before he could take another step forward. He'd never been so glad to see anyone.

Paperman Wei WuXian clung to Lan WangJi's face, trembling. Lan WangJi's eyes were covered by its two wide sleeves, and after a moment, he carefully picked up the paperman and carried it over to Wei WuXian's body. He placed it down on Wei WuXian's chest.

A moment later, Wei WuXian opened his eyes, gasping loudly.

Lan WangJi was right in front of him, and Wei WuXian drank in the sight—that handsome face he’d missed so much, the way he was looking at Wei WuXian with worry.

“Lan Zhan! Quick! Let’s go,” he said, struggling to get out of bed. There were other things he wanted to say to him, but before that, they needed to get to Nie MingJue.

Having left his physical body for awhile, he was still getting used to his limbs and his knees went weak as he pushed himself out of bed. Lan WangJi caught him before he could fall, helping him up. Leaning heavily on him, Wei WuXian struggled upright.

“Where to?” Lan WangJi asked, one hand holding Wei WuXian by the waist while the other held his hand so he could balance.

“The Blooming Garden,” Wei WuXian said. “Chifeng-Zun just went into qi deviation, and Lianfang-Zun is fighting him!”

Lan WangJi frowned and went faster, still holding Wei WuXian steady by the waist as they hurried in the direction of the Blooming Garden. After one corridor, Wei WuXian was able to walk by himself again, which was good because they began encountering the LanlingJin guards, and they both had to fight to get through. In a life or death situation, Lan WangJi didn’t try to stop Wei WuXian from using his demonic cultivation as they kicked aside anyone in their way. The Koi Tower guards, though, had been instructed to be alert after the attack last night, and even though they couldn’t defend against Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi, they could warn the others. With so many sects still at Koi Tower, this meant disciples were being drawn in with the noise.

“WangJi, what are you doing?” Lan XiChen was one of the first on scene, but even as he spoke, Lan WangJi was already kicking open the gates of the Blooming Garden. “These are A-Yao’s private quarters!”

“No time to explain,” Wei WuXian said, striding with Lan WangJi to the sitting room. “Sect Leader Nie is in trouble.”

Wei WuXian threw open the doors, but the room was empty. Neither Nie MingJue nor Jin GuangYao was inside. The furniture that Nie MingJue had broken had all disappeared. Even the guqin had gone, and there was no sign of the mess or struggle that had happened here just a few minutes ago.

A voice suddenly came from their right. “What’s wrong? Why is everyone here?” Jin GuangYao walked out from the crowd.

Though he had just been fighting Nie MingJue not long ago, he had straightened his hat and clothes. He looked a bit pale, but he was beyond thick-faced, calmly looking around with that disarming smile as though he were confused why everyone was here. He was an incredibly good actor, Wei WuXian thought.

“Lianfang-Zun, good timing for you to come here,” Wei WuXian said.

Jin GuangYao raised an eyebrow. “Is it strange that I should be in my own chambers?” he asked. “Perhaps Young Master Wei could tell me what he is looking for so I can assist.”

He was playing the part of an innocent man being harassed by the unreasonable Yiling Patriarch. With Wei WuXian's current reputation, it took hardly any convincing his audience, and Wei WuXian could already hear some of the resentful whispers coming from the cultivators who had gathered.

"I'm looking for Chifeng-Zun," Wei WuXian said, ignoring them.

Whatever his act, there was no way Jin GuangYao could have hidden Nie MingJue so quickly. If they searched the Blooming Garden, they would certainly find him.

But Jin GuangYao only laughed. "Da-Ge? Why would he be here?"

"With so much noise, everyone has come out. Where is he?" Wei WuXian asked.

Lan XiChen frowned. "Yes, where is Mingjue-xiong?" he asked. "Wasn't he supposed to listen to the Sound of Clarity with you?"

Jin GuangYao nodded, still smiling as though he weren't concerned. "Yes, he came awhile ago and I played for him," he said. "Then he said he wanted to go hunting to...calm himself," he said with that usual apologetic wince. Since everyone knew Nie MingJue had it out for Jin GuangYao, it was doubly convincing that he'd want to blow off steam after spending time with him. The explanation also took Nie MingJue outside of Koi Tower where he wouldn't hear the shouts and alarms—a masterful lie Jin GuangYao had crafted in just a few minutes.

"He would leave Koi Tower at such a time?" Wei WuXian asked.

Jin GuangYao shrugged. "Why wouldn't he?" he asked. "We enacted justice on the people who broke in and killed so many people including my wife and son," he said.

Wei WuXian looked at him. "Well, if he's really not here, it would be easy to disprove if you would let us search your chambers," he said.

Jin GuangYao grimaced. "You'd ask me to open my chambers for all of you to go through just because you think you saw ChiFeng-Zun here?" He shook his head. "Qin Su and A-Song's bodies are still here, awaiting burial. I cannot allow you to desecrate them."

The resentful murmurs rose in pitch.

"That's going too far even for the Yiling Patriarch," Wei WuXian heard someone whisper behind him.

"Who does he think he is?" another asked. "We can't let him desecrate our dead."

"Yeah, I remember how he dug up corpses during the Sunshot Campaign. Does he intend to use our fallen allies in his army?"

"He thinks just because he can command corpses that he can control living humans too," another said. "We're not dead yet—"

A sudden silence fell over the crowd.

Wei WuXian turned, surprised, only to see cultivators clutching at their throats. Their lips were pressed tightly together in a very familiar manner.

“WangJi, you shouldn’t use the silencing spell now,” Lan XiChen said, but he also looked surprised.

Wei WuXian’s eyes widened. Lan WangJi had put the silencing spell on everyone who had been speaking negative words about him. “Keep to the subject at hand,” he said mildly.

Everyone knew Lan WangJi did not care about rank, treating everyone equally from civilians up to sect leaders. Still, there was a certain level of respect accorded to established cultivators. Something like the silencing spell was reserved for disciplining younger disciples when they studied at GusuLan. Wei WuXian had never heard of someone using it outside of GusuLan and on established cultivators, treating them as though they were juniors.

Even under the circumstances, Wei WuXian felt mildly relieved that he hadn’t been silenced. Instead, with Lan WangJi on his side, he felt stronger. “Exactly,” he said. “And the subject at hand is ChiFeng-Zun. If you’re really not guilty of doing anything to him, let us search your rooms.”

Lan XiChen sighed. “A-Yao, why not just let them search,” he said. “You have nothing to hide.”

Jin GuangYao exhaled and shook his head. “Your brother is as stubborn as Young Master Wei,” he said. “All right. Go ahead.” He stepped aside and gestured to his chambers.

At his permission, Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi immediately moved forward, followed more slowly by a handful of GusuLan cultivators. They searched the living room, study, and then finally the bedrooms. In one of the bedrooms lay two bodies covered by white sheets—one larger and one smaller.

Wei WuXian approached them, ready to pull the back the sheets.

“Let me,” Lan WangJi said, stopping his hand. He glanced at the cultivators behind them. If Wei WuXian, who had just been accused of desecrating corpses, were to touch them and the sheets weren’t hiding Nie MingJue, his reputation would be worse than ever.

Wei WuXian nodded and stepped aside to let Lan WangJi pull the sheets aside.

Beneath them lay Qin Su and Jin RuSong’s sallow, still corpses.

Lan WangJi turned and shook his head at Wei WuXian.

Though they searched cabinets and closets, even pulling up a few floorboards, there was no trace of Nie MingJue anywhere inside the Blooming Gardens.

“It’s not possible for him not to be here,” Wei WuXian said when he’d searched the study for the umpteenth time.



“How would I hide an entire person in these rooms without you finding him?” Jin GuangYao said. He looked harassed, as though he were the one being imposed upon. “Do you believe me now?”

Wei WuXian turned to Lan WangJi. “You believe me, don’t you?” he asked.

Lan WangJi frowned but nodded.

“Good because I know what I saw,” Wei WuXian said. “If he’s not here, you hid him elsewhere.”

“Aren’t you satisfied yet? Lianfang-Zun already allowed you to humiliate him by searching his rooms,” a LanlingJin cultivator said before Lan WangJi glanced at him and his mouth sealed itself shut. He glared at them, furious, but couldn’t force his mouth open.

“WangJi, that’s enough,” Lan XiChen said. “Young Master Wei, surely you’re satisfied now.”

Since they hadn’t been able to find Nie MingJue, Wei WuXian would not be able to convince them. He had no choice but to give up for now. Until he had proof, all of these cultivators were on Jin GuangYao’s side.

“If Young Master Wei still does not trust me, it may be best if he leaves Koi Tower,” Jin GuangYao said mildly.

With the resentful glares being sent his way by everyone else, the way they were lining up behind Jin GuangYao, the dismissal was clear.

“I know where I’m not welcome,” Wei WuXian said. “But Sect Leader Lan, you better count the days your eldest brother stays missing,” he said to Lan XiChen. “When he doesn’t show up, everyone will know what you’ve done.” He narrowed his eyes at Jin GuangYao.

Then turned on his heel and pushed past the cultivators crowded there to leave.

Lan WangJi was right behind him, which was as much a surprise as a relief.

“Lan Zhan, you don’t have to leave with me,” Wei WuXian said as he packed up his few things back in their guest room. “It won’t look good for you if you side with me. It already doesn’t look good that you silenced so many people.”

“I will go with you,” Lan WangJi answered.

Wei WuXian knew he should argue with him more, convince Lan WangJi to stay for the sake of his reputation and for the reputation of GusuLan. Lan XiChen was sworn brothers with Jin GuangYao who had all of the cultivation world’s support at his back now, whereas the only reason Wei WuXian hadn’t been outright denounced yet was because of his marriage to Lan WangJi. He shouldn’t drag him down any further, and yet—

—and yet, it felt nice, for once, having someone by his side. Wei WuXian could take care of himself, had spent his whole life taking care of himself and others, but now, he thought how good it would be to

have someone himself. Someone he could rely on, someone who would take care of him and support him. For once, Wei WuXian wanted to be just a little bit selfish.

“Thank you,” Wei WuXian said finally.

Lan WangJi paused in his packing and turned to him. “I will always go with you, Wei Ying,” he said.

Wei WuXian’s face began to burn under Lan WangJi’s gaze. “Ah, Lan Zhan, for someone who doesn’t speak much, you sure have a way with words,” he said lightly. He fidgeted until Lan WangJi turned and began to pack again.

Wei WuXian watched him, wondering how someone so stuffy could somehow make him so happy with just a few actions. How, though Lan WangJi barely spoke a handful of words at a time, somehow knew the exact right things to say. How, even though he was only one person, Wei WuXian felt like he had an army when he was with Lan WangJi.

By the time they had finished packing, LanlingJin disciples had come to escort them out.

Jiang YanLi and Jiang Cheng, who had both rushed to guard Jin ZiXuan when the alarms went off, had also apparently heard the news and come to see him off.

“Shijie, be careful,” Wei WuXian warned her. “Something’s not right here.” He turned to Jiang Cheng. “Stay as long as you can and watch over her and Jin ZiXuan,” he told him.

“You don’t have to tell me that,” Jiang Cheng said. Since he hadn’t been present when Wei WuXian caused a scene, no one could ask him to leave. If he claimed to be worried for Jiang YanLi after the attack or that he wanted to stay and help her settle in at Koi Tower, no one would question it either. He frowned. “Do you really think there’s an issue here?”

Wei WuXian nodded. “Shijie, wear your comb always,” he said to her. “I’ll do what I can to continue looking into it.”

Jiang YanLi nodded. “Be careful, A-Xian,” she said. She looked at Lan WangJi. “Take care of him,” she said.

“I will,” Lan WangJi answered.

By morning, Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had returned to the Cloud Recesses. Most of the flight was spent in silence—Wei WuXian was more exhausted from the paper metamorphosis than he’d expected and kept dozing off on Lan WangJi’s shoulder no matter how much he tried to stay awake. Throughout the cold flight, Lan WangJi passed spiritual energy to him, keeping him warm even though it wouldn’t be easy for a normal cultivator to do that and fly at the same time.

The slowly rising sun was only just beginning to bother Wei WuXian, waking him up, when they landed at the main gates of the Cloud Recesses.

Wei WuXian yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Sorry I couldn’t stay awake,” he said as he stepped off the sword and Lan WangJi sheathed Bichen.

"You're tired," Lan Wangji said, hovering by Wei WuXian's side as though worried he might tip over. "Rest."

Wei WuXian smiled at him. "You're the one who stayed up all night," he said. "Come on, let's go sleep."

They had only walked through the gates, though, when a disciple posted there stopped them.

"Please come with me," the disciple said. "We've been waiting for you."

Wei WuXian exchanged a glance with Lan Wangji. No one had time to send GusuLan a message that they'd be returning before Wei WuXian and Lan Wangji had already left. No message could get here faster than they had flown.

But nothing seemed wrong here at GusuLan. The morning air was crisp, the occasional bird chirped from the trees. Although it was still so early, with the GusuLan sleep schedule, the Cloud Recesses were already busy with cultivators and servants going about their normal jobs.

Both of them followed the young disciple as he led them to the Apothecary Pavilion. Though named it was called the Apothecary Pavilion, the series of buildings actually consisted of medical bay, infirmary, and apothecary.

They were led to a room in the apothecary building where an unexpected sight met them. Lan QiRen and Wen Qing were bent over a table, conversing in quiet tones.

They looked up when Wei WuXian and Lan Wangji walked in, and the disciple quickly bowed and left again.

Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow, looking at the strange pair. "How did you know we were coming back, Uncle?" he asked.

Lan QiRen frowned. Wei WuXian expected him to begin asking questions—why they had come back earlier than planned, where the other GusuLan cultivators and Lan XiChen were—but Lan QiRen didn't say anything.

Wen Qing, likewise, didn't look happy or annoyed to see him like she usually did—only serious and a bit worried.

Then she pushed out the item that had been sitting on the table between them.

By the early dawn sunlight, the Purification Stone she revealed had turned completely black.

Chapter 11: where lan wangji went

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian stared at the Purification Stone that had turned entirely black. When he'd left, there had been just the one dark spot on the stone. Now, though, he couldn't see even a white speck left on the surface.

It felt like a lifetime ago when it had only been a few days since he'd gone to Koi Tower. In those few days between when Lan WangJi had discovered his secret and the wedding, Wei WuXian had continued pretending to purify in Library Pavilion up until he left for Koi Tower. Since Lan WangJi already knew about the stone, he hadn't thought anything about leaving it in its closed box in the library.

Wei WuXian swallowed hard. He could feel Lan WangJi stiffen beside him. "How...how did you find it?" he asked.

Lan QiRen opened his mouth, looking like he was about to scold Wei WuXian the way he used to when Wei WuXian was a student, but Wen Qing beat him to it. "How do you think he found it? Elder Lan went to check on your progress and found the stone like this!" she demanded, furious. "What do you think you were doing? Why didn't you tell me?"

Wei WuXian winced. "I can explain," he said automatically before he realized he really couldn't. "I, I mean, Uncle told me to purify using the stone after we came to the Cloud Recesses," he said. "Didn't you wonder where I was every day?" he added when Wen Qing did not look appeased.

"I assumed you were goofing off doing who knows what with demonic cultivation like you always do," Wen Qing said heartlessly before she narrowed her eyes on Lan QiRen and then Lan WangJi. "And what were you two thinking? If you'd told me what you wanted from the beginning, I could have explained to you that Wei WuXian doesn't have a golden core—purification is impossible for him. Now you've ruined a perfectly good Purification Stone."

Lan QiRen's moustache twitched. "How would we have known? If you had told us the truth from the beginning..." He looked over at Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian wondered how Lan QiRen wanted to finish that sentence. That if there was no hope of purification for Wei WuXian, maybe he wouldn't have taken them in. Maybe he would have left them at the mercy of the cultivation world, out in the Yiling Burial Mounds. Maybe, now that he knew, he'd kick them out again—if not the Wen family that had pledged themselves into GusuLan, at least Wei WuXian. Maybe he'd make Lan WangJi annul their marriage, make Wei WuXian return to Yiling but alone this time—

"Uncle, this is how it is," Lan WangJi said suddenly, cutting through Wei WuXian's thoughts.

Wei WuXian turned to look at him, but Lan WangJi was staring straight at his uncle. His handsome face looked as expressionless and serious as always, but his words were determined and calm.

Lan QiRen looked as shocked as Wei WuXian felt at those words. "WangJi, you knew about this?"

Lan WangJi nodded.

"Why did you not tell me?" Lan QiRen demanded.

"I did not wish to worry Uncle until I knew more," Lan WangJi answered. "It is not Wei Ying's fault."

"Of course it's his fault! If he stopped practicing demonic cultivation—"

"He did not practice demonic cultivation while at the Cloud Recesses these last week, and it made no difference," Lan WangJi answered, interrupting his uncle. Lan QiRen looked like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Wei WuXian had never once heard Lan WangJi argue with his uncle before—always, in the past, he'd been Lan QiRen's pride—the perfect disciple. "Even if Wei Ying has no golden core to purify, it should have been ineffective but not corrosive," Lan WangJi said.

As though he'd been prepared for this conversation, he reached into his qiankun sleeve and pulled out five paper books. He knelt by the table, and waited until Wei WuXian sat beside him to flip open the first book.

Wei WuXian, still surprised by Lan WangJi's unexpected defense of him, looked down at the open page. At first, it looked like any sort of text on cultivation. But the more he looked at it, the more he thought the calligraphy looked familiar until he realized the book was covered in Lan WangJi's own refined handwriting.

"You copied this?" Wei WuXian asked.

Lan WangJi nodded. "After Wei Ying informed me of his core, I asked Brother for permission to access the Sect Alliance Library," he said.

If anything, this seemed to make Lan QiRen go from disbelieving to angry. Wei WuXian had never seen the Lan elder look so upset before—not even that time Wei WuXian had been caught helping Nie HuaiSang cheat on an exam. "The Sect Alliance Library?"

"What's the Sect Alliance Library?" Wei WuXian asked, glancing between Lan WangJi and Lan QiRen, wondering what sort of a library could have Lan QiRen react like this.

Every sect, no matter how big or small, had its own library with its set of sacred texts that documented sect doctrine and secret techniques. GusuLan's Library Pavilion was the most famous in the cultivation world, and different from the others because it held not only its own sacred texts but gathered texts from all over the cultivation world including even ones from long-extinct sects. Often, GusuLan received requests from visiting cultivators to conduct research there. He had a hard time imagining what sort of library Lan WangJi would need to leave the Library Pavilion for.

"I've heard of it," Wen Qing said. "Back when the QishanWen Sect was still in power, Wen RuoHan heard praise about the GusuLan Library Pavilion—he visited the Cloud Recesses then, didn't he?"

Lan QiRen exhaled. "He did," he said. "We thought he only came to do research, but who knew, a few months later, he came and burned down Library Pavilion." He shook his head. "He could never stand others having something better than him."

Wei WuXian realized this must have happened shortly before the QishanWen Sect had found an excuse to require every sect to send them disciples under the guise of training. He'd only found out about what happened at the Cloud Recesses after he'd seen the bad condition of the GusuLan disciples who had

come—particularly Lan WangJi, who he found out later, had had his leg broken because he was protecting the library. At the time, the rumors were that because Lan WangJi had helped Wei WuXian humiliate Wen Chao during the archery competition, Wen Chao had held a grudge and looked for an excuse to raze the Cloud Recesses. Apparently, the Wen Sect had more than one reason to attack GusuLan.

“XiChen saved what he could, but much was lost during the fire,” Lan QiRen said and shut his eyes. “After that, Wen RuoHan made all sects turn over a copy of their secret texts, and he created the Sect Alliance Library to be the most comprehensive library in the cultivation world.”

It must have happened in those few months while Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi were still under Wen Chao’s command, memorizing the QishanWen rulebook and being treated like slaves. Of course they’d heard no news from the outside world at all then, so he’d never found out about this library.

“There was a lot of protest from the sects at the time, so I thought it was destroyed during the Sunshot Campaign,” Wen Qing said. “It still exists?”

Lan WangJi gave a short nod. “The four major sect leaders decided to preserve the library under strict guard. The location is only known to the four.”

“WangJi, it is forbidden to go to the Sect Alliance Library,” Lan QiRen said. “If other sects were to find out you had access to their sacred texts...”

Cultivation sects guarded their secret techniques jealously. Wen RuoHan had forced all the cultivation sects—big and small—to hand over copies of those sacred texts that would contain secret techniques. If people found out that the four sect leaders had not destroyed that library after the Sunshot Campaign, that someone had visited it, even if it was Hanguang-Jun who had an impeccable reputation, there would be trouble.

“I already searched the entirety of Library Pavilion and the Room of Forbidden Books, and they contained nothing to help Wei Ying,” Lan WangJi said. “I asked for permission from Brother to go.”

It all fit together suddenly. Wei WuXian couldn’t wait and turned to Lan WangJi. “You went all the way to the Nightless City after I told you about my golden core—that’s why you were late to the wedding?” he asked.

Lan WangJi glanced at him and gave a short nod. “I apologize for being late,” he said.

Wei WuXian shook his head, staring at him. By going to this library, Lan WangJi could have started a war between GusuLan and the rest of the cultivation world—and he’d done it for Wei WuXian. “Thank you,” he said faintly. “But what could you find in that library that could help me?” he asked. “I developed demonic cultivation on my own—the only texts about it are written by me.”

“QishanWen Sect’s sacred texts are in that library as well,” Lan WangJi said. He touched the first book he had copied. “Since Wen ZhuLiu developed the Core-Melting Hand, this is the text documenting the technique.” He pointed to three more books. “These document the results and experimentation.”

Wei WuXian's eyes widened. Lan WangJi had gone straight to the source—the only place that such a text would still exist—to search for a cure for his missing golden core.

On top of that, to travel to the Nightless City and copy these volumes of text would normally take weeks. They weren't as thick as GusuLan's rulebooks, but those rulebooks had taken Wei WuXian over a month to copy back when he was fifteen. Lan WangJi had managed copy multiple books and in such perfect handwriting in just four or so days.

"WangJi, you—do you know what would happen if these texts got out?" Lan QiRen was furious. "You copied the Core-Melting technique! Do you want more Wen ZhuLius in this world?"

"These texts may have a cure to save Wei Ying," Lan WangJi said, stubborn and unmoving.

"You would risk the entire cultivation world for one person?" Lan QiRen shouted. He was so upset he was shaking a finger at Lan WangJi.

"Even if he is just one person, he is still a person," Lan WangJi said.

Lan QiRen stared at him. He let out a loud exhale and stopped speaking, but for once, Wei WuXian could understand his uncle's point of view even though his heart beat fast at the knowledge of what Lan WangJi had done for him.

He had essentially stolen the most deadly technique in the cultivation world. If others learned that the technique had been resurrected and could be learned, it could bring unimaginable chaos. If such dangerous texts existed in that library, no wonder the sect leaders had kept it a secret.

"Do any describe a cure?" Wen Qing asked when it was apparent Lan QiRen had nothing else to say.

Lan WangJi pointed to the smallest book of the ones he'd brought out. "These document attempts at a cure," he said. "But none was found before Wen ZhuLiu passed away." He looked at Wen Qing. "Will they help him?"

Wen Qing exhaled. "I won't know until I've had a chance to study them, but it's better than nothing." She looked at Wei WuXian. "And you, I'll start running some tests on you—we won't know how to find a cure until we figure out what's wrong." She glanced at the black Purification Stone again.

"Thank you," Lan WangJi said and inclined his head toward her.

She sighed. "No need to thank me. I'm his doctor and the one who agreed to perform the surgery." She narrowed her eyes at Wei WuXian. "Which is why he should have told me about this sooner."

Wei WuXian grinned sheepishly at her. "Sorry, Wen Qing-Jie," he said. "And thank you."

Wen Qing waved a hand. "All right. Wei WuXian, you come with me to the medical bay—we'll start with some tests there," she said. "Would you like to come?" she asked Lan WangJi as she stood up.

Wei WuXian stood as well, expecting for Lan WangJi to come with him after all this, but he didn't move, instead staying seated across from Lan QiRen. "No, I will take punishment," he said. Sitting like this,

nephew and uncle looked like mirrors of each other—backs straight, uniforms pristine, faces serious. It was clear where Lan WangJi had learned his mannerisms.

Wei WuXian frowned. “What punishment? Why should you be punished?”

Lan WangJi didn’t look at him. “I have risked the safety of GusuLan to copy those texts,” he said.

Lan QiRen finally spoke. “So you know what you’ve done,” he said.

Lan WangJi inclined his head. “I accept discipline.”

Lan QiRen looked at him for awhile. Usually, discipline at the Cloud Recesses meant copying the rulebooks. Back when Wei WuXian had studied here, the harshest punishment he’d received was when Lan WangJi ordered them both to be hit with the discipline planks. Wei WuXian had been so sore after that he couldn’t leave the Ancestral Hall without Jiang Cheng carrying him out, and without the cold springs, it would have taken several days to heal. Surely, Lan QiRen couldn’t pass down a punishment harsher than that.

“Five strokes from the discipline whip,” Lan QiRen said. “One for each of the books you have copied.”

“No!” Wei WuXian shouted. The discipline whip was the harshest form of punishment in the cultivation world. Even Wei WuXian had never been hit with a discipline whip before, but Jiang Cheng had. It had taken him several weeks to recover with just one stroke. Furthermore, the whip left a scar that would never heal so that every time the cultivator saw the scar, they would remember the disgrace of what they had done. The usual punishment with a discipline whip was one stroke, two at most. Wei WuXian had never heard of anyone taking five strokes at once. “You can’t—Lan Zhan did it for me.”

“It’s precisely because he did it for you that he must take punishment,” Lan QiRen said. “He risked the lives of our entire sect for one person. Is one life worth so much?”

“Then let me take the punishment instead,” Wei WuXian said. He wanted to push Lan WangJi behind him, hide him and keep him safe. “He did it for me. It’s only right that I do it for him.”

Lan QiRen snorted. “That’s the first time I’ve heard you willing to take punishment,” he said and shook his head. “WangJi made his own decision—he needs to take responsibility.”

“He’s your nephew! Do you want him to be crippled?” Wei WuXian shouted. “That many strokes, it would take months to recover—”

“Stop, Wei Ying,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian’s arguments quieted at the tone of Lan WangJi’s voice. “I will take punishment,” he said, resolute. “I only ask that Uncle does not destroy these books until Maiden Wen has had a chance to look through them.”

Lan QiRen looked down at the books. “Very well,” he said. “Since they are already here, if they can save a life, so be it.” He stood. “Come with me, WangJi.”



Lan WangJi also stood and turned to Wei WuXian. “Go with Maiden Wen and begin the tests,” he said.

Wei WuXian shook his head. “If you’re going to be punished, I’m coming with you,” he said, grabbing Lan WangJi by the arm. “You’ve never experienced the discipline whip,” he said. “You really won’t be able to move for months! This isn’t like the discipline planks.”

“I will be fine,” Lan WangJi said firmly and turned to Wen Qing. “Take him to begin the tests.” He looked down at the stone. “We cannot wait longer.” When Wei WuXian still refused to let go, Lan WangJi slowly reached for his fingers. Though he hated touching others, he gently took Wei WuXian’s hand. “Please,” he said.

Wei WuXian looked into his pale, sincere eyes, and bit his lip. Finally, he let Lan WangJi loosen his grip.

Wei WuXian watched until Lan WangJi and Lan QiRen had both left the apothecary.

Wen Qing finally sighed and touched his shoulder. “Come, let’s go to the medical bay to begin the tests,” she said. “You’ll see Second Master Lan there soon enough.”

Two hours later, Wen Qing was just pulling a few acupuncture needles from Wei WuXian’s chest and noting down observations when the doors to the medical bay burst open.

Years ago, when they were still students, Lan WangJi had caught Wei WuXian sneaking Emperor’s Smile into the Cloud Recesses. Wei WuXian had grabbed him around the waist, forcing them both to fall off the wall and break curfew together. Originally, his only thought had been to escape punishment, but he hadn’t understood Lan WangJi enough at the time because Lan WangJi had punished them both—himself taking even more strokes than Wei WuXian. Although Jiang Cheng had carried Wei WuXian out, Lan WangJi had walked out alone with his back straight and head held high.

This time, two disciples carried in Lan WangJi, propping him up so that his arms were around their shoulders as they helped him stumble inside. They had stripped him of his robes during the punishment—the discipline whip would immediately rip through clothes anyway, but more telling was how Lan WangJi had not redressed after the punishment. Instead, his entire upper body was exposed, the most undignified Wei WuXian had ever seen Lan WangJi outside of the Xuanwu Cave. His hair stuck in long, dark strands to his sweating body. His face was pale, his eyes unfocused.

Wei WuXian ran to him, ignoring Wen Qing’s shout of protest.

“Lan Zhan! Lan Zhan, you—”

“Quick, get him on a bed,” Wen Qing ordered and the disciples complied. Wei WuXian hovered next to them, wanting to help but afraid to touch Lan WangJi in case it hurt him more.

The disciples put Lan WangJi face down on the bed he had vacated, and Wei WuXian froze.

Five angry red lines split open the once perfect plains of Lan WangJi’s broad back. They weren’t welts—they were open wounds, the flesh bleeding and raw, cut deep into his back. Wei WuXian had seen Lan WangJi’s back before when he’d found him in the cold springs so many years ago, and even then, admired how he had the perfect male body. In these weeks, he’d slept beside Lan WangJi enough times,

had hung onto him enough times riding Bichen that he knew the feel of his back too. Now, because of him, Lan Wangji had a set of wounds that would leave scars for the rest of his life.

“You, bring the anaesthetic,” Wen Qing ordered one of the other medical cultivators in the bay. She was already hitting pressure points on Lan Wangji’s back to slow the bleeding. “You, prepare the antiseptics,” she ordered another.

Wei WuXian stood frozen as medical cultivators rushed around him, bringing Wen Qing whatever she ordered.

“You can’t treat him,” said one of the disciples who had carried Lan Wangji. “It’s part of the discipline. He must endure the punishment and reflect—”

“I don’t care what the rule is,” Wen Qing said. “If Lan QiRen has a problem with it, he can say so himself!” she snapped. “Wei WuXian, come help—take his ribbon off and move his hair away,” she ordered.

Wei WuXian stumbled forward, but Wen Qing was already pulling off Lan Wangji’s forehead ribbon and handing it to him. Wei WuXian stared at it in his hand, the long white ribbon with its pattern of blue clouds that was now speckled with bright red blood where it had brushed up against Lan Wangji’s wounds.

“Wei Ying...” Lan Wangji murmured.

Wei WuXian jolted. “Lan Zhan,” he said, swallowing hard.

Lan Wangji turned his face in his direction. “Wei Ying,” he repeated, his gaze unfocused, his face glistening with sweat. Though he was gritting his teeth with pain, he reached for Wei WuXian.

“I’m here,” Wei WuXian said and grabbed his hand. Though his skin was pale, his touch was unnaturally heated, perhaps already beginning to burn with fever. “Lan Zhan, I’m here,” he said, his voice catching in his throat. He pressed Lan Wangji’s fingers to his lips. “I’m here.”

Wen Qing worked on Lan Wangji’s injuries for the better part of the day. She stopped the bleeding, disinfected the wounds, and sewed up those long cuts in Lan Wangji’s back, which she told Wei WuXian later would at least help the injuries heal faster though it would still leave permanent scarring—wounds that deep would have to.

Wei WuXian stayed by Lan Wangji’s bed, holding his hand through it all. Even unconscious, Lan Wangji could feel pain, his hand squeezing around Wei WuXian’s fingers as Wen Qing worked, and making Wei WuXian shout, panicked, for her to be more gentle.

Lan Wangji was already burning with fever when Wen Qing had finished sewing him up and rubbing medicinal poultice on the wounds to help them heal faster.

By the time Wen Qing finally wiped her hands clean, Wei WuXian felt as exhausted and drained as she looked.

"I've fed him an anaesthetic to help the pain," Wen Qing told him. "I've also blocked his pressure points to keep him asleep to speed up the healing process—he'll be unconscious for about two weeks. That should be about the amount of time it'll take to run your tests too."

"Will he be healed by then?" Wei WuXian asked.

Wen Qing sighed. "That'll be up to him," she said. She looked tired as she washed her hands and glanced outside the window where the moon had already risen. "It's late," she said. "I'm going to get dinner. Are you coming?" she asked.

Wei WuXian shook his head. "I'll stay with Lan Zhan," he said.

"I'll bring something back for you then," she said. "Then we'll continue your tests."

Wei WuXian nodded.

Once the medical bay had cleared out, everyone else gone to dinner, Wei WuXian slumped in the chair someone had brought for him. By the lamplight, Lan Wangji lay still, his breathing steady, but even so, his grip on Wei WuXian's hand never loosened. Though Wen Qing had given him anaesthetic, his brows were still drawn together even in sleep.

Wei WuXian wasn't sure how long he sat there, just watching the slow rise and fall of Lan Wangji's ruined back. But after some time, when Lan Wangji's brow began to glisten with sweat again, Wei WuXian reached for the cloth and basin left by the bed. He tried to wipe Lan Wangji's face to help him cool the fever, but he frowned and tried to turn away like a kid.

"Shh, I'm just wiping your face for you," Wei WuXian whispered, soothing, and reached for his face again. "Be a good boy."

Lan Wangji stilled at Wei WuXian's voice though he was still unconscious, allowing him to wash his face for him. For the first in a long time, Wei WuXian couldn't smell sandalwood when he was so close to Lan Wangji—he smelled only of blood and sweat and the pungent herbs of the medical ointment Wen Qing had put on him.

"How is he?"

Wei WuXian turned to see Lan QiRen standing in the doorway. He was holding a tray of steaming food.

Wei WuXian stiffened all over. "How do you think he is?" he said. "How do you think five strokes from the discipline whip would be?" He began to move, to block Lan QiRen's way, but Lan Wangji's hand still held tight to his so he was unable to get up.

During the suturing, Lan QiRen had never come to give orders against Wen Qing's treatment. Wei WuXian didn't think Lan QiRen would be cruel enough to undo Wen Qing's work, but he also hadn't thought he'd be cruel enough to punish Lan Wangji this badly—either way, he wasn't going to let Lan QiRen hurt Lan Wangji more.

But Lan QiRen only came close to put the tray down on a nearby table. It was full of the usual bland, GusuLan food—just one portion, presumably for Wei WuXian. When Wei WuXian made no move to leave Lan WangJi's side, Lan QiRen came to stand by the bed.

"Do you know why WangJi's father, my brother, spent most of his adult life in seclusion?" he said after a moment.

Wei WuXian watched him warily, holding tight to Lan WangJi's hand, but all Lan QiRen did was stand by the bed, looking at his nephew. By the light of the lamps and the moon, the elder showed no expression on his face much like Lan WangJi normally looked.

"When he was young, my brother was a model disciple." Lan QiRen spoke after minutes had passed, his voice low. "When he grew up, he became one of the most promising cultivators of our generation—people used to speak about him like they speak about WangJi now." He paused. "But when he was around your age, he met a woman outside Gusu City."

For as long as Wei WuXian could remember, QingHeng-Jun, Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen's father and the Sect Leader of GusuLan back then, had almost always been in seclusion, leaving most sect affairs to Lan QiRen. He remembered glimpsing him only a handful of times during the rare sect alliance event that he chose to attend, though more often, it would be Lan QiRen taking his place. While he'd studied at the Cloud Recesses, he had never seen QingHeng-Jun once. Wei WuXian had vaguely wondered about Lan WangJi's parents before—the most Lan WangJi had ever spoken about his father with him was in the Xuanwu Cave when he told him his father was dying. He had never mentioned his mother once.

"He fell in love with her." Lan QiRen paused as he came to stand by Lan WangJi's bedside, looking down at his nephew. "She did not care for him as much, but worse than that, she killed one of our teachers."

"Why?" Wei WuXian blurted out. It was impossible to imagine that Lan WangJi's father had married a woman who once killed his teacher.

Lan QiRen shook his head. "What matters is that despite knowing this, my brother took her in. He knelt with her before heaven and earth, and told everyone in the clan that she would be his wife." He exhaled. "After that, he found her a house and locked her inside. Then he found a second house and locked himself inside. To the outside world, we called it secluded cultivation, but this is the truth." He glanced at Wei WuXian and then down at his hand that was still clutching Lan WangJi's own. "Do you know why?"

Wei WuXian answered after a moment. "He couldn't forgive her for killing his teacher, but also couldn't watch the death of the woman he loved. He married her to save her life, but forced himself not to see her."

Lan QiRen bent and slowly brushed away some of Lan WangJi's hair. Without his forehead ribbon, strands of it had slipped down his face that Lan QiRen tucked behind his ear now. "Do you think he was right?"

Wei WuXian did not know how to answer. In one palm, he held Lan WangJi's hand, and in his other lay the white ribbon that had been stained red.

After looking at Lan Wangji for awhile, Lan Qiren spoke again. "I watched my brother throw away his life, his future, his own children, for a woman," he said. "Ever since they were born, I have taught XiChen and Wangji all I can—to be righteous, to be model disciples, to uphold the rules that guide our path." He paused and swallowed. "The first time Wangji was ever disciplined was when you pushed him outside the walls of the Cloud Recesses," Lan Qiren said. "This is the second time."

In the time Wei WuXian had known Lan Qiren, he'd always seen him as the strict teacher who would eagerly punish anyone for breaking those rules carved on the wall. Now, though, he looked weary and aged, the lines of his face carved in the lamplight.

"I do not wish to see my nephew hurt," Lan Qiren said.

He watched as a tear slid down Lan Qiren's face.

And Wei WuXian couldn't say a word.

Chapter 12: a stone to break your soul

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

For the next two weeks, Wei WuXian never left Apothecary Pavilion. Wen Qing alternately ran tests on Wei WuXian, and checked on Lan Wangji's progress. In between the two, she read the texts Lan Wangji had copied.

Wei WuXian, for his part, stayed by Lan Wangji's side as he had promised. In the meanwhile, he cooperated with good humor and only minimal complaints about how bitter the medicine was, and how Wen Qing could really work on her acupuncture techniques because it hurt—before getting jabbed even more viciously by her. The younger Wens, most of whom worked in the medical bay along with Wen Qing all seemed worried, so Wei WuXian cracked as many jokes as he could. The older Wens also came to visit all the time, pestering everyone with advice about which herbal brews they should try on either or both Wei WuXian and Lan Wangji, until Wen Qing kicked them out.

In fact, the only time Wei WuXian ever left Lan Wangji's side was three days in when A-Yuan somehow snuck away from the Wens keeping him out of the medical bay and came trotting through the doors.

"Xian-Gege!" A-Yuan called.

Wei WuXian's eyes widened as he glanced at Lan Wangji's ravaged back, and he quickly let go of Lan Wangji's hand to sweep the toddler up in his arms and take him to the room next door.

"I want to see Lan Er-Gege," A-Yuan said, trying to peer around Wei Wuxian's shoulder and into the room. "Ning-Gege said he's sick."

Wei WuXian turned so A-Yuan wasn't able to get a good look. "He's sick, so you can't see him," he said.

It was only three days after the initial whipping so Lan Wangji's wounds were still so bad that it would definitely give A-Yuan nightmares if he saw it. So Wei Wuxian just kept turning every time A-Yuan tried to look around him.

"But Xian-Gege can see him," A-Yuan protested.

"Your Xian-Gege is a grown up," Wei Wuxian said. "I won't get sick around Lan Er-Gege, but you will."

"But I have medicine for Lan Er-Gege." A-Yuan leaned back in Wei Wuxian's arms to open one chubby hand where two small sticky candies were sitting. "Jingyi said his mom gives him one when he falls down and it always makes him better."

Wei Wuxian smiled. "I'm sure it does," he said.

"I want to give them to Lan Er-Gege," A-Yuan said and began fidgeting in Wei Wuxian's arms again.

"What a good son you are," Wei Wuxian teased and pinched his cheek. "How about this—I'll give them to Lan Er-Gege for you so he'll get better soon. Then as soon as he gets better, you can come see him." He smiled, hugging A-Yuan. "I'm sure it will make him very happy."

A-Yuan seemed to consider it for a moment. "Xian-Gege promises?" he asked.

"Mm, I promise," Wei Wuxian said and held out his hand.

It took two shakes before A-Yuan dislodged the sticky candy from his palm and into Wei Wuxian's hand.

Impulsively, Wei Wuxian pressed a kiss to A-Yuan's forehead before putting him down again. "All right, be a good boy and go play," he said.

It wasn't until A-Yuan ran off again that he looked up and saw Lan Qiren was standing by the doorway.

Lan Qiren didn't seem to have anything to say to him so Wei Wuxian just turned and went back to Lan Wangji's side. He was still sitting there when Lan Qiren came in, speaking in quiet tones to Wen Qing who was updating him on Lan Wangji's progress.

He did not say anything to Wei Wuxian, but he also did not make him leave, only watching silently as Wei Wuxian put the two candies on a handkerchief to put by Lan Wangji's bedside.

So Wei Wuxian's schedule turned out to be surprisingly busy between keeping the atmosphere light with their visitors, going through the tests Wen Qing gave him, and keeping A-Yuan and Lan Jingyi from breaking in through various doors and windows. The two kids had apparently got it in their heads that it was a challenge now, and Wei Wuxian felt half-proud and half-annoyed that A-Yuan turned out to be nearly as proficient at it as Wei Wuxian used to be back in the day. Wen Qing also began relegating some tasks in taking care of Lan Wangji to Wei Wuxian because he was an extra pair of hands.

Although Wen Qing checked on his progress every day, Lan Wangji needed new medication spread on his healing wounds, which Wen Qing taught to Wei Wuxian so he could help. As the days passed, Wei

WuXian would wipe down Lan WangJi's body, spoon feed him medicinal broth while two other medical staff helped hold him upright. He knew Lan WangJi would hate being so dirty so he made sure to keep his face clean. One afternoon, he also made some servants bring in a basin of warm water so he could wash Lan WangJi's hair for him as best as he could so at least it was free of the clumps of blood that had dried there.

In whatever spare time he had, Wei WuXian, out of curiosity, also read the books Lan WangJi had copied. He didn't like thinking about the Core-Melting Hand with his memories of the evil technique, but at the same time, the texts interesting to read from an intellectual standpoint. After reading hundreds of pages of Lan WangJi's handwriting, Wei WuXian had the general idea of how the technique worked. Essentially, it was a variation of qi deviation—every cultivator had to be careful when cultivating because the golden core could only be built up slowly to avoid irregular fluctuation of spiritual energy that could result in qi deviation and death. The Core-Melting Hand technique essentially forced a large blast of spiritual energy through a cultivator's meridian in order to overload their golden core and destroy it.

So the good news was that the average cultivator would never be able to use such a technique—the amount of spiritual energy that needed to be sent in order to cause qi deviation explosion would usually require the person to be at a much higher cultivation level. In fact, from the reading, Wei WuXian gathered that Wen ZhuLiu should not have been able to use this technique on Yu ZiYuan or Jiang FengMian except that they had both been so shaken by the events surrounding Lotus Pier that they were already at risk of qi deviation. In other words, the more susceptible a person was to qi deviation, the more likely the Core-Melting Hand technique would work.

It was interesting information, though the only thing that became obvious after reading it was that there was no cure to recover a golden core once it had been destroyed. An exploded golden core simply couldn't be recovered, and so it seemed Lan WangJi had gone to all this trouble for nothing after all.

In this way, two weeks passed as Wei WuXian waited for Lan WangJi to wake, spending every possible hour with him even though he was unconscious. Because once he woke, Wei WuXian didn't how much longer he'd be able to stay.

Two weeks later, when Lan WangJi's fever broke, Wei WuXian was there waiting when his lashes trembled and his pale eyes finally flickered opened. Wei WuXian watched as he lay still, taking in his surroundings.

Wei WuXian smiled. "Lan Zhan, you're finally awake," he said. "I missed you."

Lan WangJi's eyes widened and he jolted back on the bed, immediately letting out a hiss of pain when he pulled at his healing stitches.

"Be careful!" Wei WuXian said. "You're still recovering," he said. "Here, let me..." He helped steady Lan WangJi as he slowly sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed so his back wouldn't touch anything.

"How long..." Lan WangJi looked confused, wide-eyed as he glanced at the white ribbon Wei WuXian held balanced in his lap.

"You've been asleep for two weeks," Wei WuXian said. "If your uncle hadn't let Wen Qing help, it might have taken longer." He turned to a nearby disciple. "Ah, can you go tell Wen Qing and then Elder Lan that Lan Zhan is awake?"

The disciple nodded and left the room.

"How do you feel?" Wei WuXian asked. He was so used to reaching for Lan WangJi's hand now that he could feel that phantom pressure, the shape of Lan WangJi's fingers wrapped around his own, and Wei WuXian had to stop himself from reaching for his hand.

"Fine," Lan WangJi said. He still seemed disoriented, his gaze landing again on the ribbon on Wei WuXian's lap. In the time he'd been unconscious, Wei WuXian had gotten a disciple to bring him water and a basin to wash out the blood stains. He hadn't been able to get it completely clean since the blood had been on it for too long by the time he thought to do it, but unless someone were inspecting it closely, they wouldn't be able to see the faint stains at a glance.

"Ah, you want your ribbon?" Wei WuXian asked. "No, don't move. I'll help you put it on."

Lan WangJi watched, wide-eyed, as Wei WuXian got up to kneel on the bed, careful not to touch any of his healing wounds. He looped the ribbon around Lan WangJi's forehead and tied it, careful to keep it secure but not too tight.

Lan QiRen came hurrying into the room just as Wei WuXian was finishing and froze as though not knowing how to respond.

"How do you feel, WangJi?" he asked finally as Wei WuXian busied himself adjusting Lan WangJi's hair to keep it out of the way of his wounds.

"Fine," Lan WangJi said. From behind him, Wei WuXian could see him experimentally roll his shoulders. Over the weeks, he'd watched as Lan WangJi's angry red wounds slowly close up and the swelling subside. Now, there were purple bruises and welts surrounding each of the wounds, but they had closed. Just two days ago, Wen Qing had pulled out the stitches.

"Hanguang-Jun truly is a strong cultivator," Wen Qing commented from where she had strode in. "Let me see," she said and Wei WuXian got off the bed to make room for her.

She nodded as she inspected Lan WangJi's back. "I didn't expect you to be able to move even after two weeks, but it looks like you're healing well. Be careful of re-opening your stitches. Sleep on your front, obviously, and come check in with me every day until I say otherwise," she said. "No strenuous movements. Try not to move too much in general if you can help it. Wei WuXian already knows how to change your bandages so I'll leave that to him." She looked at Wei WuXian and then back at Lan WangJi. "He did a good job taking care of you these two weeks."

"Wen Qing," Wei WuXian hissed. "It's not a big deal," he said to Lan WangJi who had turned to stare at him.

"You did," Wen Qing said bluntly. "Credit should be given where it's due."



Wei WuXian expected Lan WangJi to maybe ask more about those two weeks or his wounds, but when Lan WangJi spoke again, it was about none of that. “How are Wei Ying’s tests?” he asked instead.

Wei WuXian hadn’t asked at all about the tests Wen Qing was running on him in all of this time, more concerned about when Lan WangJi would heal and wake than anything else.

“The final results should be in by tomorrow morning so I won’t know conclusively until then,” Wen Qing said. Her expression gave nothing away, but Wei WuXian had bigger worries right now. “For now, rest.”

“Thanks, Wen Qing,” Wei WuXian said and stretched. “Well, it’s been two weeks since I got to go outside. Now that Lan Zhan is awake, I’m going to take a bath,” he announced.

Lan WangJi frowned, making an abortive gesture in his direction.

Wei WuXian kept his hands by his side, fingers restless, and smiled. “I’m sure your uncle has things he wants to discuss with you,” he said, glancing between Lan QiRen and Lan WangJi. “Oh, I’ll bring you something good to eat!” he said. “We haven’t been able to feed you anything but herbal stew—good thing you already know inedia, Lan Zhan,” he said. “I’ll see you soon.”

Lan WangJi gave a slow nod.

Wei WuXian flashed him another smile and stepped out into the sunlight for the first time in two weeks. The air outside was fresh, free of the smells of medication and ointments that permeated Apothecary Pavilion, and he took a deep breath as he headed to the Jingshi.

The first thing he did, as he’d said, was get a few servants to fill the bath for him. It hadn’t been a lie when he said he hadn’t a real bath the entire time he’d stayed in Apothecary Pavilion—just quick washes with the basin—and he was craving one the way he was sure Lan WangJi would be too. Wei WuXian usually kept his baths short since he wanted to hurry and move on to whatever his next activity of the day was, but today, he took his time soaking in the water and enjoying cleanliness.

After that, he took a leisurely stroll around the Cloud Recesses beneath the sunlight. Though it was late autumn now, growing close to winter, they were in a warm spell and the trees were golden and the breeze gentle. He spotted a pair of fat rabbits and chased them around a grassy hill for awhile, before they escaped him. When he grew tired of looking for the rabbits, he headed for the kitchens. Since spicy food wasn’t good for someone who hadn’t eaten properly in two weeks, he moved all the spices out of reach before he began cooking for self control. Then he made congee with a few side dishes, and ladled out a bowl of the herbal broth that the kitchens had kept brewing for Lan WangJi since his discipline.

By the time he headed back to the Apothecary Pavilion, it was the late afternoon and Lan QiRen had gone. Lan WangJi was alone, slowly stretching and working out his sore muscles. From the way his hair had been done up in its usual hairstyle again and his skin was looking healthier and flushed, he’d also had a bath just like Wei WuXian had predicted.

“I said I’d bring food for you,” Wei WuXian said, placing the tray and soup on the table for Lan WangJi. “Your stomach can’t take too much yet, so I made you congee.”

Lan WangJi had a complicated expression on his face as he looked at the white congee. "Thank you," he said after a moment.

In just the few hours Wei WuXian had been gone, Lan WangJi had apparently already regained mobility and walked nearly entirely normally to the table on his own though Wei WuXian couldn't help hovering by him anyway.

Most of the time Wei WuXian forgot just how strong Lan WangJi was since his build was slim and elegant when he was fully dressed. Without his robes covering his upper body, though, Wei WuXian could see how well built he was that even two weeks without solid food couldn't deteriorate. But the reason he couldn't look away now were the long lines of stitched flesh scarring Lan WangJi's back. He'd grown used to looking at them day after day, but in these few hours away, the horror of his marred back hit Wei WuXian at full force again.

Lan WangJi didn't speak as he ate, and although Wei WuXian had decided to be patient and wait, the longer he waited, the antsier he go. He stood by the table, nudging the dishes a little closer to Lan WangJi or handing him a handkerchief when he paused.

When Lan WangJi finally put down his bowl and still didn't speak, Wei WuXian couldn't wait any longer.

"What did your uncle say?" he asked.

Wei WuXian had made up his mind, two weeks ago, that when Lan WangJi woke, he'd let Lan QiRen say whatever he wanted to him. If Lan WangJi decided to dissolve the marriage agreement between them, Wei WuXian wouldn't stop him. At most, he'd ask for the Wens to stay at the Cloud Recesses, and he'd leave without an argument.

Lan WangJi glanced at him. "Nothing," he said.

Wei WuXian blinked. "What do you mean nothing? There's no way it was nothing! I thought you talked for a long time—or at least, he talked for a long time since I know you hate speaking," he said, pulling out a chair and sitting down next to him. "Didn't he—you know—"

Lan WangJi looked at him.

Wei WuXian gestured. "Didn't he ask you to annul the marriage?" he asked.

Lan WangJi's brow furrowed. "Do you...want to annul the marriage?" he asked finally.

"I just meant, I thought your uncle hates me," Wei WuXian blurted out. "I'm—I mean, it was my fault you were punished. You were unconscious for two weeks, Lan Zhan." He glanced at Lan WangJi's shoulders. Because of Wei WuXian, those scars were going to be on his back forever.

Lan WangJi frowned and looked down at his empty bowl. "Uncle said you stayed by my side for two weeks," he said slowly. "They brought your meals in. You slept in a chair. He said you...took care of me." He glanced at the tray and then at Wei WuXian who was the one to look down this time.

"It wasn't a big deal," Wei WuXian said with a nervous laugh. He'd been prepared to thank Lan WangJi for all he'd done and leave as unobtrusively as he'd arrived on their wedding day. He hadn't expected Lan QiRen not to mention their conversation to Lan WangJi at all. "You were punished because of me—it was the least I could do."

Lan WangJi went silent again, and Wei WuXian felt like he'd said the wrong thing somehow.

"Um, Lan Zhan." He reached out but when he touched Lan WangJi's shoulder, he flinched and Wei WuXian quickly drew back. "Sorry, it's time to change your poultice," he said, waiting until Lan WangJi stood and went back to the bed.

Lan WangJi lay face down again, his movements still stiff and clumsy. His shoulders were tense as Wei WuXian took a cloth to wipe away the old medicine on his wounds and reapplied fresh poultice the way he had been doing the past two weeks.

By the time he was done, Lan WangJi's eyes had slid shut.

Wei WuXian watched him for a moment. Even before these two weeks, Lan WangJi always took off his forehead ribbon to sleep so Wei WuXian reached out to untie it for him now.

As soon as his fingers brushed the ribbon, though, Lan WangJi's eyes opened again and he grabbed Wei WuXian by the hand. Automatically, Wei WuXian's fingers wrapped around his in muscle memory, like sliding right back into the place his hand belonged.

"I—I thought you were asleep," Wei WuXian said, face heating up. "I was just going to take off your ribbon since it looks uncomfortable," he said. When Lan WangJi didn't let go of him, he thought he was really angry. "If you want to keep it on, it's fine. I'll just go."

"No," Lan WangJi said.

"You want me to take it off?" Wei WuXian stared at him.

"I want you to stay," Lan WangJi answered. He let go of Wei WuXian but moved to the side of the bed, clearly making room for him.

It had been two weeks since Wei WuXian last slept on a bed, two weeks since he'd slept beside Lan WangJi on one. Just this morning, he would have been grateful for one last night in the Jingshi, so he didn't think too much about the way his heart soared at the invitation as he got into bed beside Lan WangJi.

It wasn't like previous times they'd slept on the same bed. Wei WuXian was still fully dressed, Lan WangJi still half-naked with his wounds healing. The bed was smaller and less comfortable than the one they shared in the Jingshi, and he didn't dare get too close to Lan WangJi in case he hurt him again.

But as they lay looking at each other, Lan WangJi reached out that short distance between them and brushed the tender skin beneath Wei WuXian's eyes. "You've worked hard," he said.

Wei WuXian sighed, leaning into the touch. He reached up to take Lan WangJi's fingers where they hovered. It felt like something sliding into place. It felt nice, he thought, as his eyes drifted shut.

"Rest," Lan WangJi said.

It was the most peaceful sleep Wei WuXian had in two weeks.

Lan WangJi's back looked better the next morning as Wei WuXian helped him change his bandages again. Wei WuXian also felt better after a long night of sleep.

"What are these?"

Wei WuXian turned from straightening his robes to see Lan WangJi pointing to A-Yuan's two candies that were still left by the bed. He grinned. "Oh, A-Yuan brought those for you," he said. "His friend apparently told him it's medicine."

Another complicated look came over Lan WangJi's face.

"You don't have to eat them," Wei WuXian said, laughing, as he took the handkerchief to discard the old candy for him. "I just left them so I wouldn't forget to tell you. He'll be excited to see you're awake."

Lan WangJi's expression, if anything, became even more complex.

"What?" Wei WuXian asked. "You want to eat them? I wouldn't if I were you—A-Yuan was holding these in his bare hands. Who knows how dirty they are. Wen Qing will kill me if you get sick from eating bad candy right after she healed you."

"My uncle said...you are a good parent," Lan WangJi said after a moment.

Wei WuXian stared slack-jawed at Lan WangJi. "He said what?"

"He saw you taking care of A-Yuan," Lan WangJi said. "He said you make a good parent," he repeated.

"I—he—you—he knows A-Yuan isn't actually our child, right?" Wei WuXian finally settled on. In all his years knowing Lan QiRen, the old man had never praised him for anything—the last thing he expected was for him to approve of his parenting when A-Yuan wasn't even his child. "I mean, I know I joked around before, but he knows I can't give birth, right?" he asked more mischievously.

Lan WangJi shot him a look. "Of course."

Wei WuXian burst out laughing. "One of these days, I'm going to have to prank your uncle—do you think he'd believe me if I stuck some bedclothes under my robes and told him you got me pregnant?" He grinned at Lan WangJi. "Imagine his face if he thought he could have a couple more Lan Er-Geges around here," he said. His grin widened. "Or a couple more little Wei WuXians."

"Spare my uncle, please," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian laughed even harder.

Since they had nothing to do but wait for Wen Qing's test results, Wei WuXian asked Lan WangJi to choose what to do. And Lan WangJi, because he was himself, wanted to go to the cold springs since he hadn't done any cultivating in two weeks. Since the springs were good for healing, Wei WuXian didn't worry too much when Lan WangJi stripped down and entered the water, slowly submerging himself as he adjusted to the temperature.

The last time Wei WuXian had been in there, they had been fifteen, freshly disciplined as well, and he remembered being freezing cold as he tried to swim around and get closer to Lan WangJi. Although he had admired his skill, his talent, his good looks since they'd met, that was the first time Wei WuXian had felt a deep, genuine admiration for his character. He'd looked at Lan WangJi's bare, bruised back that day, wanting to get closer, but Lan WangJi had kept him at arms-length until Wei WuXian finally tired of teasing him and left.

Now, Wei WuXian watched, sitting at the edge of the springs. "I know the springs are good for healing injuries but I feel cold just looking at you, Lan Er-Gege," he said, smiling as he balanced his chin on his hand.

"Cold is good for cultivation," Lan WangJi answered.

Wei WuXian grinned. "I'm sure it is, but while you're in there, work on healing yourself too," he said. "Don't make us worry about you so much. Do you know how many herbal remedies Granny tried to make for you?" he said. "I don't even know where she got those ingredients and you definitely don't want to know," he told Lan WangJi. "Anyway, if your back still looks like this when she sees you again, even I can't save you from her feeding you snakes and lizards and whatever else she puts in those broths."

As he spoke, he allowed his eyes to roam as Lan WangJi turned and began walking toward the small waterfall at the far end of the springs. Experimentally, Wei WuXian dipped his hand into the water, wincing at how cold it was, and withdrew it again, immediately forgetting all thoughts of getting in with Lan WangJi.

When he looked up again, Lan WangJi was looking at him with an odd expression in his eyes, but he had also gone to stand beneath the waterfall so that the water would cascade over his back.

This man was really good, Wei WuXian thought. So good. He smiled as he watched Lan WangJi close his eyes, letting the cold water wash over his face. Back when they were classmates up until now, Lan WangJi's convictions and principles had always been admirable, helping anyone in need, being just and righteous. Even during those times Wei WuXian had found him unbearably strict, Lan WangJi had only ever acted out of his sense of doing what was right. But now, Lan WangJi had gone against the rules to help him. Wei WuXian couldn't say whether it was right or wrong—just that if given the choice, he too, would have chosen what Lan WangJi had chosen. He already had, he thought, as he remembered the golden core he'd given to Jiang Cheng while he himself turned his back on righteousness and walked down the path of demonic cultivation.

Somehow, just knowing that there was someone else who would choose the same thing—someone else on this same path as him—it made walking it a little less lonely. And if it was Lan Zhan, if it was the man he was already married to...

Lan WangJi had only been in the springs for an hour or so before a disciple came running to find them.

“Doctor Wen wants you to return to Apothecary Pavilion,” he said. “She says she has your final test results.”

Wei WuXian nodded. “We’ll come right away,” he said and waved to Lan WangJi. “Lan Zhan, Wen Qing wants to see us.”

Lan WangJi waded out of the springs and Wei WuXian was both surprised and pleased to see the long stitches on his back seemed much less red and swollen than before. “We’ll come back after we talk to her,” he said cheerfully. “Your back looks a lot better,” he said as he helped dry off Lan WangJi’s back and rebandage it before putting on his robe.

“Mm,” Lan WangJi agreed.

They walked back to Apothecary Pavilion together. Side by side, they didn’t walk slow or fast. Wei WuXian glanced at Lan WangJi every so often, wanting to speak but not sure how to begin this conversation.

In the end, they reached Apothecary Pavilion before he had decided how to bring it up.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said, touching his sleeve to stop him before they entered.

Lan WangJi turned. When their eyes met, Wei WuXian felt caught in the entirety of his attention. Lan WangJi’s pale eyes felt like they could stare right into his soul, and his words dried up in his throat.

“You’re here,” Wen Qing said. “Come in.”

Wei WuXian turned, quickly dropping his hand.

“You have finished the tests,” Lan WangJi said, turning his attention to her instead.

Wen Qing nodded, though she circled around him to look at his back. “How do you feel?” she asked.

“Better,” Lan WangJi said as he walked into the apothecary. Wei WuXian followed him, going over to the table Wen Qing had obviously been using from the stacks of papers and texts on it. Though there were a lot of them, they were neatly ordered unlike Wei WuXian’s usual workspaces. To one side lay the Purification Stone, still completely blackened. On the other lay the five texts Lan WangJi had copied.

Wen Qing lingered first at the doorway, and then occupied herself tidying already tidy texts at the table.

“The cold springs really work to help,” Wei WuXian said as he sat down beside Lan WangJi.

“That’s good,” Wen Qing said, sounding distracted. She adjusted her seat first forward, and then back again. She also had not given Wei WuXian a straight look since they came in, which was nothing like the bossy woman Wei WuXian was used to.

He was smart enough to know what it meant.

“Wen Qing-Jie,” he said. “Tell me. Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

Wen Qing chewed on her lip. Then she shut her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she was a doctor—serious and professional. “We’ll start at the beginning,” she said, her voice steady again. “With the golden core surgery.”

“I already know how that works,” Wei WuXian said.

“You don’t know all the details, and neither does Hanguang-Jun,” Wen Qing said. She glanced at Lan Wangji. “When Wei WuXian came to me and asked that I remove his golden core and transfer it to Jiang Cheng, it was an experimental procedure. Based on my studies, I originally thought he could be anesthetized for it, but then we realized the golden core could not be activated while he was unconscious, so he had to stay awake for the surgery.”

“You don’t have to tell him all the details, Wen Qing,” Wei WuXian said. He didn’t like remembering that time, and he didn’t want Lan Wangji to hear about it. “I already told him the basics.”

“It’s important for what I’m about to explain,” Wen Qing said and continued. “That was the first time I saw a golden core outside of a human body—maybe the first time anyone has ever seen it.” She paused. “During that surgery, I confirmed it—golden cores are intangible, but they are located where your heart is.” She gestured to the place where Wei WuXian still bore the scar of her surgery beneath his robes. “What I removed from you and transferred to Jiang Cheng looked like a glowing ball of pure light.”

Wei WuXian didn’t like recalling how much pain those couple of days had been, so he rarely thought about it. At her reminder, though, he involuntarily remembered the echo of the feeling, that though what she removed looked only like light, he’d felt weak and empty after in a way he knew wasn’t just from conscious surgery—like something fundamental inside him had been taken away.

Wen Qing paused and looked down at her notes. “Has either of you seen a beast core before?” she asked.

Lan Wangji and Wei WuXian both nodded. Wei WuXian could still remember the rough feel of the Tiangou’s core stone in his palm, heavier than something that size should warrant.

“Then you know the cores that condense inside beasts when they cultivate forms a stone inside of them,” she said. “The larger the beast and the longer it has had to cultivate, the larger the stone.”

“What does that have to do with the golden core?” Wei WuXian asked.

“The essence,” Wen Qing said. “Humans cultivate using spiritual energy that comes from within, so the golden core isn’t solid and completely compatible with our physical beings,” she said. “Non-humans, though, like beasts, cultivate using external energy. The external energy needs a place to gather, so the result is the congealed beast stone.”

Wei WuXian began to follow her explanation. “Demonic cultivation uses external resentful energy,” he said. “That’s how I’m able to cultivate without a golden core.”

Wen Qing nodded. "You've been using demonic cultivation for some time now, so, like a beast, a physical core has formed inside of you," she said. "A core made from condensed resentful energy."

"The animal corpses?" Lan Wangji said, looking at Wei WuXian who nodded.

"If my core is similar to a beast core, that might be how I was able to control them," he said. "And when I was able to fight off the Tiger Seal control over the corpses too."

"What animal corpses? What was controlled by the Yin Tiger Seal?" Wen Qing asked. "Why is this the first time I'm hearing about it?"

So Wei WuXian told her about how he'd accidentally controlled animal corpses two times now while under extreme duress.

When he was done, Wen Qing exhaled. "How do you get yourself in so much trouble?" she asked, shaking her head. "Well, that's all in line with your results, I suppose, but you should have told me earlier."

"Do you know what's going on with the Purification Stone then?" Wei WuXian asked.

Wen Qing sighed. "The stone is just reflecting your resentful energy," she said. "What matters is that with your cultivation level, the core in you has gotten strong to the point that you could control animal corpses, that you could control corpses under the Yin Tiger Seal, that you could corrupt the Purification Stone," she said. "This is the first time this has ever happened in a human being since you're the one who invented demonic cultivation," she said. "But with the tests I've been running, at this point, I have a good guess what will happen to you."

"What do you mean what's going to happen to me?" Wei WuXian asked. "If I keep cultivating, eventually, I can control the Yin Tiger Seal—hopefully sooner than later. I'm sure Jin GuangYao has it, and if Nie MingJue hasn't shown up yet, he'll get desperate enough to use it again soon."

"You don't understand. Listen to me." Wen Qing took a deep breath and began listing them off one by one. "First, we know that beasts, and those who cultivate using beast cores like the QingheNie Sect, are the most susceptible to qi deviation."

Lan Wangji had been on him about his change in temperament ever since he'd returned from the burial mounds years ago. Wei WuXian knew himself that he had grown more temperamental, but everyone knew demonic cultivation wasn't good for body or soul—so much resentful energy would make anyone irritable, but he'd never connected it to a temper like Nie MingJue's.

"Even the Nie clan only uses sabers made of beast cores—so you're even more susceptible to qi deviation than they are," Wen Qing said. "I should have seen it earlier."

"I didn't even know. How could you?" Wei WuXian said.

Wen Qing just held up a second finger. "Secondly, we know that only large, legendary beasts are able to cultivate and form these beast cores. Most likely, this is because the cores take up physical space and



are always formed in the stomach,” she said. “Smaller beasts die before they form cores because their stomachs are not large enough to both accommodate the cores and also continue to perform their function of digesting.” She paused and took a deep breath. Her knuckles, wrapped around some loose leafs of test results, had turned white.

She looked up at Wei WuXian. “But you—you’re not a beast. From the tests I’ve run, your core stone is located where a human golden core usually forms—in your heart.”

In that instant, looking at that expression on her face, Wei WuXian understood. He had, because of external energy cultivation, formed a stone core inside of his body. But since he was an ordinary human being of ordinary human being size, he, like those smaller animals, would never be able to sustain a core stone growing inside of himself.

He was dying.

“It will block the flow of blood,” Wei WuXian stated. “Or worse.” He wondered if it had anything to do with how he almost always felt cold now. He’d assumed it was because he didn’t have a golden core to circulate spiritual energy through his body, but apparently, it might be more than just that. “If the core is in my heart,” he said. “I have even less time than if it was in my stomach.”

“Surgery,” Lan WangJi said.

Wen Qing shook her head. “I thought of that but it won’t be possible. I could stop his flow of blood with spiritual energy, but the surgery would take days, and his body could not live without blood flow from his heart for so long. On top of that, if I were to cut into his actual heart, I don’t know what sort of damage that would do,” she said. “He only barely survived the original surgery, and even then, it was because the golden core wasn’t tangible so I didn’t have to do anything to his actual heart. The golden core took a long time to remove, but at least his physical body was fine.”

“How can he be saved?” Lan WangJi asked.

Wen Qing looked down at the table. “His core stone is powerful enough to corrupt the Purification Stone, which means it’s large. Probably about this size now.” She put her thumb and forefinger together about a nails-width apart. “Something like this could block any of your heart valves at any time.”

“You’re saying I could drop dead at any moment,” Wei WuXian said.

Wen Qing pressed her lips together but finally gave a short nod. “It’s only a matter of time. Even if that stone doesn’t block one of your valves, it will grow too big inside you soon, and the result will be the same.”

“How can he be saved?” Lan WangJi repeated.

When Wei WuXian looked at him, his hands had clenched into fists on his lap.

Months ago, when he had been out shopping and run into Wen Qing by chance, he could barely recognize her. From the prideful and experienced doctor he remembered her being, she’d become a

shadow of herself, thin and desperate as she cried and begged him to save her brother. That was the last time he'd seen the lost expression on her face that he was seeing again now.

Wen Qing bit her lip and shook her head. "I can't save him," she said finally. She shut her eyes. "Forgive me."

On the day Wei WuXian had conceived the idea to give his golden core to Jiang Cheng, he'd gone to Wen Qing and listened to her explanation of the procedure.

"You most likely will not survive this procedure," Wen Qing had told him. She had just been a doctor he was indebted to, who had saved their lives by hiding him and Jiang Cheng.

"If Uncle Jiang hadn't found me back then, I might not have survived on the streets long anyway," Wei WuXian had said. "If my death means Jiang Cheng gets his golden core back, then it's worth it."

He'd been lucky enough to survive once then. When he'd been caught by Wen Chao and thrown into the burial mounds, that was the second time he thought he'd die, and yet, he'd managed to learn demonic cultivation and survived yet again. Now, it looked like those choices had finally caught up with him and his luck had run out.

Wei WuXian shut his eyes and took a deep breath, felt the air fill his lungs, his heart beating a steady beat. In this warm weather, he didn't feel any different from usual. He let the air out of his lungs again, and opened his eyes.

"How long do I have?" he asked.

Wen Qing bit her lip. "Days, probably, with the way you say your power has been strengthening." She swallowed. "Maybe weeks if you don't cultivate at all. I have some medication that could slow your heart rate, maybe extend your life longer."

Wei WuXian smiled. "All right. Thanks for letting me know," he said.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Don't look at me like that, both of you," he said. "I should have already died years ago—if not from the surgery, then when I was tossed into the Burial Mounds. I've had years since then to live, so I'm already considered lucky."

Wen Qing looked down at the table. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

Wei WuXian sighed. "Why are you the one looking so upset?" he said and grinned. "I'm the one who should be comforted right now, but you're making me comfort you? You've done your best these last two weeks," he said and lowered his head. "Wen Qing-Jie, thank you."

"Wei WuXian, I—" Wen Qing seemed only more upset by it, but Wei WuXian got back to his feet.

“Well, if I haven’t got long to live, there are still some things I want to finish before then,” he said cheerfully. “Lan Zhan...” He looked at the man he called his husband. There were so many things he had wanted to say to him, but he supposed none of it mattered now.

He smiled.

“Lan Zhan, I’ve had two weeks to sit here and think about what happened at Koi Tower, and I have an idea.”

Notes:

thank you guys so much!!

Chapter 13: what do you want, wei ying?

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

Wei Wuxian smiled and extended a hand to Lan Wangji who looked like he wanted to stay and grill Wen Qing some more. “Lan Zhan, Wen Qing-Jie has tried her best. Don’t make it more difficult for her,” Wei Wuxian said. “Come on.” He gestured until finally Lan Wangji stood up though he didn’t take his proffered hand.

“How is your back?” Wei Wuxian asked once they were back outside in the noonday sun. “I forgot to have Wen Qing check it again.”

“That’s not important,” Lan Wangji said, clipped. He sounded almost angry.

“Of course it is,” Wei Wuxian said lightly as they walked down the white pebbled pathway. “You still have a long time to live, after all. You need to take care of yourself.”

“Wei Ying...” Lan Wangji turned to him, frowning.

“Lan Zhan, don’t look so serious. You should be relieved,” Wei Wuxian said. He smiled. “You won’t even have to annul the marriage. This troublesome person will be out of your life soon.”

“Do not joke,” Lan Wangji said in such a serious tone that Wei Wuxian felt a little shiver run down his spine.

“All right, all right, I know you care about me,” Wei Wuxian said, a little embarrassed to be saying it out loud. “But that’s why.” He didn’t have long to live anyway—did pride really matter? He stopped walking and reached out to take Lan Wangji’s hand, so much warmer than his own. He took a deep breath and smiled at him. “That’s why you have to take care of yourself after I’m gone,” he said. He met Lan Wangji’s eyes.

When he finally loosened his grip, Lan WangJi held his fingers tighter, refusing to let go. “Wei Ying.” His mouth opened but he seemed to have a difficult time deciding what to say.

Just then, a voice spoke up from behind Lan WangJi. “Young Master Wei, WangJi, are you all right? Uncle told me you were disciplined for you copying texts from the Sect Alliance Library.”

“Sect Leader Lan, when did you return?” Wei WuXian asked, dropping Lan WangJi’s hand and turning to his elder brother. He felt his face heat up, wondering if Lan XiChen had heard that whole exchange.

“Just last night,” Lan XiChen answered. “WangJi, how are you feeling?” he asked. “I should not have let you go.”

“Brother,” Lan WangJi said.

Although Lan WangJi’s face changed only minisculely, Lan XiChen suddenly frowned. “WangJi, what’s wrong?” he asked. “What happened?” He glanced at Wei WuXian. “Did something else happen?”

Wei WuXian quickly shook his head. “Everything is fine,” he said, glancing at Lan WangJi. He didn’t want to make a big deal out of something no one could help. “Wen Qing just discovered a few things about my demonic cultivation,” he said. “She can tell you later, but more importantly, you’ve been at Koi Tower for two weeks,” he said, changing the subject. “Has Chifeng-Zun returned?”

Lan XiChen looked like he wanted to ask more but stopped at the question. “No, but HuaiSang received a letter from him two days ago,” he said. “MingJue-xiong apparently experienced the beginnings of a qi deviation which must have been what you witnessed,” he said. “So he immediately went into secluded meditation to suppress it. He wasn’t able to let us know ahead of time, but he spent a few days at Golden Cloud Mountain to calm his spirit.”

“Then where is he now?” Wei WuXian asked. He was truly impressed with Jin GuangYao’s deception—there was even enough of the truth in the story to explain what Wei WuXian saw at least in part.

“The letter said his condition is still not good so he returned to Qinghe, and will be spending a few weeks in secluded meditation so not to disturb him,” Lan XiChen answered. “All the QingheNie cultivators also left Koi Tower for the Unclean Realm yesterday.”

“And you believe it?” Wei WuXian was glad for the distraction. “If Lianfang-Zun is really so innocent, then why did he not mention it when I accused him?” he asked. “Even if you believe that Nie MingJue really left in such a hurry that he didn’t tell anyone, wouldn’t people have at least witnessed him leaving? Koi Tower has been full of security since the attack—you can’t believe that not one person witnessed him leaving?”

No matter how well Jin GuangYao lied, he couldn’t make another Nie MingJue magically appear. Lan XiChen was far from foolish, and Wei WuXian could tell from the small frown on his face that he’d also been noticing the holes left in that story. “HuaiSang has gone to check on his brother—I expect correspondence from him soon,” Lan XiChen said.

“Sect Leader Lan, I’ve been thinking about the events at Koi Tower and I think I know what happened,” Wei WuXian said. It should not take long for Nie HuaiSang to check whether Nie MingJue really had

returned to the Unclean Realm, but Wei WuXian also might not have much time left. “I know it’s a sect secret, but can you play me the Sound of Clarity?”

Lan XiChen gave him a mildly curious smile. “Young Master Wei, have you not married WangJi?” he said. “You are a part of our sect now. I would be happy to play the song for you, but may I know the reason?”

“I know you don’t want to suspect Jin GuangYao,” Wei WuXian said. “But it’s what I saw. That song is supposed to calm Sect Leader Nie’s spirit, right?” he said. “But instead, after he heard it, he went into qi deviation. If there is a song that can calm his spirit, then there may be one that leads to qi deviation as well.”

Lan XiChen frowned. “But I have played the Sound of Clarity for MingJue-Xiong before,” he said. “He knows what it sounds like—he would recognize it if A-Yao played him a different song.”

“Then maybe Jin GuangYao only changed the song you taught him,” Wei WuXian said. “Everyone knows Lianfang-Zun is clever and has a perfect memory,” he said. “He could have slipped something into the song.”

“Come with me,” Lan XiChen said finally.

Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi followed him to the Hanshi. Wei WuXian was acutely aware of Lan WangJi’s presence beside him, but he didn’t say anything to Wei WuXian, and for once, Wei WuXian was intensely grateful for his silence. Lan XiChen gestured for them to sit at the table where he took out his own guqin.

“This is the Sound of Clarity,” he said and began to play.

The song sounded the same as the one Wei WuXian had heard twice now. If he hadn’t been listening for it, he never would have noticed the one place where the song was different—just one phrase of the song had been changed, and so masterfully that Wei WuXian had to ask Lan XiChen to play the song again to confirm it.

“This is the one I heard,” Wei WuXian said, taking out his own flute. Then he played the entire melody that he had heard Jin GuangYao perform. “Did you hear it?”

“Please play that part at the end of the fourth phrase,” Lan XiChen requested. “WangJi, did you hear it?”

Lan WangJi, who had up until now, been sitting silently next to Wei WuXian, frowned. “I apologize, I was not paying attention.”

Wei WuXian turned to him, surprised. This was the first time he’d ever seen Lan WangJi not paying full attention to the task at hand. Lan WangJi’s hands were clenched in his lap, but as Wei WuXian reached out, not sure what exactly to say or do, he repeated himself. “Play it again, please.” He took a deep, shuddering breath. “I will listen.”

Wei WuXian bit his lip and withdrew his hand. He raised the flute to his lips again and played the song from beginning to end.

This time, Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi exchanged a glance. “The last phrase is incorrect,” Lan WangJi said, apparently back to his usual self again.

Wei WuXian nodded. “Lianfang-Zun has a perfect memory. He even remembers details about people he has only met once, and Sect Leader Lan must have taught him this song more than once.”

Lan XiChen slowly nodded.

“There is no way he would have misremembered then,” Wei WuXian said. He looked between the two brothers. “My guess is that that changed phrase does something to agitate the spirit. Since it’s such a small change in the Sound of Clarity, it must have taken a long time for it build up effect in Chifeng-Zun.”

Lan XiChen shook his head. “Jin GuangYao is clever, yes, and his mother taught him music since a young age,” he said. “But he didn’t become a cultivator until later in life, so he would not be skilled enough to write such a subtle change as this one in guqin cultivation technique and have the effect you claim it did.” He frowned. “It’s possible that he just misremembered,” he said but he seemed to be trying to convince himself. “If it really has such an effect, it could be a coincidence.”

Everyone knew Jin GuangYao, born Meng Yao, was the son of Meng Shi, a famous courtesan in the Yunmeng area. She had been well known for her beauty and charm, so Jin GuangShan insisted on making a visit to her when he passed through the area years ago. When she gave birth to Meng Yao, she had high hopes being brought into the Jin clan and spent all her money on purchasing cultivation manuals to educate her son. But although he had been smart and clever, most manuals that circulated in regular society were fraudulent and useless. It hadn’t been until Meng Yao joined Nie MingJue’s forces that he’d really begun to learn to cultivate. It would have been even later than that when Lan XiChen was able to teach him the Sound of Clarity. Even infusing pieces of music with spiritual energy took years of practice to learn, so that Jin GuangYao had learned the one song was already impressive enough. To learn the the GusuLan music technique so well as to compose with it and with such a dark purpose would be difficult even for Lan XiChen or Lan WangJi.

“The Room of Forbidden Books,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian caught on immediately. “That’s right! He didn’t have to compose it himself—if there already exists music that can do such a thing, Jin GuangYao could have just copied it,” he said. “Copying a piece is far easier than composing one.”

“We will search,” Lan WangJi said, and the three of them headed for Library Pavilion, bringing the guqin with them to test the music they might find.

Although Wei WuXian had spent a lot of accumulated time in the library, he had never seen the secret chamber beneath the floor that Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen led him to now. At an empty corner of the library, Lan XiChen lifted a floor panel and stairs descended down into a dark room.

Lan WangJi lit the lanterns that had been hung around the chamber, and Wei WuXian saw a large chamber filled from floor to ceiling with shelves of old texts.

He let out whistle as he looked around. “GusuLan sure takes its books seriously—even your secret library is huge,” he said.

"Brother was able to save many of these books after the Cloud Recesses were burned," Lan WangJi said. "Jin GuangYao hid him for some time."

"I trust A-Yao," Lan XiChen said. "It did him no good to hide me back then—if not for him, I might have been caught by the QishanWen Sect," he said. "He even washed my clothes for me because I would accidentally rip them. He would never harm me—even less MingJue-xiong," he said. "If not for him, A-Yao never would have had a chance to return to LanlingJin."

Wei WuXian could understand being reluctant to doubt a person he trusted, but he had seen it with his own eyes. "Sometimes," he began. "Sometimes people change," he said. "The person you knew back then had nothing to lose—no power, no fame, no riches—now, he has everything to lose."

"Perhaps," was all Lan XiChen said, and he sounded sad.

The three of them began to search through the stacks, pulling out any musical notations they could find. Once they had gathered all the books to a table, they began the tedious task of reading through them. After a few hours, Wei WuXian was too cold in the basement and restless as well, so he got up from the table and began to wander around. He bounced up and down as he wandered from shelf to shelf, looking around curiously at the secret GusuLan library, occasionally pulling out an interesting-looking book to flip through before continuing his way.

He left the Room of Forbidden Books sometime in the afternoon to get a servant to bring them an early dinner since he and Lan WangJi hadn't eaten since breakfast, and then sent someone else to Apothecary Pavilion for fresh ointment and bandages for Lan WangJi since he didn't want to go himself in case he ran into Wen Qing again.

"Food is not allowed here," Lan WangJi said when Wei WuXian returned with a tray of food enough for three.

"No one's here to see us and you haven't eaten all day," Wei WuXian said, pushing aside a few books to make room for the tray. "You're still recovering."

"We will eat upstairs," Lan WangJi said.

"The food's already here," Wei WuXian said. "It's fine just this once. I'm sure your brother wants to find this score as soon as he can too for the sake of Nie MingJue."

Lan XiChen put down the book he had been skimming. "Young Master Wei is right," he said. "Let's take a break and eat. You're still healing."

Wei WuXian smiled and tugged on Lan WangJi's robe. "Take off your robe before you eat. I can change the bandages for you first."

Lan WangJi obediently did as told, stripping himself of his robes until his back was bare again, and the two brothers took a quick break to eat while Wei WuXian changed Lan WangJi's bandages for him.

"How are the wounds?" Lan XiChen asked as Wei WuXian worked.

"A lot better after the cold springs, actually," Wei WuXian said, pleased. "You should go again later when we're done here," he said to Lan WangJi. "A few more hours in there and you might not need the bandages at all."

"Mm," Lan WangJi answered. "Wei Ying, eat first."

"No speech while eating," Wei WuXian said, imitating Lan WangJi's tone of voice and grinned at him when Lan WangJi shot him a disgruntled look. "Your rules," he pointed out. "Anyway I'm almost done."

After the brothers finished eating, Wei WuXian ate himself while flipping through yet another stack of books. This time, he tired more quickly than before, and took a break to bring the food tray back upstairs to hand to a servant. Outside, it was already dark, he saw. He walked a few circles around the library to wake himself up before returning to the Room of Forbidden Books.

"Wei Ying, if you are tired, go to rest," Lan WangJi said when Wei WuXian sat down beside him again, yawning.

Wei WuXian shook his head. "We're not done yet," he said, ignoring the fact that he hadn't been helping much in the last few hours anyway.

Lan WangJi frowned. "Are you feeling all right?" he asked.

Wei WuXian smiled. "Yes, of course. You don't have to worry so much," he said, but gave in when he felt another yawn coming. "All right, I'll just take a short nap and keep searching," he said. "Wake me in an hour," he told Lan WangJi, pillowing his head on his arms and shut his eyes.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sleeping when he heard the murmur of quiet, low voices.

Although it had been cool in the basement earlier, he felt warm now with something heavy draped over him. It smelled like sandalwood, a calming scent that made Wei WuXian want to sleep again except for the voices disturbing him.

"Is Jiang WanYin still at Koi Tower?" Lan WangJi asked.

The mention of his brother's name made Wei WuXian a little more aware, though he was so comfortable he didn't want to move. He realized that sometime during his sleep, he'd either moved or else been moved so he was now laid on his back with his head pillowed on something firm and warm.

When he cracked his eyes open, he could make out Lan WangJi's form above him and realized he'd been placed on Lan WangJi's thigh, though he hadn't noticed Wei WuXian was awake.

"He is," Lan XiChen answered. "He said he intends to help his sister transition, but the other YunmengJiang cultivators have stayed as well, so I think he's waiting until ZiXuan-xiong is fully recovered."

"If we find the song, do you intend to return to Koi Tower?" Lan WangJi asked.



"If it truly was A-Yao, I will speak to him," Lan XiChen said.

Lan WangJi fell silent for so long that Wei WuXian began drifting to sleep when he spoke. "When you go to Koi Tower, please tell Jiang WanYin that he and Young Madam Jin must come see Wei Ying," he said.

Wei WuXian heard the pages Lan XiChen had been flipping pause. "WangJi, what has happened with Young Master Wei?" he asked.

If Lan WangJi told Lan XiChen about Wei WuXian's condition now, he was sure Lan XiChen would stop searching and they didn't have time for delays. On impulse, Wei WuXian whined and stirred, turning onto his side to bury his face against Lan WangJi's stomach and making the robe fall off his body. The shiver from the cold wasn't all an act, and worked to distract Lan WangJi.

"Wei Ying? Nightmare?" Lan WangJi asked, unbearably gentle. He felt Lan WangJi adjust the robe over his shoulders again.

Wei WuXian whined again, wondering how much Lan WangJi would let him get away with, and was surprised when he felt a hand stroke down his hair, soothing. It felt familiar, in the outer edges of his memory, like he'd been in such a position, like he'd experienced this before. But that time, he'd been too warm and his whole body hurt, and instead of sandalwood, everything had stunk of blood. But the voice murmuring to him had been the same, and the hand pressed to his brow was the same.

"Xuanwu..." he whispered.

He felt the hand stroking his hair pause. He recalled a vague dream back then when he'd wanted to lie in Lan WangJi's lap, partially because the stone he was leaning against was hard, but mostly just to be near someone. The real Lan WangJi had refused, of course, but in his dream, Lan WangJi had put Wei WuXian's head on his lap and when Wei WuXian told him where it hurt, he had tried to take care of him as much as he could. Wei WuXian remembered thinking, in the dream, how nice it would be if Lan WangJi would take care of him in real life. He drifted to sleep again thinking that, in some ways, it seemed his dream had come true after all.

The next time he stirred into consciousness, it was because Lan WangJi was helping him sit up. "Wei Ying, wake up," he said. "I have found the song."

Wei WuXian stared at him, disoriented, until the words sank in. Then he straightened up. Lan WangJi's arm immediately slid away from him, and Lan WangJi's outer robe slid off his shoulders, exposing him to the cold air. "Where?" Wei WuXian asked, pulling the robe back up over his shoulders and moving closer to Lan WangJi, a little disappointed when Lan WangJi didn't put his arm back around his waist.

Instead, Lan WangJi put a book in between him and Lan XiChen.

"There is a page missing," Lan WangJi said.

When Wei WuXian flipped through the book, he found it was true, though whoever had torn it out had done it so carefully that unless someone were looking specifically for it, it was hardly noticeable.

Wei WuXian pulled out his flute and played first one page, which sounded similar to the phrase in the Sound of Clarity, though not exactly the same. The second page was an entire different song. In other words, the page that had been removed most likely contained the actual phrase in the Sound of Clarity, though, with the page gone, they could not prove it—which was the whole point.

He flipped the book to look at the cover. “The Collection of Turmoil?” Wei WuXian read the title out loud.

“It’s a score from Dongying,” Lan XiChen said, his expression complicated. “According to the inscription inside, these songs were collected by one of GusuLan Sect’s cultivators when he traveled by Dongying. It says that the songs in this book, if played with spiritual energy, can harm others—everything from shutting down the senses to agitating the spirit. If you have enough spiritual power, you could even take a life...”

“Then this is the one,” Wei WuXian said, excited. “Jin GuangYao’s spiritual energy is low so he wouldn’t have been able to kill with this music—it would have been too obvious if he’d done it that way, anyway, but if he put in just that phrase into the Sound of Clarity and played it for Chifeng-Zun over months, wouldn’t it have acted like a slow poison?”

“It is possible,” Lan XiChen said slowly. “But we do not have the page, so we cannot determine if it really is this song.”

That was, of course, Jin GuangYao’s entire reason for removing it. In case anyone discovered the problem in the song, they would never be able to prove it with the actual score missing.

Wei WuXian sighed. Even now, Lan XiChen didn’t want to doubt Jin GuangYao. “Chifeng-Zun is missing, we’ve found that phrase that Jin GuangYao must have woven into the Sound of Clarity. If these two pieces of proof still won’t convince you, then I have a third.”

“A third?” Lan XiChen asked.

Wei WuXian nodded. “When I saw Chifeng-Zun go into qi deviation, he attacked Lianfang-Zun and knocked his sword away,” he said. “Lianfang-Zun only had the guqin nearby so he played a second song that took away Chifeng-Zun’s spiritual energy.”

“Impossible,” Lan XiChen said. “I’ve never heard of such a song.”

“What’s impossible is only what hasn’t succeeded yet,” Wei WuXian said. “If it’s possible to create a song that causes qi deviation, it should also be possible to compose a song that cuts off spiritual energy.” He shrugged. “If you don’t believe me, I remember that one too and I can play it for you.”

So saying, he took the flute from his waist again. “I’ll play it once and then one of you will have to play it with spiritual energy,” he said. Since he had no golden core himself, the song played by him, would only be a song.

Then he played that second song he had heard. It sounded like one of GusuLan’s musical attack songs that warded away corpses, if the performer were making mistakes everywhere. Wei WuXian had studied

music long enough to know a proper melody when he heard it, and this one was anything but pleasing to the ear.

Clearly, the brothers felt the same way because both of them grimaced any time a particularly jarring note came into the song.

After he finished, Lan XiChen nodded. "WangJi, no need for us both to test it. Why don't you go upstairs?" he suggested.

"Brother..." Lan WangJi said.

"I will be fine," Lan XiChen said with a smile.

Lan WangJi finally nodded and went back up the stairs. Once the door had shut, Lan XiChen put his hands on the guqin. "Then, I will play it now," he said.

As Wei WuXian had demonstrated on his flute, Lan XiChen strummed the notes on his guqin. On that instrument, it sounded even more similar to one of Lan WangJi's guqin attack songs. Wei WuXian could feel the spiritual power that came with each note—Lan XiChen truly was a strong cultivator.

He had played only about half the song when his fingers stilled on the strings. Wei WuXian felt no different, but Lan XiChen was staring stunned at the instrument.

"How is it?" Wei WuXian asked.

To his surprise, the door opened from above and Lan WangJi came back down.

"Qi has been suppressed," Lan WangJi said.

"You could hear it from outside?" Wei WuXian asked.

Lan WangJi shook his head. "Very little, but I could feel it," he answered. Spiritual energy, like sound, could be contained with enough distance and interference. But again, like sound, if the distance wasn't long enough or the walls thick enough, spiritual energy as strong as Lan XiChen's could naturally still be felt though it would have a decreased effect. "I may be able to force my meridians open since the suppression is weak."

"No don't. You might hurt yourself," Wei WuXian said quickly. "What about Sect Leader Lan?" he asked. "Your brother only played half the song," he told Lan WangJi. "But if it already worked on you even with a door between us."

Lan XiChen had been staring down at his hands. "How is this possible?" he whispered. It was probably the first time either of them had ever been without spiritual energy, Wei WuXian thought, and he knew how it felt to be powerless.

"What about you?" Lan WangJi asked, looking at Wei WuXian who shrugged.

"No effect on me," he said cheerfully. "See? Demonic cultivation still has its uses," he said. "That's probably why it didn't affect me in paperman form either—can you imagine if my resentful energy had been suppressed then?" He laughed. "Jin GuangYao would have killed me for sure."

"Wei Ying—"

"It turned out fine," Wei WuXian said and turned to Lan XiChen. "Do you believe me now, Sect Leader Lan?" he asked.

Lan XiChen turned to look at him. The smile on his face was sad. "I have no choice," he said. "But until I have solid proof, I cannot act." He held up a hand to stop him when Wei WuXian began to protest. "All of these things together are concerning," he said. "But Jin GuangYao has a silver tongue—until I have undeniable evidence, he will try to talk his way out of it." He sighed. "And I will want to believe him."

"We can help you," Wei WuXian offered. "If we return to Koi Tower and find the Yin Tiger Seal, won't that be proof enough?"

Lan XiChen shook his head. "If you return right now, he may try to accuse you," he said. "Stay here and take care of my brother," he said. "Leave this to me."

Wei WuXian suppressed the impatience and nodded. "All right. Then we'll leave the rest to you," he said, getting to his feet and stretching. He gave Lan WangJi's robe back to him. "Lan Zhan, shall we go?"

Outside, the sun was just rising in the sky. Lan WangJi had let him sleep through the night, Wei WuXian realized, as he and Lan XiChen worked. He smiled, moving a little closer to Lan WangJi.

"Lan Zhan, do you want to eat first or sleep first?" Wei WuXian asked as they walked down the pathway.

Lan WangJi didn't answer, only walking silently beside him.

"Come on—are you more hungry or tired? If you want, you can go sleep and I'll ask someone to bring food," Wei WuXian said. "They must be serving breakfast now—everyone here wakes up so early."

"Mm," Lan WangJi said which wasn't an answer at all. He only continued to walk, quiet, even quieter than usual for Lan WangJi, which was hard to do.

"Lan Zhan, stop looking like your wife died," Wei WuXian said, grinning as he nudged him with his elbow. "I'm not dead yet."

If possible, Lan WangJi looked even more glum.

"All right, all right, I'll stop joking," Wei WuXian said, keeping his tone light. "Really, though, it's not like there's anything we can do about this, right? At least your brother believes us now." He smiled. "The Wen family is safe here. Jiang Cheng is doing well as sect leader. Once things are taken care of at Koi Tower and my shijie is safe, I can go in peace."

He was about to say more when Lan WangJi stopped walking. Wei WuXian turned to him, a question on his lips, when Lan WangJi suddenly spoke.

“What do you want?” he asked. In the early morning sun, Lan WangJi stopped on the white stone path and turned to Wei WuXian, looking intently at him. In the sunlight, his eyes shone gold. “Wei Ying, what do you want?”

Wei WuXian stared at him, the rest of his words dying on his lips.

It was a question he had never heard before in his life. Wei WuXian’s earliest childhood memories were dim. After his parents died, he’d had no choice but to live on the streets and fight stray dogs for scraps of food. After being adopted into the Jiang family, they’d taken him in and taught him cultivation, though he’d never had a real decision to make when the alternative was to stay a street urchin. After he’d learned demonic cultivation, he’d naturally joined the Sunshot Campaign, reigning terror down on the QishanWen Sect and received the envy or criticism of cultivators everywhere, though not one person asked if he’d ever wanted to cultivate this way. When things had gone bad and he’d escaped to the burial mounds with the Wen family, they’d needed him, giving him no choice but to help. After Jiang Cheng had made this arrangement with Gusulan, it had been for him, to keep him safe. But no one had ever asked him this question—what he, Wei Ying, wanted.

Wei WuXian bit his lip and looked away, smiling. “Goodness, Lan Zhan, if you said that to a girl, she’d fall at your feet,” he said.

“I’m saying it to you,” Lan WangJi said, undeterred. “Name anything, and I’ll give it to you.”

Wei WuXian felt his face heating up. He took a deep breath and smiled as he began walking again, turning the question over in his mind. In his short lifetime, he’d already seen a lot, experienced too much—he used to be one of the most promising young cultivators before he’d lost his golden core, then he’d become arguably the strongest cultivator in the world with demonic cultivation. He’d had an exciting life, money, fame, the attention of girls everywhere he went.

“I guess I’d just like to live normally for once,” he said after a moment. “You know, I’ve never really had a chance to before.” He glanced over at his companion. “Don’t you think it might be nice? To retire and live as an ordinary person for awhile? Have a nice family, get a little cottage somewhere, tend the fields, weave clothes, go to the market and bargain for deals.”

“Is that what you want?” Lan WangJi asked.

Wei WuXian laughed. “You’d really give it to me if I asked for it?”

“I would,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian laughed harder, making Lan WangJi frown. “Good Lan Zhan, you really would keep every promise,” he said. “Don’t worry, I won’t make you give up cultivating,” he said and tilted his head. “How about you just take me to a lotus pond?” he said. “It’s been awhile since I got to go.”

“Mm.” Lan WangJi nodded and before Wei WuXian knew it, he felt a sudden burst of spiritual energy and he was being lifted up onto Lan WangJi’s sword and they were flying out of the Cloud Recesses.

“Lan Zhan! That was dangerous—what if you injured yourself?” Wei WuXian said, grabbing onto Lan WangJi’s shoulder, surprised at the suddenness.

Lan WangJi raised an eyebrow. “Qi suppression was weak,” he said. “And you want to go to the lotus pond.”

“Now?” Wei WuXian asked.

Lan WangJi glanced at him. “Is that not what you meant?” he asked mildly as they continued to fly.

Wei WuXian stared back at him and laughed. “Who knew Lan Er-Gege could be so impulsive?” Everything about this was reckless and irresponsible. Lan WangJi was still healing, they should really rest and sleep and wait and see what Lan XiChen would find, but all he wanted—all he truly wanted was to go with Lan WangJi right now. “All right.” He smiled and held on a little tighter. “Now it is.”

Notes:

not-a-date date chapter next!!

Chapter 14: i am lan zhan's first wife

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

#### Chapter Text

When they arrived in Caiyi Town, the hustle and bustle of an ordinary market day had already begun. Farmers and merchants had long set up the boats and stands that lined the canals of the city with colorful wares. Restaurants and shops had opened, and salespeople were calling out their bargains to any passing person willing to listen. Kids crowded by candy stands, watching as artisans molded sugar into amber dragons and tigers and phoenixes.

It had only been a few months ago when Wei WuXian had snuck out of the Cloud Recesses, but it felt like ages ago. Back then, he would never have imagined Lan WangJi taking him here—now he couldn’t imagine anyone he’d rather be with.

Wei WuXian laughed. “Let’s rent a boat, Lan Zhan!” Thick-facedly, he tugged on Lan WangJi’s elbow and pulled him to one of the vendors where Lan WangJi paid for a small canopied boat that could be pushed along the waterways with a paddle.

Although Lan WangJi hardly looked the part of a servant, he took the paddle and stood at the helm of the boat. Wei WuXian basked in the attention of passers-by who stared at Lan WangJi’s pristine white clothes and jade-like face—even for a GusuLan disciple, Lan WangJi was on another level. But since he seemed happy slowly steering the small wooden craft, Wei WuXian took full advantage and peered into the merchant boats floating alongside them or the stalls by the edge of the canals.

“Young masters, how about some Emperor’s Smile?” asked a man on one of the boats they passed. He gestured to the jars stacked on his own vessel. “Finest liquor in Gusu.”

Wei WuXian glanced hopefully at Lan WangJi and was almost shocked silent when he really did take out a small, intricate-looking pouch. “Here,” he said, handing it to Wei WuXian. “Buy anything you want.”

“Really?” Wei WuXian said, staring wide-eyed at it. From the weight of the pouch, there was more than just a little money in it.

“Mm,” Lan WangJi said.

“Even Emperor’s Smile? You’re really not going to stop me?” Wei WuXian asked, staring between Lan WangJi and the tempting earthen jars of liquor.

Lan WangJi stared impassively back at him. “Would you like me to stop you?”

“No!” Wei WuXian said quickly. “No take backs! Since Lan Er-Gege is so generous today, three jars please,” he said to the man, happily handing over the money in exchange for the jars.

He set the jars down at the bottom of the boat and immediately peeled off the paper on one of them. “Thanks, Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said cheerfully, toasting him. “I won’t offer you any right now—last time you were drunk, you were so forward.” He grinned when Lan WangJi stalled the boat. “Hm, why did you stop moving?”

Lan WangJi swallowed. Wei WuXian wondered if it was just his imagination or if Lan WangJi’s earlobes had turned a bit pink under the sun. “What did I do?” he asked finally.

So much had happened at Koi Tower after that banquet, that Wei WuXian had completely forgotten about the prelude to that night until now.

“Do?” Wei WuXian asked. “To me, you mean?” He drank from the Emperor’s Smile to draw out the suspense. Lan WangJi actually looked impatient now, and the expression tickled that part of Wei WuXian that had always liked teasing a response from him. He suppressed a delighted grin and continued the charade.

“You were so rough,” Wei WuXian said, pouting. “Even though I took you back to our room, you kept holding onto me.”

Lan WangJi seemed to go paler. “I...”

“You only let me go so I could take off my clothes.” He eyed Lan WangJi as though Wei WuXian were the injured party. “Who knew Lan Er-Gege could be such a pervert.”

“You—”

Wei WuXian burst out laughing. “Just kidding, just kidding,” he said. “We just went back to the room and you wouldn’t let me go back to the banquet. I didn’t want to sleep with all my outer robes on, although you really didn’t want to let me go except to take them off,” he said and grinned. “You really can’t hold

your liquor, Second Master Lan,” he teased. “So now these three are all for me.” He gestured to the Emperor’s Smile.

Lan WangJi continued to stand, looking as though he wanted to ask more.

“All right, stop looking at me like that, I’ll stop teasing you,” Wei WuXian said, still amused. “Lan Zhan, let’s go over to that boat. I want to see.” He pointed out another merchant’s boat.

Lan WangJi didn’t look satisfied, but at Wei WuXian’s prompting, he began guiding their boat along again. Wei WuXian happily peered into boats, shopping and bargaining to his heart’s content.

“Look at these ribbons—they’re so thin and you’re selling them for thirty wen?” Wei WuXian demanded, inspecting the red cloth he was holding in his hand. It had caught his eye because of the pattern of golden clouds embroidered on it similar to the GusuLan cloud pattern, maybe even copied from them since GusuLan had one of the most handsomely designed uniforms amongst all the cultivation sects. “Look, these threads are even loose! This isn’t worth more than five wen at most!”

“Five? They’re worth forty-five—it’s a bargain I’m selling them at thirty,” the old woman said.

“Make it cheaper,” Wei WuXian bargained. He didn’t even particularly want or need any red ribbon, but haggling was fun and he hadn’t done it in awhile.

“If you want it, buy it,” Lan WangJi said, apparently both unused to and a little uncomfortable with it.

“Shh, Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian shushed him. “Rich people don’t understand at all.” He turned his attention back to the old woman. “Come on, can’t you see this cloth is too thin! You can see right through it—what good is it going to be for anything other than a string?” he demanded, pressing his fingers up against the ribbon. “Fifteen wen for this length!” he bargained.

“Are you blind, young master? This is clearly good quality! Look at the embroidery on it—I only sell high class goods,” the old woman said, just as stubborn. “Perfect for the young master’s wife!”

Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow and grinned at Lan WangJi. “What do you think, wife? Want one?”

“Stop playing, Wei Ying,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian laughed. “Eighteen wen,” he haggled.

Lan WangJi, apparently tired of the bargaining, brushed aside Wei WuXian and handed the woman the full amount. The old woman beamed. “This young master has good taste,” she said. “It’s a beautiful ribbon for a high class lady.”

Wei WuXian sighed, looking down at the scrap of red ribbon in his hand. “I could have gotten a way better price for that,” he said. “Just because you have money, doesn’t mean you should waste it, Lan Zhan. When I’m gone, you better marry someone better at managing the books than you are.”

Lan WangJi frowned.



Wei WuXian began to put the ribbon down on the bench beside him when a gust of wind started up and forced him to grab it again. “Well, since you bought it, maybe we can give it to Wen Qing. Do you think she’ll get mad that I spent so much money on a hairpiece?” Wei WuXian wondered out loud. “She used to get so mad if I brought home anything other than groceries.”

“It’s yours,” Lan WangJi said. “Do as you wish.”

Wei WuXian glanced at him. “Hm, what if I wanted to give it to you then?” he asked and moved closer to Lan WangJi. “What if I wanted you to replace this—” He tapped on Lan WangJi’s white forehead ribbon. “With this?” He held up the red ribbon with a grin. “It even has clouds embroidered on it—it really matches yours, don’t you think?” he said. “If we had gotten married the traditional way, would you have switched out your white ribbon for a red one?” he asked. “White is bad luck on a wedding day, after all.”

When Lan WangJi didn’t answer, Wei WuXian continued, saying whatever nonsense came to mind. “All right, I’ve decided to give this to you,” he said cheerfully. “When you get married someday for real, you can wear it! Let it be the gift of your former wife—no, your first wife—to your future wife!”

Though just a moment ago, he’d been joking around, all of a sudden, he felt his throat start to lock up. He swallowed it down and forced himself to continue speaking, keeping his tone as light as he could without it wobbling. “Because even after I’m gone, I’m still Lan Zhan’s first wife—you’re not allowed to forget it, all right?” He thrust the ribbon into Lan WangJi’s hand.

Lan WangJi grabbed his wrist before Wei WuXian could draw away. “I will not marry again,” he said suddenly.

Wei WuXian froze. Surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the market around them, the sun high in the sky, the two of them stood beneath the canopy of their little boat. Wei WuXian gave a nervous laugh. “What are you talking about? Of course you have to marry again,” he said. “Hanguang-Jun has to have the most amazing wedding—celebrations like GusuLan has never seen before,” he said. “You’ll have the most beautiful bride who you’ll love this time,” he said. “The whole cultivation world will come to celebrate your union. Even the Cloud Recesses will have to be decorated, of course—red for once! Ah, the Jingshi will also have to be decorated properly this time,” he said. “Not like our wedding night. And there will be a feast—a real banquet with good food and Emperor’s Smile—although you probably shouldn’t drink very much or you might scare off your new bride.”

He could see it in his mind’s eye as he described it—Lan WangJi dressed all in red standing beside an equally beautiful woman. She’d have to be someone who would do well at GusuLan, maybe even one of the GusuLan women cultivators—a strong one, of course, to match the Second Jade of Lan. She would be someone quiet and demure, someone who Lan QiRen would approve of and eagerly adopt into the family registry. She’d be smart, talented, skilled in cooking and weaving and bargaining who could keep good track of the household accounts. She and Lan WangJi could go night hunting together, make a name for themselves as a great cultivation couple—a love story to be passed down, maybe even carved onto the GusuLan halls like the other more famous GusuLan ancestors. Lan WangJi would surely be worthy, and she would be worthy of him.

The more he spoke, the heavier his heart felt, and yet he couldn’t seem to stop himself, imagining this wonderful, bright future for Lan WangJi. He would want them to light incense for him and thank him for stepping aside—no, he didn’t want to get in the way of Lan WangJi’s happiness. They could leave his

tablet somewhere in the back of the hall—maybe just send it back to Lotus Pier once the funeral rites were complete—and Lan WangJi could forget about him and marry this woman.

“Wei Ying—”

“You have to—you have to promise me you’ll do it,” Wei WuXian said, grabbing at Lan WangJi’s hand with his free one. “Promise that when you get married for real, you’ll have the most amazing celebration, you’ll have the most amazing wife, you’ll be happy. I want you to be so happy that you’ll cry at your own wedding.”

Lan WangJi frowned. “Wei Ying, I—”

“Promise me, Lan Zhan, or I’ll never rest in peace,” Wei WuXian said insistently. “Promise.”

Lan WangJi looked at him. Wei WuXian met his eyes, desperate with an emotion he couldn’t name. “I promise,” he said finally.

Wei WuXian looked at him for a bit longer and nodded. “Good,” he said and smiled. He took a step back and cast his eyes away. “I’m hungry now. Let’s go get something to eat, and then I want to get gifts for everyone!”

They spent the entire day out, shopping and going around the Gusu area. Although they visited the nearest lotus pond, at this time of year in Gusu, it was far too cold to see much other than browned stalks. Lan WangJi seemed ready to go further south in search of a blooming lotus pond until Wei WuXian stopped him.

“Even in Yunmeng with good weather, it would be difficult to find a blooming lotus pond at this time of year,” Wei WuXian said with a laugh. “Take it as I was being unreasonable,” he said. “Today was fun. I’d rather go home and give these to the Wens. I can’t wait to see the look on A-Yuan’s face when I’m the one giving him toys!”

When they returned to the Cloud Recesses, Wei WuXian spent some time passing out the gifts he’d purchased. A-Yuan was ecstatic with the toys they had bought for him, and Wei WuXian made him promise to share them with his friends. Wen Ning bowed about fifty times when he received a new jade hairpiece, but kept following him around as he distributed the rest of the gifts with such gloom that Wei WuXian was relieved that corpses couldn’t shed tears. The two siblings were truly related because when Wei WuXian gave Wen Qing her gift—some cosmetics he’d picked up—she burst into tears and punched Wei WuXian in the stomach hard enough that he was pretty sure it would bruise, and ran off.

Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had dinner with the Wen clan that night. Now that their living quarters had been completely built, they had their own small multi-purpose hall that they used primarily for eating as a family.

A-Yuan, as soon as he saw them, came running with grass butterflies in his hair and climbed into Lan WangJi’s lap with much protest from everyone else, but none from Lan WangJi who calmly let him.

“Thank you for my butterflies and my sword and my top and my ball,” A-Yuan listed off on his fingers and beamed at Lan WangJi.

"Hey, I bought those for you," Wei WuXian said, a bit offended from the seat next to them. "Where's my thanks?"

"You are Poor Brother," A-Yuan said matter-of-factly. "Rich Brother bought them for me."

Uncle Four heard the exchange and burst out laughing. "Now that's a wise kid," he said and winked at A-Yuan. "Stick to him some more and maybe he'll adopt you."

"He already calls him dad," Wei WuXian said. "And you still haven't properly called me dad yet. Don't you know I'm married to your Hanguang-Jun? His money is my money now so I am also a Rich Brother."

A-Yuan gave him the most skeptical look Wei WuXian had ever seen a toddler make. "Then A-Yuan wants sweet soup," he said and held out his hands to Wei WuXian.

"Have we raised an advantage-taker?" Wei WuXian said incredulously. "Can you believe how shameless our son is?" He nudged Lan WangJi in the side.

Lan WangJi shot him a look that clearly said the most shameless one here was Wei WuXian.

"Well, sweet soup is for dessert," Wen Qing said. "Let's start eating!"

If not every dish was spicy, every other one was. All up and down the long table, food had been generously dosed with peppers. Wei WuXian loaded A-Yuan's bowl with the milder items, keeping an eye on him to make sure he didn't spill onto Lan WangJi's white robes, before helping himself to some of the spicier dishes. "We've really been missing out eating with you," Wei WuXian said happily as he dug in. "Can you imagine if GusuLan food was always this good?" he said, nudging Lan WangJi.

"From now on, as long as the two of you are here, eat with us," Granny Wen said, reaching to take Wei WuXian's hand. She patted it, looking a bit misty-eyed.

"Granny, I don't know what Wen Qing-Jie told you, but I'm sure she's exaggerating," Wei WuXian said. Apart from A-Yuan who no one had told, Wei WuXian wasn't even sure how the news had spread so quickly about his condition.

"No, no, Granny's right! Every night, we'll feast!" Uncle Four said, of no help at all from across the table. "Here, you like spicy peanuts," he said and began heaping peanuts into Wei WuXian's bowl.

Wei WuXian was distracted from stopping him when A-Yuan began fussing in Lan WangJi's arms, reaching for him until Wei WuXian took the child. A-Yuan, apparently tired after he'd eaten, promptly put his head down on Wei WuXian's shoulder and went to sleep. "Every night is a lot, Uncle Four," Wei WuXian said, struggling a bit to adjust him so he could hold him with one arm and eat with the other. His bowl had been piled full of spicy food from all the Wens around them.

"I bet you won't be saying that when you see this." Uncle Four sneakily nudged him under the table. When Wei WuXian peaked beneath the table, he showed him not just one but six jars of liquor that smelled strongly of fruit.

"You smuggled alcohol into the Cloud Recesses?" Wei WuXian hissed, glancing at Lan WangJi who was thankfully distracted, being fawned over by several of the older aunties. "Do you know how much trouble I got in for that?"

"Who do you think I am?" Uncle Four said. "I'm a GusuLan cultivator now! I would never break the rules—I brewed it," he whispered.

"I'm pretty sure one of the GusuLan rules is that you can't bend rules," Wei WuXian said, amused.

"If I don't tell and you don't tell, then—"

"Then I'll tell," Wen Qing said, looming over him. "Hand them over, Uncle Four." She said, holding out her hand.

Wei WuXian laughed as Uncle Four protested at Wen Qing's confiscation.

"And you—you better stop laughing and save your husband there," Wen Qing said, eyeing the other side where Auntie Five was harassing Lan WangJi.

"Our Wei WuXian certainly found himself a good husband," Auntie Five said to Lan WangJi beside him. "Look at you, so handsome! Why if I was twenty years younger, I'd marry you myself!"

"Twenty? More like sixty years earlier," Uncle Seven said to her.

"Sixty?" Auntie Five screeched. "Just how old do you think I am?" She grabbed his ear and twisted it.

Wei WuXian laughed harder, leaning into Lan WangJi who, instead of pulling away, let him. Lan WangJi reached, instead, to wipe at A-Yuan's face with a handkerchief where he had begun drooling a bit on Wei WuXian's shoulder.

"This is nice," Wei WuXian whispered to Lan WangJi, the loud chatter and warm bodies pressed all around them in the Wen common quarters. He'd missed these times when they'd all eaten together like one big family at the Yiling Burial Mounds.

"Mm," Lan WangJi agreed.

"Let's have a toast!" Uncle Four called as they all got to their feet. Someone took A-Yuan from Wei WuXian's arms, and then he and Lan WangJi were being urged to stand as well. "Quick, quick, pass this out," he said, bypassing Wen Qing to pass around the jars of liquor.

Wei WuXian quickly filled Lan WangJi's cup with tea instead of liquor before anyone else could touch it and handed the cup to him, wondering if it was someone's birthday and hoping the toast wouldn't be one of those long-winded speeches. "I'm sure you don't want to go to sleep while standing," he whispered to him, grinning as he picked up his own cup.

But when he turned back, he was surprised to find every single one of the Wens had turned to face them. Each one of them, dressed in the white robes of the GusuLan sect, held up their small cups of liquor up to him.

“Wei WuXian!” Wen Qing said. “You—you saved our lives, you brought my brother back, you gave us all a future. For that, we can only say one thing—thank you!” she shouted. She held up her cup of liquor, toasted him, and drank. All around them, every Wen toasted and drank their cups of liquor in Wei WuXian’s honor.

Wen Ning, who could not drink but had watched them from where he stood beside Wen Qing then saluted Wei WuXian. “Thank you for everything!” he said and bowed.

“Thank you,” Granny Wen said and also bowed, her head bending down.

All around them, each one of the Wens shouted thank you and bowed their heads to him, one by one, from the youngest to the eldest.

Wei WuXian felt his throat tighten up, unable to say a word, as he watched them—this family, his family—bow before him.

After they’d stayed late into the night drinking and eating and talking with the Wens, they took their leave. Wei WuXian was tired and sure that Lan WangJi must be as well since he hadn’t slept the night before and was still recovering from injuries. The Wens gave them the last two jars of the fruit liquor to take with them, refusing to take no for an answer. But instead of retiring to the Jingshi, Lan WangJi took him in the opposite direction to the other side of the field.

There, Wei WuXian saw a small cottage. He’d noticed it when the Wen family was first given this land to build on, but he’d never seen anyone coming or going from the little house. In the Cloud Recesses, the only flowers that existed were planted in key places as highlights for the scenery, but this cottage was an exception, surrounded by gentians. Although at this time of year, there weren’t many of them, thanks to the warm spell, a handful of purple flowers had bloomed visible beneath the moonlight.

The small cottage was pretty, well-kept and clean, Wei WuXian noticed, as he stepped up onto the wooden walkway.

“What is this place?” Wei WuXian asked, curious.

“Your cottage,” Lan WangJi answered, lighting a lamp as he opened the first door and showed Wei WuXian inside.

Wei WuXian stared at him for a moment and then smiled. “You—you really took my request so seriously, Lan Zhan,” he said. “You’re even giving me a cottage?”

The inside of the cottage was well-kept, though small, consisting only of four rooms that Lan WangJi led him through. The first was a living room with a table, delicate tea set, and incense burner laid out as well as some cushions on the floor. The second was a study lined with shelves of books, maybe the most amount of books Wei WuXian had ever seen in a private study. The third was a bedroom with a large bed meant for two people. And the fourth was a small kitchen with all the cooking utensils stored away neatly. Each of the rooms was adorned with beautiful paintings. None of the paintings were signed, which was a good indicator that the person who lived here had painted these paintings of the Gusu scenery, of mountains and fog, of pine trees and gentian flowers, of clouds and canyons.

"Lan Zhan, who really lives here?" he asked when Lan Wangji finished giving him the tour and led him back to that first sitting room. This place was too nice, too well kept for it to belong to no one.

"My mother used to," Lan Wangji said, setting down the jars of fruit liquor on the sitting room table. Where the table was set by the open door, it gave them a perfect view of the foggy moonlit back mountains. When it was warmer, it would also have a foreground of delicate purple gentians.

Wei WuXian's eyes widened as he sat down on the cushion beside him. "Your mother," he said, remembering what Lan QiRen had told him about her. "Lan Zhan, this is your mother's house?"

Lan Wangji nodded and reached for the jar of liquor. He poured Wei WuXian a teacup full, since they were the only cups available in this house.

"What was she like?" Wei WuXian asked, playing with the cup between his fingers as he stared at the gently swaying leaves of the gentians.

Lan Wangji's lips parted, but he seemed to hesitate. "She was like you," he said finally.

Of all the answers and descriptions Wei WuXian expected, that wasn't one. "Like me?" he echoed.

"She...liked to tease," Lan Wangji answered after a moment. "But she was gentle and kind."

All of a sudden, Wei WuXian could imagine a small Lan Wangji coming here with his expressionless face and mannerisms. Since he was serious by nature, he must have been like this as a child as well. If Wei WuXian had loved teasing Lan Wangji when they were fifteen to get a reaction, he could imagine how his mother, apparently someone Lan Wangji thought was like him, would tease him to get a reaction. He smiled.

"She must not have enjoyed being made to stay here," Lan Wangji said slowly. He didn't have to say more for Wei WuXian to understand. He'd felt so cramped and uncomfortable when he was being made to purify in the library every day, but even then, at least Wei WuXian had had the freedom to move around the Cloud Recesses. Madam Lan had never even been allowed to leave this cottage. "But she never complained."

"Tell me about her," Wei WuXian said, wishing he'd gotten to know Lan Wangji when they were younger. If Wei WuXian had met Lan Wangji as a child, he probably would not have hesitated to chase him around a cottage, maybe try to put flowers in his hair, pinch his cheeks, pull his ribbon. He smiled, wistful, and a little sad.

Lan Wangji began to speak. "She laughed a lot," he said. "She liked to laugh."

"What else?" Wei WuXian asked.

"The flowers," Lan Wangji said.

Wei WuXian looked outside where he could still see the few purple gentians blooming. He got up, and went to pick one, bringing the bloom back and twirling it between his fingers. "The gentians?" he asked.

It was a beautiful flower, this one a bit darker on one side than the other so it was a purple fading nearly to blue. Unlike the peony he'd once thrown at Lan Wangji in full bloom, the gentian was also beautiful but in a far simpler way, delicate. "Did she put them in your hair?" he teased.

But as he reached to put it on Lan Wangji's head, he shook his head and took the flower from him. "No, she wore them herself," he said. So saying, he tucked the flower behind Wei WuXian's ear, his fingers tracing the shell of his ear, gentle and lingering.

Wei WuXian could smell the delicate fragrance of the flower, and felt his face warm. "Flowers don't suit me," he said. "They're for more classy, elegant people. Especially one like this," he said.

"It suits you," Lan Wangji said.

Wei WuXian's protests dried up in his throat. He looked down and then back up again at Lan Wangji. He coughed. "Did you come here a lot then?"

"My brother and I were allowed to see her once a month," Lan Wangji said.

"Only once?" Wei WuXian didn't have many memories left of his parents—most were just a handful of sensations. But he remembered he'd been happy and warm and almost always with them when they'd still been alive. After, he'd gone to Lotus Pier, he'd always been with Uncle Jiang or Jiang Yanli, and then Jiang Cheng once he'd gotten used to having Wei WuXian around. He had the fewest memories of those days in between, when he'd been on the streets. He'd always been thankful he had a bad memory when it came to those times he'd been alone, but Lan Wangji had spent far longer than just a few years that way.

"Mm," Lan Wangji said. "I always looked forward to that day every month. Brother and I would wait outside the door because Mother liked to sleep late," he said. "But when she woke, she would open the door."

Wei WuXian smiled, imagining a little Lan Wangji waiting patiently outside the cottage, kneeling on the wooden floor and listening for his mother's footsteps. "You were so good ever since you were young," he said. "Too bad you didn't get to spend more time with her. Maybe it would have loosened you up a bit," he said. But then, Lan Wangji had gotten less strict lately, he thought fondly as his gaze fell to the fruit liquor in his cup.

"She passed away when I was six," Lan Wangji said.

Wei WuXian's gaze flew up to his face. Lan Wangji was sitting very still, the handsome planes of his visage illuminated by the moon and lamplight. He looked flawless, like a fine piece of jade, and his face betrayed no sign of emotion. And yet, Wei WuXian could tell, could see the little boy Lan Wangji had once been, how young he'd been when he'd lost his mother. He remembered what Lan Qiren had told him, how Lan Wangji's father had secluded himself, effectively removing himself as a parent from before they were born. Lan Qiren himself had raised them strict, requiring complete discipline from them to protect them from making the same mistakes as his brother. Lan Wangji had only been six when he'd lost the one parent who had tried to help him enjoy life when he was with her, to be flawed and loved and treasured just the way he was regardless of status or honor or duty.

Wei WuXian hesitated for a moment, but imagining a small Lan Zhan waiting in front of the door that would never open again, knowing that he himself would not have much longer to do so, he turned to his husband. Lan Wangji was staring out at the beautiful landscape, his face perfectly still in the moonlight. In that moment, he looked infinitely lonely.

“Don’t move, Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian whispered as he wrapped his arms around Lan Wangji’s waist from behind. He pressed his face into Lan Wangji’s back, very gentle so as not to bother those still-healing wounds he’d endured for his sake. “Just for a moment, let me stay like this,” he said.

He could smell the scent of sandalwood mingling with the purple gentian at his ear. “You’ll find her someday,” he said into Lan Wangji’s back. “After I’m gone, you’ll find that person you’re destined to be with. You’ll be happy with her. You’ll have a happy ending.”

Unlike himself and Lan Wangji, he thought. Lan Wangji was good to him. Really good, he knew, extra good because Wei WuXian was dying. He felt privileged, knowing how Lan Wangji didn’t like to speak, but had brought him to this cottage that held so many memories because Wei WuXian had requested a little house. And yet, like Madam Lan could never give Qingheng-Jun the happiness he wished for, Wei WuXian also could never give Lan Wangji a happy ending. He was destined to die, and Lan Wangji would continue to live without him.

“Thank you,” he whispered. He hugged Lan Wangji tighter, wishing he didn’t have to leave, not now when everything was finally starting to come together. But like everything else, he never had a choice. “I’m sorry.”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji said after a long moment. “I will go into seclusion for the next couple of days.”

Wei WuXian looked up at him sharply, drawing back. “Now?” he asked as Lan Wangji turned to meet his eyes, his heart sinking right down into his stomach.

“I will find a way to save you,” Lan Wangji said.

Wei WuXian shook his head. “Didn’t you hear Wen Qing? There is no way. This was always my fate,” he said and bit his lip. “Didn’t you say you’d give me anything I want?” He looked up at him. “We haven’t even gone lotus-picking yet,” he said, thinking up any excuse to keep him here. “I change my mind—I want to go lotus-picking.”

“It is too cold in Gusu,” Lan Wangji said.

“Then we’ll look for one in Yunmeng,” Wei WuXian said stubbornly. “The weather has been warm. We might find one.”

Lan Wangji exhaled and Wei WuXian hated seeing the way his brow furrowed.

He hesitated. “I want to spend my last days with you,” Wei WuXian admitted and looked down.

“These won’t be our last days,” Lan Wangji said. He reached out to touch Wei WuXian’s face and tipped it up to look at him again. Wei WuXian grabbed his wrists, holding him in place when Lan Wangji began drawing away. “Wait for me.”



They both knew there was no possibility of him surviving this, but looking into Lan WangJi's earnest golden eyes, Wei WuXian couldn't take that hope away from him. He bit his lip and slowly let his hands drop. "Hurry back," he said.

## Chapter 15: ghost story

### Chapter Text

Lan WangJi was already gone by the next morning, although Wei WuXian had been left with the rest of the fruit liquor and a still-warm breakfast.

Having nothing to do during the day, he slept in and spent it playing with A-Yuan and JingYi and the other kids under the sunlight together with Wen Ning who apparently spent most of his days now babysitting. Wen Ning looked like he was about to cry every time he looked at Wei WuXian so Wei WuXian kept ordering the toddlers to dog-pile him every time it seemed like Wen Ning was about to say something horrifically sappy. If he was weak to women's tears, the tears of men were a thousand times worse—when someone who was supposed to be strong broke down in tears, he didn't know how to handle it.

"Stop looking like I'm already dead," Wei WuXian said to Wen Ning, knocking him on the head. A-Yuan who was sitting on Wen Ning's neck also patted his head enthusiastically. "Your sister said it could be weeks, and I feel fine!"

"Weeks..." Wen Ning looked like he might start sobbing right then and there.

Wei WuXian sighed. "It's really not such a big deal. You and your family are safe. A-Yuan's got a good future here. Lan WangJi will take care of you all once I'm gone."

Wen Ning face crumpled up again.

"What did I say now?" Wei WuXian said.

"Second Master Lan will be all alone," Wen Ning said.

"What are you talking about? He'll have all of you, his family, everyone at GusuLan here," Wei WuXian said.

Wen Ning's bottom lip trembled. "But Young Master Wei is his h-h-husband."

"It's an arranged marriage," Wei WuXian said, sounding stronger than he felt. "He'll find someone good to take care of him and cause him less trouble after me."

"How could you say that?" Wen Ning yelled, the most upset Wei WuXian had seen him maybe ever. "Don't you know, for Second Master Lan, Young Master Wei is—"

"Why do you sound more upset about this than me?" Wei Wuxian said, rolling his eyes even as his pulse sped up at Wen Ning's words.

"Where is Xian-Gege going?" A-Yuan asked, bouncing a few times on Wen Ning's neck, looking wide-eyed and innocent up at Wei WuXian.

"I might go on a trip," Wei WuXian lied easily and patted A-Yuan on the head. "I don't know when yet," he said. "But when I do, I want you to be good for Lan Er-Gege and Ning-Gege and Qing-Jiejie and your grandma and everyone else here, okay?"

A-Yuan nodded and hopped off Wen Ning's neck to suddenly throw himself into Wei WuXian's arms.

Wei WuXian laughed, looking at the child in his arms. "Oh, A-Yuan likes me so much today. Is it because Lan Er-Gege isn't here?" He pinched A-Yuan's cheeks.

A-Yuan blushed and pushed his face into Wei WuXian's chest.

"Why are you blushing? Is A-Yuan being shy?" Wei WuXian couldn't help wanting to bully him a little with such a cute reaction. "Well, A-Yuan is Xian-Gege's favorite good child," he said, hugging him and laughing when A-Yuan began struggling out of his grip.

A-Yuan twisted around in his arms and pulled one of the grass butterflies from his own hair. "For Xian-Gege," he said shyly, holding out his offering.

"You're sharing with me?" Wei WuXian asked, delighted. The grass butterfly had already gone a bit flat from the manhandling, but he bent his head down. "Do you want to put it on for me?"

A-Yuan clambered up in Wei WuXian's lap, pulling at the strands of his hair and pinning it on top of his head before he finally leaned back, satisfied with his handiwork.

"Am I beautiful now?" Wei WuXian asked and grinned wider when A-Yuan nodded.

"Show Lan Er-Gege," A-Yuan demanded.

Wei WuXian laughed. "All right, I'll show him when he comes back," he agreed.

He had dinner with the Wen clan again that night, which was, as promised, another feast big enough that he could almost forget that Lan Wangji was not there. Still, after the third time he turned to the seat beside him, intending to nudge Lan Wangji about something and finding himself staring at Uncle Seven's leathery visage instead, he excused himself to retire to the Jingshi.

In their room, he lit the incense burner, inhaling the scent of sandalwood. Finally, he felt something inside him that had been restless all day finally calm down. In the quiet, Wei WuXian thought about the other things he should wrap up while he was still alive. He had never taken a single disciple for demonic cultivation, which was good given its eventual result. Once he was gone, he had to make sure all the research he'd done, the new techniques he came up with, stayed out of the wrong hands. So for the rest of the evening, he sorted through everything he'd accumulated in the Jingshi, categorizing the books he'd scribbled, the half-finished spells and talismans, all the different techniques he'd invented or improved. He destroyed what he could and worked until late into the night before he finished going

through the piles of things he'd brought with him from the Yiling Burial Mounds. He'd leave all these things for the GusuLan Forbidden Library once he was gone.

He fell asleep in the large bed, hugging Lan Wangji's pillow to his chest, satisfied with the work he'd done.

He'd worked so late that he slept in until past noon the next day and woke only because Wen Ning and Wen Qing thought he'd died in the night and came charging into the Jingshi when he still hadn't gotten up for lunch.

"Don't you dare scare us again like that!" Wen Qing yelled after she'd given him the longest lecture he'd ever received about the health benefits of a consistent sleep schedule.

"You're not even supposed to come in here without permission," Wei WuXian whined. "The Jingshi is Hanguang-Jun's private quarters."

"I'm sure your Hanguang-Jun understands if I invade his privacy to save your stupid life," Wen Qing said. "You're the one he'll have words with when he finds out how you worried us!"

"If he finds out," Wei WuXian muttered.

"Oh, mark my words, I will make sure you stay alive until he gets back just so I can tell him what an idiot you are." Wen Qing narrowed her eyes at him.

"Oh look, Wen Ning brought lunch! Let's eat, Wen Qing-Jie," Wei WuXian said loudly and scrambled out of bed when he saw Wen Ning come into the room with a tray of food.

"You, keep an eye on him," Wen Qing ordered her younger brother. "If he dares so much as do anything out of line, you report to me."

"That could be anything," Wei WuXian complained as Wen Qing began stalking out again. "Your standards are unreasonable!"

"Your standards are unreasonable!" Wen Qing shouted back. "Anything, A-Ning!"

"Are you making Wen Ning babysit me?" Wei WuXian realized belatedly.

Wen Qing had apparently gone out of earshot by then, though the answer was obvious. Wei WuXian sighed. "Your sister is a monster," he told Wen Ning.

"She has a point, though," Wen Ning said mildly.

Wei WuXian rolled his eyes as he began to eat. "Well, I guess it's fine that you're here," he said as he ate. "I have something else I need help with today anyway."

He'd thought about it the night before. Out of all the things he still had left to wrap up, the thing he wanted to know most was Jin GuangYao's situation, but until Lan XiChen returned, Wei WuXian had no

choice but to wait. Which left only one last mystery he hadn't entirely solved yet—and that was the ghost of Yang FeiFei.

It had been months since the ghost had appeared on Beiluo Bridge. They'd originally assumed she was a part of the landborne abyss, but then she had followed him back to the Cloud Recesses, strong enough to break through the protective arrays which meant she carried some extreme resentment. But when they'd found her killer, she still hadn't entirely disappeared. Instead, she'd showed up twice again at Koi Tower—once during the hunt, and once in the tower itself after the protective arrays had been broken. She had helped Wei WuXian himself multiple times now, warning him about Xue Yang, about the Tiangou, showing him where Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan were in time to save them. There had been too many other things to take care of before, but now he had time, and he owed it to her to figure out what was still keeping her from reincarnation.

And so after his late lunch, Wei WuXian bullied Wen Ning into going to Caiyi Town with him.

"I'm not supposed to leave the Cloud Recesses," Wen Ning said as Wei WuXian shoved him down the stairs of the entrance.

"It's fine, it's fine," Wei WuXian said, looking around just in case they'd stuck any alerting spells on Wen Ning, but no one came to stop them. "The ghost is too weak now, so we can't stay here or she won't show up."

"But—"

"If we get in trouble, I'll say I made you do it, okay?" Wei WuXian said. "You're even worse than Lan Zhan. He just doesn't like breaking the rules—you're afraid to break them."

Wen Ning looked guiltier than ever, but he obediently followed Wei WuXian to Caiyi Town.

Wei WuXian had plenty of pocket money from Lan WangJi so he rented a room in a nearby inn and spent the afternoon coming up with a new talisman.

"I really don't think this is a good idea, Young Master Wei," Wen Ning said, watching him anxiously as he worked. "What if a lot of ghosts come?"

"This should call just one ghost in theory if it works," Wei WuXian said as he painted the strokes onto the talisman.

"In theory?" Wen Ning asked.

"I haven't tried it yet," Wei WuXian answered. "We'll know soon enough if it works."

"Don't you think we should wait for Second Master Lan?" Wen Ning said, looking like he wished Lan WangJi were here to stop Wei WuXian. "Didn't he stop you from doing this last time?"

"If he wanted to stop me, he shouldn't have left," Wei WuXian said, making a quick cut on his thumb so he could finish up the final strokes of the talisman with his blood. It was a modification of his soul-summoning talismans, directed for just the one ghost. "I don't know how much longer I have, and Yang

FeiFei has already helped me multiple times. I owe it to her to help her find rest, and if I'm right, she should be nearby anyway—I'm sure she's been following me because I can give her what she wants."

"What does she want?"

Wei WuXian shrugged. "Most likely she wants her corpse given a proper burial, but just in case, I'm going to double check. What do you think this is all for anyway? If I already knew for sure, I'd help her do it."

"But you're not supposed to use demonic cultivation. What if it makes your condition worse?" Wen Ning said, pacing the room.

"I can hardly make my condition worse than it is," Wei WuXian said dismissively as he waved the talisman to quicken the drying. "And this will only take a half hour—Empathy isn't designed to last any longer than that. If I haven't dropped dead by now, a half hour isn't going to kill me."

"But my sister said—"

Wei WuXian sighed. "Just be good and cooperate. I'm not even asking for too much here. All you have to do is wait for a half hour. If I'm still not awake by then, whack that incense burner so I can hear it." He gave the incense burner he'd stolen from the Jingshi a little tap with his inkbrush so it made a melodic little ping.

"What if you don't wake up?" Wen Ning asked.

"Then I die a little sooner than originally planned, but it won't make much of difference either way," Wei WuXian said, checking outside the window. He was satisfied to see the sun had set. "Now are you going to do it or not?" he demanded, waving the ink brush at him.

"Please don't die," Wen Ning said.

Wei WuXian rolled his eyes. "I'll do my best," he said and activated the talisman. The ink and blood on the talisman glowed red as the resentful energy activated the charm. Wei WuXian watched the door and window carefully from where he sat on the bed. It was only a little more than a minute before he saw the ghostly figure of a woman materialize inside the room. "Good, it worked," he said.

Yang FeiFei looked the same as she always had, if a bit curious since this was the first time Wei WuXian had ever summoned her.

"Since you can't speak, I'm going to use Empathy," Wei WuXian told her. "Show me what you want so I can help you move on." He turned to Wen Ning. "Remember, hit that incense burner after half an hour if I'm not awake by then."

Then he lay down on the bed and let Yang FeiFei's spirit possess him.

When Wei WuXian opened his eyes again, he saw everything from a much shorter point of view. He was pretty tall himself if not quite as tall as Lan WangJi, and Yang FeiFei, at the average height of a woman, came up to only his shoulders.

Yang FeiFei was in an ornate room, sitting in front of a mirror as she hummed to herself and applied rouge to her lips and cheeks. She was much younger than the ghost he knew, probably only around Wei WuXian's own age right now, and, as he'd expected, very beautiful with all the energy of youth. She was wearing an embroidered golden robe of such quality that Wei WuXian could feel the weight of it on her shoulders.

She seemed happy as she applied her makeup, which was strange for Wei WuXian to see and feel. As the Empathizer, he would relive key parts of Yang FeiFei's life, experiencing what she experienced, which was accurate down to the last detail so he could even feel the soft brush on his face, smell the rouge she applied.

"You're beautiful! You can do this!" she told her own reflection, which made Wei WuXian want to laugh as he watched her. "After today, it's off to a bright future!"

She took some time finishing her makeup and arranging her hair before she appeared satisfied and left her room. Outside, there was no doubt this building was a brothel, the noise loud and energetic, carousing going on at full pace at the moment. Yang FeiFei turned many heads as she descended the staircase, not unlike the way Wei WuXian typically commanded attention though definitely not for the same reason. It took him a few moments to place why the building looked so familiar—it was the same brothel where she had been murdered years later in Yueyang City.

But the person she focused her gaze on was not a young Chang Ping, but someone Wei WuXian had not thought of at all—a much younger but unmistakable Jin GuangShan. The young sect leader smiled at her and gestured for her to join him, which she did, giggling at him and refilling his cup of liquor whenever it grew low. His arm, which started out slung around her shoulders, slowly worked its way down to her waist, hugging her tight against him.

Wei WuXian had never had any extended interaction with Sect Leader Jin, but as they chatted, he could observe a certain charisma to Jin GuangShan. Unlike many of the other men at the other tables who he could hear bragging about their accomplishments while the courtesans pretended to admire them, Jin GuangShan asked Yang FeiFei about her interests, spoke about poetry and art and music in a knowledgeable way, and seemed to confide in her about cultivation world news. He turned out to be a surprisingly good conversationalist, which, Wei WuXian supposed must be rare in Yang FeiFei's line of work. In an objective way, he could see the practiced appeal of the sect leader, though he found himself thinking that he preferred Lan WangJi's company any day.

Lan WangJi might be quiet, but when he spoke, he was sincere. Anyway, Wei WuXian had enough words for the both of them. He liked that Lan WangJi now let him talk as much as he wanted without silencing him, and always listened intently no matter how trivial the things coming out of Wei WuXian's mouth. He suddenly thought back to those times he and Lan WangJi had visited the brothels and wished he was here with him now. No one in the room could hold a candle to Lan WangJi—not the most beautiful of the women or the most charming of the men.

Of course, no matter how charismatic Jin GuangShan was, Wei WuXian could feel Yang FeiFei's true excitement was not for attention from the sect leader, but for the hope of a life outside of this brothel if she played her cards right. She was a smart woman—though she was young and beautiful now, she'd grow old and she had to line up a future for that eventuality. But she wasn't from the cultivation world,

so she didn't know of that Jin GuangShan's empty promises were thrown out to women left and right, that he had illegitimate children everywhere he visited to the consternation of Madam Jin. Knowing Yang FeiFei's eventual fate, she wasn't the exception either.

As Jin GuangShan flirted, Wei WuXian felt mildly disgusted, wondering how Madam Jin could stay married to him. They weren't even in a real marriage, but if Lan WangJi ever dared so much look at someone else in the way Jin GuangShan was now eyeing Yang FeiFei, Wei WuXian would probably kill him before he managed to do anything—although even imagining Lan WangJi doing such a thing was laughable.

"My most beautiful Lady Yang, how about a gift?" Jin GuangShan said, holding out an ornate button for Yang FeiFei.

She giggled, taking it, and lowered her eyelashes coquettishly. "Is that all?" she asked, turning the button in the light. It was a pretty thing, probably cost quite a bit for the average person since it was inlaid with gold and pearl.

"Does it not satisfy the lady?" Jin GuangShan asked.

"I'm sure Sect Leader Jin gives these out to everyone," Yang FeiFei said with a pout.

Wei WuXian internally snorted—she had no idea how true that was.

"I won't lie to you, Lady Yang, I do meet many beautiful women in my travels," Jin GuangShan said, holding her hand. "But I have never given my favors before I met a woman as beautiful as you."

Jin GuangShan said it so sincerely that for a moment, Wei WuXian almost believed him. Jin GuangYao had most definitely inherited his skillful lying from his father, he thought, because Yang FeiFei believed him, giggling as she accepted the button and then invited him to her bedroom.

The next memory showed Yang FeiFei a year later, holding a young infant, as she stared up at the gates of Koi Tower. She had climbed up a thousand steps, and Wei WuXian could feel the tremble of exhaustion in legs not strengthened by cultivation, and the weariness of having traveled for days to come here.

She had to stop and catch her breath at the top of the steps before she knocked on the side door—the main gates of the Koi Tower would only be opened for official visits, and even though this was Jin GuangShan's son, until they were acknowledged, she knew they would not open those gates for them.

Her heart leapt when the door opened, but instead of a cultivator, it was a servant who came out.

Yang FeiFei was interrupted halfway through the customary greeting when the servant waved his hand at her, shooing her away. "If you're here to see Sect Leader Jin, he's busy," the servant said and began shutting the door again.

"No wait, I must see Sect Leader Jin," Yang FeiFei said, fumbling in her robes. "This button, he gave it to me," she said, taking out the button she'd so carefully wrapped in a handkerchief.

The servant barely glanced at it before he slapped her hand away. "You think women like you don't come here all the time seeking to entrap the sect leader?" he said. "Buttons like that you can buy by the handful in the market," he said. "Shoo! Get out of here!"

"Please, if I could just see him, he'll recognize me," she begged. "This is his son."

The infant in her arms began to stir, letting out cries as he felt his mother's agitation.

"Sect Leader Jin is busy," the servant said. "Get that child out of here! It's so noisy!"

"Please—"

But the servant had already slammed the door shut on her please.

Yang FeiFei stood staring at the shut gates. This time, when she pounded on the door, no one answered. She didn't give up until her fist had become sore and red. On their way up, she had showed her child the murals adorning the path, stopping in particular at the ones illustrating Jin GuangShan and telling him that he would be great like his father some day. But now, the child was crying and she had nowhere to go.

As the sun set, Yang FeiFei finally left Koi Tower to begin the trek back down the stairs and into Lanling.

She came to Koi Tower every day for a week. Each time, it was more exhausting to climb those steps again, to walk past those murals of Jin GuangShan leading battles and night hunting. Each time, she held a little less hope in her heart, a little more desperation. And each time she was turned away. The last time, the servant did not even open the door to her, only dumping a bucket of dirty used water out onto her head, soaking her and the child who immediately began bawling at the top of his lungs.

"Shh, shh, Xiao-Xue," she said soothingly to the child. "Don't worry, mom will take care of you," she said. "Everything will be okay."

By the end of a week, it was clear that Jin GuangShan had no intention of acknowledging her or their son. It left Yang FeiFei with no choice but to return to Yueyang, but when she returned, the madam of the brothel was incensed.

"You leave for a year and come back with a son?" she shouted at Yang FeiFei. "What customer would want a whore like you? What are you thinking?"

"Please, he won't be any trouble," Yang FeiFei begged. "I'll work hard. Customers never have to see him. Just—" Her words were cut off when the child began to cry, startled at the loud noises around him.

"I can't run a business like this," the madam said. She eyed the child that Yang FeiFei began to soothe. Yang FeiFei, like her son, was trying not to let her tears fall. The madam sighed. "You've been a good worker these past few years, but we cannot have a child here," she said slowly. "Do you understand?"

Wei WuXian could feel her dread, her desperation at being given this choice. He felt suddenly more grateful than ever that Jiang Cheng had arranged his marriage, that he'd been able to bring the entire Wen family, bring A-Yuan together with him to the Cloud Recesses where they could live well and live



safe. But then, like Yang FeiFei, if he'd been given the choice to save just himself and abandon his family, he knew what he would have chosen just like her.

Yang FeiFei met the madam's eyes, wide and fearful. "I cannot abandon him," she said. "He's my son."

The madam sighed and reached into her robe. She took out a pouch and counted out a few coins that she held out to Yang FeiFei. "This is all I can spare," she said. "Good luck."

That winter, Yang FeiFei spent out on the streets, doing her best to salvage scraps of food, beg for work anywhere she could find it, take care of her son. She survived shivering in old temples through the winter months, doing whatever she could to keep her son alive.

By the end of winter, she could barely recognize her own reflection in puddles of water. Her clothes were worn to threads, her face, once beautiful, was streaked with dirt, and her hair was unkempt and tangled. The people she passed by on the streets turned their faces away, some holding their noses as they commented on how she smelled. Shopkeepers shooed her away from their stalls, rejecting any offer she made to work in exchange for food.

"No one would even come to our shop with you looking like that," one woman said. "Go, clean yourself up! Don't you have any shame?"

But she had no place she could clean herself—she had no money for food much less a bath.

A few weeks later, on a cold spring day, Yang FeiFei was sitting on the side of a market street, eyeing the stands for any bit of dropped food when she saw three young children walking down the street together with a white-robed man. Two of the children were dressed similarly in white, though she recognized the uniform of only the third child—the golden peony robes of the LanlingJin Sect.

Wei WuXian, on the other hand, was delighted to recognize them all as he drank in the sight of a younger, beardless Lan QiRen who was apparently babysitting a young Jin ZiXuan, a young Lan XiChen, and most of all, a young Lan WangJi, who at that point was still so small that he was significantly shorter than either of the other two. He paused halfway down the street to ask a man for directions.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei WuXian called though he knew Lan WangJi couldn't hear him. "Lan Zhan! You were so cute! You really were serious even as a child!" He wished he could get a closer look at that face that, though expressionless, was clearly drinking in the city judging from the way his golden eyes were darting from one thing to another.

They were still so young that they wouldn't have debuted cultivators yet—confirmed when Lan XiChen called out to his younger brother. "Didi, are you hungry now? Here. Eat it while we wait for Uncle." He had apparently been holding a riceball for Lan WangJi that he handed to his brother now. The riceball was so large that Lan WangJi had to hold it using both hands.

Wei WuXian wanted to coo. Thankfully, those unusual uniforms stood out so much that Yang FeiFei kept staring at them so Wei WuXian could also do his best to memorize the sight of a child Lan WangJi.

Lan WangJi stood holding the riceball as though unsure whether he should begin eating it right there on the street. Then his eyes met Wei WuXian's.

For a moment, Wei WuXian thought Lan WangJi recognized him, before he realized Lan WangJi was staring at Yang FeiFei. He was even more surprised when Lan WangJi began walking in her direction before he stopped directly in front of where she sat by the side of the street, holding her child. He held out the riceball to her with both hands.

“...for me?” Yang FeiFei’s voice came out a raspy croak.

Lan WangJi nodded his head as he looked down at the infant in her arms that had begun a thin, reedy cry. “The baby is sad,” he said.

Lan Zhan really had been so good even when he was young, Wei WuXian thought fondly.

Yang FeiFei was so tired, she hadn’t even noticed when her baby began to cry. She had not eaten in days now, and her hands shook as Lan WangJi carefully placed the riceball into it. She could feel that gnawing hunger in her stomach start up again now that she had food in her hands.

“Where’s A-Zhan?” Lan QiRen said, apparently having noticed that one of the children was missing. “A-Zhan!”

Lan WangJi turned and trotted back to his uncle. “Don’t wander off,” Lan QiRen scolded him. “And don’t run. A-Huan, watch your brother,” Lan QiRen told Lan XiChen before he turned back to the man he was speaking to.

Yang FeiFei held the riceball in her hand. It had been so long since she’d had kindness shown to her that her throat tightened, and she could only hold the riceball, watching the young boy.

“Where did you go?” Lan XiChen had reached down to hold Lan WangJi’s hand. “You ate the riceball so fast. Were you very hungry?”

Lan WangJi turned to look at Yang FeiFei again, but Lan XiChen followed his brother’s line of sight to the candy stand she was sitting behind. “Oh, did you want candy, Didi?” he asked and brought Lan WangJi a bit closer to the stand. Jin ZiXuan followed the two brothers, apparently deciding it was more interesting than listening to whatever Lan QiRen was talking about.

The candy stall was one of the ones where the seller shaped them into different animals. When he saw he had the attention of three young children, he put a flourish into his actions, grinning as he pulled the amber candy out and then twirled it back in before molding it into the shape of a bunny on top of a stick. “Young masters, would you like one?” he said.

“We have better ones in Lanling,” Jin ZiXuan said imperiously.

Wei WuXian wanted to roll his eyes. It seemed Jin ZiXuan had been a peacock since a young age.

“It’s very cute, sir,” Lan XiChen said politely. “Do you like it, Didi? Shall I ask Uncle to buy it for you?”

Lan WangJi began to shake his head only for the middle-aged man at the stall to hand the stick of candy to him.

"This one's on the house, Didi," he said. "That was a very kind thing you just did." He winked at Lan WangJi.

"Thank the nice uncle," Lan XiChen said as Lan WangJi reached out to take the candy.

"Thank you," Lan WangJi said seriously.

"Kids, let's go!" Lan QiRen called.

Jin ZiXuan was first to hurry over to Lan QiRen's side.

Lan WangJi gave a short bow to the candy seller before he suddenly let go of Lan XiChen's hand and held the candy out to Yang FeiFei as well.

"Young master, I—"

"A-Zhan! Hurry up!" Lan QiRen called again.

Lan WangJi thrust the candy at her, and as soon as she took it, he also hurried back to Lan QiRen's side, walking as quickly as he could without running as per his uncle's earlier instructions.

Yang FeiFei watched them until they disappeared into the crowd. Wei WuXian, on the other hand, felt both proud and touched that Lan WangJi really had been so good since he was young. Of course, he didn't lack for food, but Lan WangJi had been hungry and like all children, even he must have enjoyed sweets back then. Still, he'd given up both his lunch and candy because he'd seen someone more in need than himself.

Yang FeiFei couldn't hold both the candy and riceball in one hand, so she set the riceball down on the cleanest corner of her lap as she wrapped the candy in a handkerchief to stow away for later.

As she did, though, she heard the bark of a dog.

Wei WuXian immediately felt that familiar fear when he looked up in time to see a scrappy mutt dart out from a nearby alley and grab the riceball from her lap in its jaws.

"No!" Yang FeiFei reached for the riceball before the dog could run away again. Like all rice balls, though, between the jaws of a dog and the clutching hands of a woman, it broke into pieces and fell to the ground. The dog snarled, Yang FeiFei shouted, cradling her infant in one hand and trying to reach for the largest pieces of the rice ball with the other.

The dog, likewise, bit at her, sinking its teeth into her arm as it fought for the food. Pain lanced through her arm and she gasped, her eyes prickling with tears, before she kicked the dog hard enough that it yelped and ran away.

On the ground were the broken remains of the riceball—the best meal she'd had in days now ruined. She picked up the largest pieces of it, but though she tried to pick off the worst of the dirt with her

hands, it didn't do much good. She was so hungry, though, that she ate the pieces anyway, filling her mouth with the taste of mud and cold rice.

When she had finished, she finally looked up to see the sympathetic eyes of the candy seller on her. He'd seen the whole thing, she realized—seen the little boy give her a riceball, seen her fight a dog and eat off the ground like a common animal.

"Miss—" the candy seller began to say, but Yang FeiFei could not stand the pitying way he was looking at her. She cradled her child close to her and hurried down the street.

She only stopped once she'd left the bustle of the market streets and entered the quiet of a residential road. It hadn't been a long distance, but she was panting for breath. The child in her arms had begun to cry again, great big tears rolling down his face. He, like her, had grown thin and dirty. She tried to shush the infant, but he would not be consoled, struggling in her arms as he wailed and sputtered, attracting dirty looks and insults from the people around them.

As she looked down at that tiny face, wrinkled in misery and tears, and her own still-empty stomach, the taste of dirt in her mouth, she knew they would both die if this continued. She'd fallen so low that even a child pitied her enough to share his lunch. She could not take care of this infant that Jin GuangShan would not recognize—she could not even take care of herself.

She was so tired she could not even shed tears as she held her child tight in her arms, unwilling to let go even though she knew it was the only chance either of them would have.

That day, she visited, for the first time, the Chang compound. She had passed by it numerous times when she still worked at that brothel. The people who came in and out of the compound were well-dressed, well-educated, well-fed—this was the only future she could give her son.

"Xiao-Xue, Xiao-Xue, be a good child," she said, shushing him in her arms as he cried. Finally, she took out the candy bunny that the little boy had given her. She slowly pulled the amber candy off of its stick.

She put the candy in the child's mouth and he immediately quieted down.

She hugged him tight to her chest again, kissing him on his forehead. He stared up at her, eyes dark and wide as he sucked on the candy. She looked at him for a long time, memorizing his face, the weight of him in her arms for the last time. Finally, she put the child on the doorstep. With him, she left a charm for protection she'd begged from the local temple and with it, the two characters for his name: Yang Xue.

Wei WuXian felt a chill run through him when he saw those two characters. Yang Xue—Xue Yang. Xue Yang hadn't killed a random woman he found with Chang Ping—he had killed his own mother.

Chapter 16: i'm here

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian was still reeling from the realization that Xue Yang was Yang FeiFei's son, when the characters of that name faded into another memory. This time, Wei WuXian saw Yang FeiFei some time

later, a bit older, and once more dressed beautifully and made up, but in a new brothel. It was daytime, and she was with an older women, both of them balancing erhus in their laps.

The other woman had a beautiful voice and delicate hands, and was teaching Yang FeiFei a song that she was doing a decent job imitating.

"Meng Shi-Jie, thank you for teaching me," Yang FeiFei said to the other woman once the lesson had concluded. She smiled shyly. "Not many other women would teach me."

Wei WuXian froze when he heard her name. Meng Shi was Jin GuangYao's birth mother—a courtesan so popular some twenty or so years ago that she'd been one of the leading women at her brothel. He had no idea Yang FeiFei had once worked with her.

Meng Shi smiled at her. "Women like us have to watch out for one another," she said. She gave a small cough, clearing her throat. "If we don't have skills, once we're older, they'll discard us like trash. But if we have skills..." She winked at Yang FeiFei who beamed at her. "Anyway, I'm sure I won't be here much longer so I want to pass my skills onto someone," she said cheerfully.

"Where will you go?" Yang FeiFei asked.

Meng Shi leaned in conspiratorially. "My A-Yao, you know, soon he'll be of age, and I'll send him to meet his father," she said. "Once he's acknowledged, he'll become a great cultivator like his father— I've been having him study all these cultivation manuals since he was a child so he won't be behind the others in their sect."

"His father?" Yang FeiFei asked. Everyone at the brothel knew Meng Shi had a son and that she doted on him, sending him to the best teachers and buying cultivation manuals for him to study. Yang FeiFei had never asked her about the father.

Meng Shi nodded and pulled something out from her robe pocket. "Years ago, I met a sect leader," she said. "The life of a woman at a brothel can't last forever so I had his child," she said. "Look, he left me with this."

Before Meng Shi opened the little pouch, Yang FeiFei could already feel her heart sink as a single gold-and-pearl button dropped onto her palm.

"Once A-Yao takes it to him, he'll be acknowledged," Meng Shi continued cheerfully. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Yang FeiFei felt her mouth dry up. "Meng Shi-Jie," she said and reached into her own robe to take out the handkerchief she'd kept all these years. She uncovered it and Meng Shi's words trailed off as the two buttons, identical, shone under the sunlight.

"No, mine is different, you see," Meng Shi said, snatching up her own button and holding it up to the window. "See how it shines?"

"I also met Sect Leader Jin five years ago," Yang FeiFei said slowly. "In Yueyang." She swallowed, unable to confess that she, too, had a son. One younger than Meng Shi's A-Yao. She felt suddenly that it was

unfair—unfair that Meng Shi had been skilled enough and popular enough that she got to keep her son with her, whereas Yang FeiFei had been forced to abandon her own.

Meng Shi shook her head. “That can’t be,” she said. “It has to be someone else that you met. He promised me—”

“Jin GuangShan promised you?” Yang FeiFei asked. “You’re older than me, Meng Shi. You’re more experienced. You know the words of men mean nothing!” she said, suddenly furious. She felt humiliated, stupid, and she wondered why she’d kept that button for so many years long after she’d given up all hope. “I know you know that because you’ve never tried to go to Koi Tower!”

“No, I’ve been waiting for A-Yao to grow up,” Meng Shi said, shaking her head, though her voice was weak and small. She smiled but it was wobbly. “I’ve been training A-Yao so he’ll be acknowledged.”

“You want to know what I did?” Yang FeiFei said. “I took this button. I took this button and my son—I took them up to Koi Tower a month after he was born, and you know what they did to me?” she asked.

Meng Shi shook her head. “No, Jin GuangShan said he loved me,” she said.

“He says that to every woman. The words of a man in a brothel mean nothing!” Yang FeiFei said. “He never even came out to see me! He had a servant turn me away every single day for a week,” she said. “I—I had to abandon my son,” she said, her voice breaking. “I had to abandon my son.”

Meng Shi just kept shaking her head as she smiled. “No, it’s different for me,” she said. “Jin GuangShan promised,” she said.

“How many years ago was it?” Yang FeiFei asked. “Do you think he still remembers you? Do you think he remembers A-Yao?” She shook her head. “Trust me, Meng Shi-Jie, keep A-Yao here. Do not send him away. Have him—have him apprentice under someone,” she said, grabbing her hand. “He’s a bright child, a quick learner. Keep him with you the way I couldn’t,” she begged.

“You don’t know anything!” Meng Shi said, pushing her away. “My A-Yao has a great future! He will be a great cultivator—he’ll meet his father. Sect Leader Jin will bring us both in,” she said, clutching the pearl button to herself. “He will.”

“Mother? Auntie Yang?”

Meng Shi and Yang FeiFei both turned to see a young man standing at the door. Meng Yao was in his late teens, shorter than he was now but his deceitfully open face was even more innocent at this age than it was now. He really had been born with that unfairly pleasant face, Wei WuXian thought.

“A-Yao, come here,” Meng Shi said immediately, embracing her son. He did look like her, Wei WuXian thought, observing mother and son—both with the same open, innocent expressions and gentle mannerisms. “Have you been studying that last cultivation manual I bought you?” she asked.

Meng Yao nodded.

"Once you've finished it, I want you to take this button and go to Lanling." She put both button and pouch in Meng Yao's hand.

"What is this?" he asked, looking at the button.

"It belongs to your father," Meng Shi said. "When you take it to Koi Tower, he will acknowledge you as your son just like he promised, and you will become a great cultivator."

She glanced at Yang FeiFei as though daring her to contradict her, but Yang FeiFei had already said her part.

"I'm sorry, A-Yao," Yang FeiFei said, reaching out to pat him on top of his head. Although her own son would be much younger than him, she couldn't help but imagine her own son in his place. She found herself both sad and relieved that she'd chosen to go to Koi Tower early because this could have been her fate, her son's fate—if they had held onto hope all these years only to have it shattered, she didn't know what she would do. "Your father—"

"He will acknowledge A-Yao!" Meng Shi shouted. "No one is better than my A-Yao!" She broke into a coughing fit.

"Mother, do not exert yourself," Meng Yao said, eyes wide as he helped her sit down.

Yang FeiFei likewise quickly handed her a handkerchief as she coughed again. Though she turned the handkerchief away from Meng Yao, Yang FeiFei glimpsed a few spots of blood on it. She had been coughing quite a bit lately, but everyone had assumed it was because the winter had been cold that year.

Meng Yao was pouring his mother a cup of water so he did not see, but Yang FeiFei did. "Meng Shi-Jie, you—"

Meng Shi shook her head and quickly folded up the handkerchief, smiling when Meng Yao brought her the water. "What a good boy you are," she said. "Your father will surely acknowledge you." She looked at Yang FeiFei. "Isn't that right?" Suddenly, Yang FeiFei knew exactly why Meng Shi was insisting Meng Yao go to his father.

Yang FeiFei nodded. "Of course," she said. "I'm sure Sect Leader Jin will take you—both of you in," she said, tucking away her own button again.

Wei WuXian already knew how things turned out for mother and son. Everyone knew that Meng Yao had been rejected at first, but he'd worked his way back up and finally become the one son that Jin GuangShan acknowledged and brought into the family. However, Meng Shi had died right before her son had left for Koi Tower—she never survived the sickness, never found out if he was accepted into the clan.

Another five or six years passed again in her memories, and this time, Yang FeiFei was around the age Wei WuXian recognized her as now. After Meng Shi passed away, Yang FeiFei had continued working at the brothel, taking over entertainment now with dance and playing the erhu. Although she was older, she had learned enough from Meng Shi that her entertainment value kept her employed.

In a way, she felt satisfied. She was past her prime now and few customers were interested in bedding her, which she preferred. She was steadily saving up money, and also learning to cook now, so she thought that maybe in another dozen or so years, she might have enough saved up to buy a small inn. She had enough friends and connections in Yunping City now that it might be possible to set up the business, and then she could live out the rest of her days simply.

That day, Yang FeiFei spent the whole night entertaining customers, and it was already long past midnight when she was finally allowed to return to her room. She was tired, eager to take off her makeup and go to sleep.

She heard the dripping first as she turned the corner to the corridor leading to her small room. At first, she thought it might have begun raining again, but the drip was steady and only from one source. As she raised her lantern to look, all traces of exhaustion fled.

On her door, someone had nailed a dead chicken. The bird had been killed recently, she could tell, because blood was still trickling steadily from its slit neck in a slow drip to the black puddle on the ground.

Yang FeiFei froze. The lantern she was holding flickered when her hand trembled, but she held her scream. The vandal could still be nearby. Every shadow looked like a man, as she turned and walked as rapidly and quietly down the corridor again. It wasn't until she had fetched the bodyguards employed by the brothel to check on the situation that the situation sank in and she began to shiver.

But although the bodyguards searched the entire brothel, questioning guests and courtesans alike, no one had seen anyone unusual come or go.

In the end, they couldn't do anything but promise to patrol her corridor as often as they could. After the chicken had been removed and the door and ground wiped clean, Yang FeiFei locked herself inside and jammed the door with another plank of wood on the inside. Still, every sound she could hear through her window woke her from a shallow sleep. By dawn, she was still exhausted though no one ever came to bother her.

The same thing happened again the next night. The guards were vigilant, but still, the brothel could only employ two of them and although they saw no one suspicious, when Yang FeiFei returned to her room, another dead chicken had been nailed to her door.

"It's just a childish prank," the madam told her. "No need to fret about it. When Meng Shi was still alive, she'd get far worse stalkers," she said. "At least yours hasn't tried to break into your room. A chicken is nothing," she said dismissively. "Give it a few days and I'm sure they'll lose interest."

But they didn't. From then on, another dead chicken appeared on her door every night. Though Yang FeiFei was increasingly frazzled, the madam couldn't pay the bodyguards to stay all night guarding only her door. When the madam allowed her to switch rooms, a second chicken would appear on the door of her new room sometime during the night, so Yang FeiFei knew the vandal was indeed watching her. But since they never did anything overtly dangerous—hadn't stolen anything, hadn't taken anything, hadn't even tried to see her, no one would take her seriously when she asked for help.



On the seventh day, a paper was nailed to her door along with the chicken. “Hello Mother,” it read, the words scrawled in chicken blood.

As she read the words, her entire world stilled.

Yang FeiFei didn’t know what to think or feel. It couldn’t be her son from thirteen years ago—she had left nothing for him to identify herself. She couldn’t. By the time she’d left him, she’d already traded everything of value on her for food that winter. At the same time, she hoped it really was him because that would mean her son had survived all those years ago. The vandal clearly wanted her attention, her fear. She couldn’t imagine her son—just the blur of a memory now, dark eyes, weak cry—could be capable of doing something like this. But whether it really was her son or not, she had to find out the truth—and the only way to do that was to return to Yueyang.

So the next morning, Yang FeiFei packed up her things and told the madam she would be gone to visit family and left Yunping. She disguised herself when she traveled, taking on the look of an old, country woman, smearing her face with dirt and messing up her hair so no one would take a second glance at her. She wasn’t sure if it was the disguise that worked or the travel, but she did not receive any unwelcome gifts at the inns she stayed at on her way to Yueyang.

When she arrived in Yueyang, she knew her disguise was good because not one of the people at her old brothel recognized her when she booked a room as a weary traveler. When she had worked there, the brothel had employed half a dozen guards—the most out of any brothel in the nearby cities, and she would be safest there. In her room, she asked for some ink and paper. After she wrote the letter, she paid a servant to deliver it to the Chang compound where she’d left her child so many years ago.

She stayed at the inn for three days, and with each day, began to relax when no dead birds showed up at her door, and she wondered if she had left the vandal back in Yunping. On the third day, she received a reply from the new head of the clan, Chang Ping. In truth, she was surprised that the head of the clan had answered her, but was just glad that he was willing to meet. Since he did not want to be seen with her, though, he inquired about her room number and came to her instead.

It was only once she had confirmed the meeting that Yang FeiFei discarded her disguise and changed into her finer clothes—she would need them if she wanted Chang Ping to listen to her.

When the man came in, nervously glancing over his shoulders half a dozen times, she found that he was willing to meet was because he, too, had been receiving dead birds nailed to his doorway. The vandalism had stopped for two weeks—that week Yang FeiFei had received the birds instead, and the week where she had traveled to Yueyang. The Chang clan had been annoyed that they never caught the vandal, but relieved—until they received Yang FeiFei’s letter.

As they talked, the entire story came out. Chang Cian, Chang Ping’s father, had found the baby a dozen years ago, but he had not wanted him. He’d intended to leave the child in a nearby temple to live or die by the gods’ wills, but a household servant had ended up taking pity and raising the boy until she was fired from the residence for petty theft. After that, they had lost track of the child. Five or so years later, Chang Cian and Chang Ping had been taking a meal at a nearby restaurant, when they saw a young boy staring at the plate of desserts they had been sharing. There had been some trouble with a rival family lately, so Chang Cian had called the boy over and asked him to deliver a letter.

"What's your name, little boy?" Chang Cian asked.

"Xue Yang," the boy said without once taking his eyes off the sweets.

"When you come back, you can have the whole plate of sweets," Chang Cian promised him and handed him the letter.

Chang Cian had not remembered the child, but Chang Ping did. "Father, isn't that Yang Xue? The boy that Long Mei took in?" he said once the boy had run off with the letter.

"Who?" Chang Cian asked. "Come, let's go," he said and got to his feet.

"But the boy—"

"What about him? The task is done," Chang Cian said and put a few pieces of silver on the table to pay.

Although Chang Ping had split ways with his father after that to go on separate business errands, Chang Cian had returned that night beaten by the rival clan. He'd been annoyed as he ranted about the audacity of the rival family, and the little boy who had come begging for sweets again.

Chang Ping looked at Yang FeiFei. "My father said he crushed the boy's hand under his cart—he didn't mean to go so far, but he wasn't sorry about it either," he said. "I tried to look for the boy after, to find some way to compensate him, but I couldn't find him. But if it's really him, why would he leave us chickens like this? And you—as his mother, you never even met him after you left him, did you?" he asked.

Yang FeiFei shook her head. "I never saw him again after I left him on your doorstep," she said. "If it really is him, then why..."

As they spoke, Wei WuXian smelled a familiar woody incense that he recognized now but that Yang FeiFei and Chang Ping thought nothing of.

When Yang FeiFei woke again, she was looking into the red eyes of a young man who was smiling at her. "Why am I doing this to you, you asked?" he said. The smile disappeared. "Why, Mother, did you abandon me?"

From far away, Wei WuXian heard the clang of wood against metal. Once, twice, three times, and then he was opening his own eyes. He scrambled upright and stared at the ghost of Yang FeiFei hovering in front of him. "Lady Yang, you are Xue Yang's mother," he said.

The ghost shut her eyes and slowly nodded.

"I...I'm sorry," Wei WuXian said, unsure of what else he could say after seeing all of that. "We already knew Xue Yang killed you, but you've continued to appear." He thought back to that case he'd worked with Lan WangJi that seemed so long ago now. As he'd analyzed back then, the reasons ghosts appeared were because their killers were not yet found, or they had not had a proper burial. Her killer had been found and brought to justice now. But her body... "Your body wasn't buried properly, was it?" he asked.

Yang FeiFei slowly shook her head.

“After it was discovered, the Chang clan obviously took Chang Ping’s body back, but they wouldn’t take yours. So...did Xue Yang take it?” he asked.

Yang FeiFei nodded again.

“And then you appeared at Beiluo Bridge,” Wei WuXian continued. “I was right all those weeks ago,” he said. “Your body really is in that landborne abyss,” he said. “That’s where Xue Yang got rid of it.” In that abyss by the border of Lanling.

Yang FeiFei nodded.

Wei WuXian got to his feet. “Wen Ning, let’s go,” he said. “We’re going to give Lady Yang a proper burial.”

It took Wen Ning and Wei WuXian longer to get to Beiluo Bridge than it had taken them when Lan Wangji had flown him. Worse, they had to clamber down the side of the gully, slipping and sliding on the vegetation covering the sides of the small canyon and into the fog-covered valley.

The closer they got, the more Wei WuXian could sense the resentment curling at the bottom of that canyon despite the arrays set up by GusuLan cultivators to keep the landborne abyss contained and to keep others away. There were enough layers of arrays that it took Wei WuXian some time to get through them on his own. Between the maze and containment arrays, Wen Ning and Yang FeiFei were unable to follow, which meant that eventually, Wei WuXian would have to break the arrays to let Yang FeiFei’s ghost in.

Once past that last array, the full force of resentment hit Wei WuXian so heavily that he staggered. Even for someone used to living in the Yiling Burial Mounds, surrounded by a mountain of corpses, the resentment here was extremely strong. There were, as he had analyzed months ago, a lot of corpses down here who had died violently if accidentally. But now that he was so close, amongst many of them, Wei WuXian could also sense a deep malice, the worse type of resentment there was—people who had been killed as a result of evil intent and not just accidental death.

But the full horror of it didn’t hit him until he saw what was waiting at the bottom of the foggy ravine. Bodies lay scattered amongst the overgrown vegetation. Broken carts lay along with the broken, skeletal bodies of people fallen from the cliffs long ago as he’d expected. But more than that, there were fresher bodies, half-decomposed and smelling of the sickly sweet smell of decomposition. Bodies of people, some wounded and some not, tossed down here like so many rag dolls. Wei WuXian couldn’t take more than a few steps without his foot brushing by another body.

Wei WuXian could feel the heaviness of the resentment press on him at the same time as his heart pulsed and he could feel the power eager to feed into him.

Wei WuXian bent to test the array keeping the landborne abyss bound. It was a complex one that would have taken several skilled cultivators to set up, which meant it would be difficult to rebuild if he undid it now. But if he wanted Wen Ning and Yang FeiFei to enter the gorge, he would need to.

He bit down on his thumb until it bled, and let the blood drip to the ground on top of the array. He felt another blast of energy when the first drop of blood fell. Then a torrent of resentful energy burst free, sweeping through and around him as the landborne abyss was set free.

It was angry, and more than that, it was hungry from being starved for so long.

“Wen Ning, be careful, don’t let the resentment control you,” Wei WuXian said as the fierce corpse appeared by his side.

“Yes, young master,” Wen Ning said. When he looked up, his eyes were nearly pitch black, and he seemed to crackle with excess energy. He was the strongest that Wei WuXian had ever seen him, feeding off all the resentful energy in the gorge.

“Yang FeiFei?” Wei WuXian called and the ghost appeared in front of him. “Where is your body?”

Yang FeiFei gestured for him to follow. In that same hovey way she’d led them down here the first time, she led Wei WuXian further into the valley. When they were directly below the bridge, she stopped. Up above, Wei WuXian could see the moon shining above the burnt remains of it. Down at his feet, lay a woman’s corpse that had gone through months of decomposition now, only recognizable as the ghost in front of him because the pattern of the clothes were the same. Her hair was in disarray, limp and covered in leaves. Her mouth opened skyward in a soundless scream. A dark stain lay on the dirty remains of her clothes, sunken in at the chest where her heart had been carved out. It wasn’t that she didn’t have a proper burial—she hadn’t been buried at all.

Wei WuXian exhaled as he looked down at her remains. “Lady Yang, thank you for everything,” he said. “We will bring you back for a proper burial. Will that be enough to help you rest in peace?”

Yang FeiFei could not speak in a way that Wei WuXian could hear, but the words she mouthed to him were entirely clear. “I want to see my son,” she said.

“Xue Yang?” Wei WuXian frowned. “But he’s already dead,” he said. “He was arrested after the Chang clan massacre and taken for execution to Koi Tower, unless...”

All the events of Koi Tower came flooding back to him. When he’d run into the Changs there, Chang ShiRei had told him that no one from the Chang clan had actually seen Xue Yang executed. Chang HaoLin had mentioned seeing something—no, some one strange the night of the wedding banquet and it had been someone his uncle knew as well. Right before he’d died, he’d confirmed it. The outbreak of fierce corpses had been worse in the guest quarters and in the Fragrant Palace—one where the Chang cultivators were staying and where they’d been killed, and the other where Jin ZiXuan had retired for the night. The agarwood in his and Lan WangJi’s room had been the same incense used to drug Yang FeiFei and Chang Ping.

“He isn’t dead yet, is he?” Wei WuXian whispered as he stared at Yang FeiFei. “Xue Yang is still alive.”

The ghostly Yang FeiFei, hovering above the shriveled husk of a body, pointed upward just in time for Wei WuXian to see a second corpse that came tumbling down into the gorge. It rolled and came to a stop a little distance from Yang FeiFei’s corpse. When Wei WuXian tipped it over, his eyes widened for two reasons.

First, this was a man who had died from lingchi—hundreds of cuts covered his body so much that his clothes were shredded to pieces and drenched with blood. And yet, the white peony and the man's face were still recognizable even with the blood—this was the body of Jin GuangShan, sect leader of LanlingJin, who had been missing ever since the Jin-Jiang wedding.

And Xue Yang, who had just dumped the corpse of his father, was still on the bridge.

Not for the first time, Wei WuXian wished he had a golden core again. If only he had a sword, he could be up on that canyon ridge where Xue Yang was.

"I'm such an idiot," Wei WuXian cursed. When the Chang cultivators had gone for help at Koi Tower, Jin GuangYao had been part of the party that came to fetch Xue Yang back for sentencing. Since Jin GuangYao had known Yang FeiFei when he was younger, he must have realized his relationship with Xue Yang then and saved him.

Xue Yang did not yet know that Wei WuXian was down here, so he had the element of surprise. But it had taken him and Wen Ning so long to come down the gorge, there was no way Wei WuXian could climb up in time before Xue Yang left and returned to Koi Tower—Koi Tower where Jiang Cheng and Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan still were.

Wei WuXian needed to be up on that canyon ridge to stop him. He had to get there before Xue Yang got away again. If they'd now killed Jin GuangShan and dumped the body, Jin GuangYao must have plans to take over LanlingJin Sect soon. Which meant he would also be setting into motion another plan to kill Jin ZiXuan. Wei WuXian had to get up on that bridge. He needed—

—and all of a sudden, the bridge was getting closer. Wei WuXian had a brief moment of confusion before he looked down and saw the mass of corpses below his feet that had responded to his desire. They piled up beneath him, pushing him skyward up toward the ridge.

There were far more than just a couple dozen corpses—there were hundreds—some who had rotted here since decades ago, but far too many that looked fresher than that. He recognized corpses wearing the uniforms of the LanlingJin Sect, others in the QingheNie Sect uniform of a few years ago—the one they'd worn during the Sunshot Campaign. There were QishanWen Sect cultivators, and still others in uniforms that Wei WuXian didn't recognize. Cultivators would not die from falling off a bridge—not when they could all fly. The only reason cultivator bodies would be down here was because they had been killed and left here. This was a serial murderer's dumping ground.

As the human corpses pushed him higher and higher, Wei WuXian heard animalistic growls join the groaning of the human corpses. Because the ridge was so high, animal corpses had also begun to rise up, pressing against the human corpses to form a mountain that was pushing Wei WuXian up toward the canyon edge.

He was now close enough that he could see the silhouette of a figure standing by the remains of the bridge.

"Faster," Wei WuXian urged the corpses, and felt something thump in his heart. A spasm of pain came from his chest and he had to take several deep breaths even as the corpses carried him up. He couldn't

stop now. He panted, willing himself to concentrate despite the squeezing pressure in his chest. A trickle of sweat ran down his brow.

Before he had caught his breath, he was already at the canyon ledge, and stepped onto it as lightly as stepping on a staircase. He relinquished his accidental control over the corpses as soon as he did, trying not to use any more demonic cultivation. The pain stayed, but didn't get worse. The corpses, though, continued to stream up beside him, pushing against one another of their own will. The resentment was too strong here, feeding into them—especially when they could sense the one who had desecrated their dying place here.

The boy, Xue Yang, was staring at him, a gleaming red look in his eyes as he hungrily eyed the corpses massed behind him.

“Xue Yang,” Wei WuXian said. He took several deep breaths, willing his beating heart to calm down. In the silence, he could hear the groans and growls from the corpses awaiting his command, the crunch of bones and flesh as they climbed atop each other.

Xue Yang smiled. “The Yiling Patriarch,” he said. “It’s good to see you again.”

Wei WuXian felt a shiver go down his spine watching him. “Was it Jin GuangShan or Jin GuangYao who let you go?” he asked.

Xue Yang tilted his head. “How did you know?” he asked.

“Your father or your half-brother—it must have been one of them,” Wei WuXian answered.

Xue Yang’s eyes flashed and he grinned. “How did you find out we’re related?” he asked, delighted. “Is that another ability of demonic cultivation? Will you teach me?”

“Who let you go?” Wei Wuxian repeated.

“Yao-Ge,” Xue Yang answered with a shrug. “Did you think my father would let me go if he wouldn’t even recognize me?”

“Is that why you killed him?” Wei WuXian asked.

“It never mattered to him if I lived or died,” Xue Yang answered. “Why shouldn’t I kill him?”

Wei WuXian laughed incredulously. “You’d kill anyone who doesn’t care about whether you live or die?”

Xue Yang shrugged. “After my adoptive mother died, I was left alone on the streets,” he said. “I vowed to find the birth parents who abandoned me and kill them.”

“You killed them for giving birth to you?” Wei WuXian could still remember the weak tremble in Yang FeiFei’s limbs, the ache in her chest when she was forced to leave Xue Yang on that doorstep. “You have no idea how much your mother loved you. How much she went through for you.”

"She abandoned me," Xue Yang snapped. "If not for her, my finger would still be here." He held up his left hand where his pinky was missing.

Wei WuXian remembered what Chang Ping had said in the memory. "Chang Cian crushed your hand—not your mother."

"If she hadn't abandoned me, I would never have been in Yueyang, never been hungry on the streets, never met Chang Cian, never had my hand crushed," Xue Yang said as though it were a sequence of events that made sense.

"Even if you blame her for it, is a finger worth her death?" Wei WuXian said. "Your father's death? Chang Ping tried to look for you, to help you, and you killed him with lingchi."

"If that's true, why didn't he step in before his father could do that to me? What did I ever do to them to deserve what I got?" Xue Yang spit on the ground. "Chang Cian, that fucking bastard, got ill and suddenly died five months ago," he said. "I couldn't kill him before he died on his own, so I had to make do with the rest of his family." He rolled his shoulders and looked at Wei WuXian again. "Anyway, everyone knows what you did to the Wen clan because of the Lotus Pier Massacre. I'm only doing the same thing," he said. "I'll make you the offer again—why don't you take me as an apprentice?" he asked. "I'm a quick learner."

Wei WuXian felt another surge of anger. "I will never teach you anything," he spit out.

Xue Yang shrugged. "Your loss," he said and reached into his pockets to pull out two halves of a familiar seal.

"So it really was you," Wei WuXian said.

Xue Yang smiled, holding the two halves of the Yin Tiger Seal a little too close for Wei WuXian's comfort. "Who else could it be?" he asked. Then his expression cleared. "You thought it was Yao-Ge, didn't you?" he said and grinned. "My half-brother was far too busy during the wedding, though," he said. "Honestly, I was surprised you and Hanguang-Jun fell for the agarwood, but then, you were pretty preoccupied, weren't you?" he said.

Wei WuXian felt another full body shiver thinking about Xue Yang watching himself and Lan Wangji in the privacy of their room. They had both been intoxicated, Lan Wangji moreso than himself, and Wei WuXian hadn't seen him in so long that he had let himself be distracted from everything else. He'd even left his robe with the seal halves on the ground—once the incense knocked them out, it was more than easy for Xue Yang to pick through his pockets.

"So what did you do—after he staged your execution, you promised to work for Jin GuangYao?" Wei WuXian said, keeping his eyes on Xue Yang's face but tracking the movement of his hands. With the number of corpses here that would come under the control of the Yin Tiger Seal once it was put together, he didn't know how badly things might turn out. Though his own power had grown stronger, he didn't want to use it any more than he had to. "If you think he's watching out for you, you're wrong."

"We work toward a common goal," Xue Yang said. "He wanted our father dead as much as me. Who do you think killed him?" He laughed.

"He did that?" Wei WuXian asked. Lingchi wasn't just murder—it was torture. Xue Yang had already killed that way before, so he had assumed it had been him. But Jin GuangYao...

"It wasn't his preferred way," Xue Yang admitted. "Yao-Ge said he wanted it to be more humiliating and public than this, but I slipped up and let Chang HaoLin see me," he said. "They reported it to my father, so we had to kill them all early."

"Did he kill his own mother too?" Wei WuXian asked.

A complicated expression came over Xue Yang's face. "His mother, unlike mine, loved him," he said. "Enough talk," he said and narrowed his eyes at Wei WuXian. "I've always wondered—between the Founder of Demonic Cultivation and the Yin Tiger Seal, which one is more powerful?"

"No—"

But it was already too late.

Xue Yang tossed one of the two halves of the Yin Tiger Seal up in the air, caught it, and brought them together.

For a moment, Wei WuXian could hear nothing but the roar of spirits screaming so loud that his head hurt. His whole chest cramped and he clutched his robes, doubling over in pain. Sweat beaded on his clammy skin and he took deep breaths. "No, not yet," he hissed through gritted teeth.

The resentment was so thick around him he could barely see, but strangely, no corpses had touched him yet.

When he finally forced himself upright again, Wen Ning was standing in front of him, fending off corpse after corpse that were throwing themselves at them.

"Young Master Wei, don't—" was all Wen Ning could get out before he was distracted by another corpse.

Wei WuXian's chest hurt. His breath was coming out in short pants, and a pain was moving up his back. He felt nauseous and dizzy, as he clutched at his chest. The core—he had to stop using demonic cultivation.

Corpse puppets were usually controlled by whoever controlled them first. Wei WuXian had let go of his control over them to stop using demonic cultivation, but the moment Xue Yang used the Yin Tiger Seal, he, too, had reached to control anything he could. With demonic cultivation, he had to use music to control them. Now that his cultivation had grown stronger, though, a handful of times now—at Koi Tower, at the base of the gorge just now—corpses sometimes obeyed his command at will. Apparently, though, since he hadn't actively used the music, the Yin Tiger Seal worked faster and all the human corpses were throwing themselves at Wen Ning to get to him.

But at the same time, Wei WuXian could see that although the Yin Tiger Seal had been crafted from a beast core itself, it could not control animal corpses. Only the animal corpses still under Wei WuXian's



control were keeping the human ones away long enough for Wen Ning to fight them. The moment he stopped, the sheer number of human corpses would tear both himself and Wen Ning to pieces.

He could feel his skin tingle, and a drop of sweat trickled down his brow.

“Young Master Wei, hurry and leave!” Wen Ning shouted as he tossed another human corpse away.

Through it all, Wei WuXian realized he could hear high-pitched laughter. A short distance away, Xue Yang was standing at the edge of the cliff, holding the Yin Tiger Seal. He was looking in delight alternately at the mountain of corpses behind him, and at Wen Ning, pressing the Yin Tiger Seal together tighter as though experimenting with how to bend Wen Ning to the seal’s control.

Wen Ning was by far the most powerful corpse, but even his eyes were starting to go dark as the power of the Yin Tiger Seal pressed down on him. The longer he fought, the more erratic his movements became, forcing him to pause in his fighting more and more often. In those gaps, corpses threw themselves at him, tearing at his flesh. Though he could not feel pain, if this continued much longer, Wen Ning could still be torn apart.

Wei WuXian couldn’t let Xue Yang leave Beiluo Bridge alive. He couldn’t leave the Yin Tiger Seal here on earth—at all costs he had to destroy that seal before the entire cultivation world was torn apart by it.

Lan Wangji always fought on the front lines during the Sunshot Campaign. He always put others before himself, put Wei WuXian before himself, had been whipped for him, stayed up night and day to find a cure for him. He would understand why Wei WuXian had to make this choice.

“I’m sorry, Lan Zhan,” he whispered. His fingers trembled as he pulled Chenqing from his waist. He raised the flute to his lips, took a deep breath, and blew as he unleashed all the resentful energy he had at once, forcing that core stone inside him to do his bidding.

He could feel the resentment of every dead creature in the gorge and on the cliff edge respond to his will. The corpses snarled around him, the darkness closing in. Wei WuXian felt the power fill him, rushing through his veins from his heart. Under the eerie tune of the ghost flute, the corpses turned as one to Xue Yang who finally realized that things were no longer under his control.

He held up the Yin Tiger Seal, pulled it apart and stuck it back together, but it didn’t do a thing to stop the advancing corpses. Wei WuXian blew harder, this time directing every bit of resentful energy pouring from him at the Yin Tiger Seal. He felt something inside his chest throb hard like something had burst. Pain shot through him. He could no longer feel some parts of his body, he realized vaguely, though the music continued so he must still be playing.

His vision began to go spotty but he blew harder, pushing every bit of his power into the command.

In front of him, he saw Xue Yang’s expression go from frustrated to shock, eyes flickering wide when the Yin Tiger Seal in his hands broke apart with a loud crack.

Then the sound of the flute was drowned when an even louder crack came from Xue Yang’s hands, and the Yin Tiger Seal burst into pieces. The small gray pieces of mysterious metal trickled out of his hands.

"No!" Xue Yang shouted. "No!" He grabbed at the fine powder, trying to scoop it together into some shape, but it was done.

Wei WuXian slowly let the flute down from his lips and swayed where he stood.

"Young Master Wei!" Wen Ning shouted.

"You..." Xue Yang's eyes turned on him. "I'll kill you."

Wei WuXian smiled. "Too late," he said. "It's over." He coughed. When he wiped at his lips, his hand came away red. This was the end, Wei WuXian thought, his vision spotty. He couldn't feel anything other than pain now traveling from his heart to what felt like every part of his body. Everything felt so heavy. He dropped down on one knee.

"Young Master Wei! Hang on, I'll take you back—" Wen Ning said, though he was not in much better condition as he hobbled toward Wei WuXian. He looked terrible, eyes wide and panicked, cuts and bruises all over his body, most of his clothes torn or stained. Wei WuXian wanted to tease him, tell him he'd be scolded so much by Wen Qing when he got back, but he couldn't gather the strength to say that much.

"I'm going to kill you!" Xue Yang snarled, stalking toward him. He pulled a short dagger from his side.

"Young Master Wei!" he heard Wen Ning shout as Xue Yang grabbed Wei WuXian by the front of his robe, raising the dagger high.

Wei WuXian wished he could see the rest of his family one more time—Jiang YanLi, Jiang Cheng, Wen Qing, A-Yuan, Lan Zhan... He wished he could see Lan Zhan one more time.

And then he heard the single note of the guqin ring out in the night.

The resonance cut through the noise like a clear drop of water in a still pool, the power rippling out from it sweeping through the air like a wave.

A blast of resonance cut between them, and Xue Yang was ripped away from him by the force of the music, thrown back toward the cliff edge. Wei WuXian fell to his knees.

Silhouetted by the moon, he saw the familiar figure of Lan WangJi, flying toward them, strumming his guqin, each note more powerful than the last.

When Xue Yang scrambled upright again, he was surrounded by a wall of corpses, now free of his control.

Two of them stood at the head of the crowd.

"Mother," Xue Yang said, looking at the first dessicated corpse of Yang FeiFei that had been left to rot for months now down in that foggy gully, the gaping wet hole in her chest, even worse than her ghost looked. "Father," he said, looking at the second corpse of Jin GuangShan covered in hundreds of cuts so that every movement split his flesh open.

Yang FeiFei took a step forward and opened a skeletal hand. In it, she held out a gold pearl button.

Xue Yang stared at the button, glinting beneath the moonlight, and held out his hand. The corpse slowly dropped the button into it.

Yang FeiFei took another halting step forward, and then another until she stood right in front of Xue Yang. She opened her arms to him.

Xue Yang looked at the button, and again at her face. Then, hesitantly, he stepped into her arms. There, the tension seemed to slide out of his shoulders as he embraced his mother, burying his face into her shoulder. Her hand slid down his hair and his back.

Yang FeiFei met Wei WuXian's eyes and gave him one slow nod.

Then, with her arms locked tight around Xue Yang, her eyes shut for the last time, and her body went limp, falling back into the fog-filled abyss clutched tight around her son.

The strums of the guqin continued, blasting away any corpse that hadn't followed Yang FeiFei and Xue Yang back down into the canyon.

"Lan Zhan..." Wei WuXian said. His voice sounded weak even to his own ears, and he was breathing hard, kneeling on the ground, when Lan WangJi landed.

"Wei Ying." He saw the flash of white and then he no longer had to support himself because Lan WangJi was holding him. "Wei Ying—" He could hear the way Lan WangJi's voice caught and went hoarse.

"Lan Zhan," he whispered, something warm bubbling from his lips as he spoke. He clutched his chest as he looked at the face so dear to him through his fading vision. It was a good thing to see in the end. He tried to smile. "You're here."

"Wei Ying, I'm here," Lan WangJi said, his voice breaking as he gathered him close. "Stay with me. I'm here."

Chapter 17: a song to save him

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian woke to the soft strum of the guqin. He was warm, warmer than he'd felt in awhile now, and comfortable. The song was soft with a gentle, rising melody, and listening to it made Wei WuXian feel calm and at peace.

"Again," he murmured when the music slowed and came to a stop.

At his request, the musician started again, playing the same song that made him forget about everything else when he listened, his mind quiet and body relaxed. It felt like that afternoon Lan WangJi had invited him to bed in Apothecary Pavilion with the gentle sunlight on their backs and Lan WangJi's warm hand smoothing over his cheek, like when he and Lan WangJi had dinner surrounded with the loud chatter of

the Wen family and A-Yuan sitting between them laughing, like the way something deep inside him settled when Lan WangJi's golden gaze landed on him with warm regard. When the song finished again, Wei WuXian opened his eyes.

Lan WangJi was sitting at a table set by the right side of the bed, his long, elegant fingers stilling the strings of the guqin he had been playing. The sunlight streamed through the windows, backlighting Lan WangJi whose very presence lent a tranquility to the room. With a cool breeze bringing the familiar smell of sandalwood to him, Wei Wuxian inhaled and sighed. It had only been a few days but he'd missed Lan WangJi so much, he thought, as he drank in the sight of him. His eyes ran over Lan WangJi's face, the curve of his eyebrows, the deep set of his golden eyes, his straight nose, his pale skin, re-familiarizing himself with that face.

"Lan Zhan..." he said, smiling. He hadn't felt so relaxed in a long time, and his limbs felt loose like not one bit of tension was left.

"Wei WuXian!"

Wei Wuxian's eyes widened when he heard the second voice. Lan QiRen's stern face glared down at him from where he was standing right next to Wei WuXian, brows drawn together and moustache twitching.

"Uncle?" Wei WuXian said. He was still too relaxed to do even question his presence much.

"You—You—how dare you leave the Cloud Recesses on your own! And you dragged Wen QiongLin with you!" Lan QiRen began shouting right away.

"Elder Lan, Young Master Wei still seems quite tired..."

Wei WuXian's gaze shifted to the left side of his bed where he saw another elderly GusuLan cultivator he didn't recognize smiling down at him. That was when he realized he was surrounded by a group of thirty-some elderly GusuLan cultivators who had circled around his bed and Lan WangJi. He also noticed that his hands were being held—one by the smiling elder on one side of the bed, and the other by Lan QiRen. All the elders around his bed were holding hands with each other in a circle.

Wei WuXian's eyes widened. "What...uh...what happened?" he asked tentatively. His hands began to sweat nervously.

Lan QiRen gave him a disgusted look and dropped his grip on Wei WuXian's hand. As though at his signal, the other elders also stopped holding hands.

They were once again in Apothecary Pavilion that had become nearly as familiar as the Jingshi to him in the time he'd spent with Lan WangJi there, though Wei WuXian had never seen this number of people in the room.

"If Wen QiongLin hadn't informed Doctor Wen about you sneaking off the mountain, do you think we could have gotten to you in time?" Lan QiRen shouted. "It was a good thing XiChen thought to put up alert talismans in case anyone broke through our arrays at the landborne abyss or you would be long dead!" he roared.

“Uncle...” Lan Wangji said.

Lan QiRen continued shouting. “If we hadn’t gotten thirty some elders to come with us, do you think we could have passed you enough spiritual energy to keep you alive long enough for the song to work?” His whole face had turned purple with exertion. “You—”

He was interrupted when the door suddenly burst open and Wen Qing came in with an equally furious expression on her face. “Is he awake?” she demanded.

“Wen Qing-Jie,” Wei WuXian said, eager for rescue.

But instead of telling Lan QiRen off for being rough with the patient, Wen Qing pinched him hard on the arm that Lan QiRen had just dropped.

Wei WuXian yelped. “I’m injured,” he said, finally stirring a little more from that peace and calm he couldn’t seem to shake off. Although he was clearly being yelled at, he couldn’t quite summon the usual defenses since he still felt so content and relaxed.

“And I’m about to injure you worse, you absolute moron,” Wen Qing threatened. “How dare you leave the Cloud Recesses in your condition! And dragging Wen Ning along with you! To confront a ghost! And then a murderer! It’s a wonder you haven’t dropped dead a hundred times by now! If Wen Ning hadn’t told me about it, do you think we could have gotten there in time to save you?”

Wei WuXian couldn’t believe he was getting the same lecture twice in a row.

Lan QiRen gave Wen Qing an approving look. “How is he?” he asked, apparently calmer now that Wei WuXian had gotten yelled at twice.

“Hold still, let me feel your pulse,” Wen Qing ordered and grabbed his wrist. She shut her eyes and listened.

Wei WuXian began to assess himself as he waited. He felt fine—better than fine, and well-rested in a way he hadn’t felt in so long now. He could feel the remains of spiritual energy that the elders had been passing him still running through his body. The last time he’d been passed spiritual energy like this had been right after the XuanWu cave incident when he’d been brought back to Lotus Pier delirious with fever. He remembered the warm feeling of Uncle Jiang passing him spiritual energy to help heal him.

Since he had lost his golden core, though, spiritual energy only had minimal effect on him. Back when Wen Qing had removed his golden core, it had been Wen Ning passing him spiritual energy to keep him from passing out. It had gone all right until Wen Qing removed his golden core, and then Wen Ning had described needing to pour in five times the amount of energy originally needed. He’d been nearly as exhausted as Wei WuXian by the end of the procedure.

Because of this, Wei WuXian had never let anyone pass him spiritual energy after the surgery even during those times he’d been injured during the Sunshot Campaign. For one, anyone who did would immediately know that he had no golden core. For another, the amount of energy needed to have an effect on him at all was enormous.

"Uncle, you went to so much trouble to keep me alive?" Wei WuXian asked, surprised. It wasn't as though he thought Lan QiRen wanted him dead, but didn't expect that the Lan elder would work so hard to save him. He looked around at the circle of cultivators surrounding him and wondered just how much spiritual energy they had collectively passed him to keep him alive.

Lan QiRen glared at him, though his face turned a bit red. He coughed. "You are a GusuLan member now, and my nephew's cultivation partner. Why wouldn't we do our best to save you?"

"You better bow to your husband a thousand times for that song," Wen Qing said, finally releasing Wei WuXian's wrist. Her shoulders slumped. "You're stable," she declared.

All around the room, people sighed as though they had been collectively holding their breaths. Lan QiRen, to Wei WuXian's continued astonishment, actually leaned over to pat him on the shoulder, looking relieved.

Wei WuXian looked over at Lan WangJi. "What happened?" he asked again. He remembered how painful it had been when he'd used demonic cultivation on that ridge. He touched his chest. "What song?"

"When you played the flute for Brother and I, I remembered that the Sound of Clarity could help calm Nie MingJue's soul, and Jin GuangYao's other song could cut off spiritual energy," Lan WangJi explained. "There are also other GusuLan music techniques that can be used to break apart stone," he said.

"Like you did back at Koi Tower," Wei WuXian said, remembering that night when the wall had been coming down on him and Lan WangJi's guqin had blasted it away to pieces. "So you played me a song that does what? Cuts off my resentful energy? Breaks the stone?" he guessed because he really did feel lighter than he'd felt in years now. "Did you find it in the Collection of Turmoil?"

Now that the effects of the song were slowly settling into him, he felt surprisingly strong and clear-minded. He was still a little too relaxed and happy for their current situation, maybe, but he could feel the energy coursing through his body and yet none of the oppressive resentment that had circulating through him for years now. He couldn't remember the last time his spirit felt so light.

Lan WangJi shook his head. "I could not find a song that could save you, so I wrote one," he said. "If the player infuses it with spiritual energy when playing it for you, it will shave down the core stone in your heart. I did not have time to write one that would destroy it entirely without hurting you."

"The song is more than that," Wen Qing said. "Even slowly shaving down the core might lodge bits and pieces of it in your bloodstream," she said. "Second Master Lan wrote a song that shaves down your core by converting it into spiritual energy," she said. "That energy stays around your core stone and stabilizes it so it can't move around in your heart—at the size he's shaved it down to, it's sustainable," she said.

"So it...so it won't kill me anymore?" Wei WuXian asked as Wen Qing's words sank in. He glanced between her and Lan WangJi.

Wen Qing snorted. "Not only won't it kill you, the technique allows you to keep your core stone," she said. "As long as you don't get yourself killed some other idiotic way, you're like any other legendary

beast," she said and looked at him. "Congratulations, you've achieved immortality before all the rest of us."

The following silence was broken by a snort from Lan QiRen. "Of all idiots to achieve immortality..." he muttered.

Wei WuXian stared at Wen Qing, and then his eyes flew over to Lan WangJi. "You—you cured me?" he asked. "I'm immortal?"

"Well, it hasn't cured you of stupidity," Wen Qing said.

Lan WangJi shook his head. "The cure is not permanent solution," he said. "The song will need to be played once a day to produce enough spiritual energy to stabilize your core stone," he said. "In order to allow the stone to stay, you will need to continue practicing demonic cultivation."

Wei WuXian's eyes widened. "You mean I can continue to cultivate?" he asked.

"Very little," Wen Qing said quickly. "You'll need to cultivate enough to produce the energy to stabilize your core stone, but more than that, and the stone will start to grow again and you'll end up with the same problem. You've already damaged your heart expanding your core stone the way you did," she said. "You're lucky you're young and there doesn't seem to be permanent damage yet, but I'll have to monitor you for longer to tell for sure."

"I can still cultivate," Wei WuXian said in wonder.

"Have you listened to a word Doctor Wen just said?" Lan QiRen demanded. "You are forbidden to cultivate any more than you need to. You almost died!"

"And don't get ahead of yourself," Wen Qing said. "This isn't license for you to run around practicing demonic cultivation all day. You'll still be at risk of qi deviation more so than the average cultivator thanks to the core stone and the resentful energy," she said. "The spiritual energy currently stabilizing your stone is like a thin membrane—too much resentful energy will either enlarge your stone or tear right through the protective spiritual energy so you'll need constant monitoring—you need to maintain a balance to stay healthy."

"You better listen to Doctor Wen this time," Lan QiRen said before Wei WuXian could respond to Wen Qing. "I've never had such a troublesome student as you."

He seemed ready to start in on another lecture when the elderly GusuLan cultivator on the left side of the bed suddenly burst into laughter. "Ah, it's nice to see you young people with so much energy," he said and got to his feet. He reached over to pat Wei WuXian on the hand. "We are glad to see WangJi has found a good cultivation partner. Us elderly people better leave them to talk," he said with a significant look at everyone else in the room.

Lan QiRen looked like he was tempted to yell some more but instead shot Lan WangJi a look. "Make sure he doesn't get himself in more trouble," he ordered. "We might not be able to save him the next time."

Lan Wangji nodded as the elders began shuffling out of the room.

Wei WuXian smiled and reached out. He had been a little embarrassed to do this in front of thirty-some elders and Lan Wangji's uncle. This time, Wen Qing moved to let him reach Lan Wangji's hand. He noticed then that Lan Wangji's fingers were bleeding. Lines ran through the calluses that had already long been there. He stilled. "Lan Zhan, how long have you been playing for me?"

"That is not important," Lan Wangji said.

"Three days," Wen Qing answered. "Your core stone was too large. Lan Wangji played the song for three days, the elders sent spiritual energy to you for three days," she said and shook her head. "Between the two of you, it's a wonder the medical cultivators here ever get a day off."

She shoved a jar of ointment and a roll of bandages into Wei WuXian's hands. "Here. You take care of him. I'll have someone bring you something to eat," she said and left with the others.

"Do not move," Lan Wangji said when Wei WuXian moved to sit up in the bed, hovering as though unsure whether to push him down or help him up.

"I feel fine," Wei WuXian said and smiled. "Really. Let me do this," he said. "I won't be able to rest well if you don't let me."

Only then did Lan Wangji reluctantly help him sit up and Wei WuXian gestured for him to sit on the bed as he took the bandages to begin wrapping Lan Wangji's fingers. There was so much he wanted to say now—now that he could live, now that they had a second chance at everything. Lan Wangji looked paler and thinner than Wei WuXian remembered, but it would have been three days since he last rested—longer actually, since he had gone into seclusion before that. He was still recovering from the discipline whip injuries as well, Wei WuXian thought as he bandaged his fingers, wrapping each one of the strong, slim digits that had been so injured because of him. He was still figuring out exactly how to say everything when Lan Wangji spoke first.

"Tell me what happened." His voice was low and smooth, stirring something delicious inside Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian smiled at him. "You go first," he said. "Tell me what happened," he echoed Lan Wangji's words as he continued bandaging his hands.

After Wei WuXian had torn down the arrays binding the landborne abyss, GusuLan had automatically been alerted. Lan Wangji and Wen Qing who had been trying to figure out where Wei WuXian and Wen Ning had gone, had immediately split up. Lan Wangji had rushed to Beiluo Bridge while Wen Qing fetched Lan QiRen who gathered the other elders. By the time Lan Wangji arrived on scene, Wei WuXian was in critical condition so he had immediately begun playing the song for him right there on the ridge. Soon after, the elders arrived and began passing him spiritual energy.

Wen Qing had arrived with a second wave of medical cultivators who helped transport Wei WuXian back to the Cloud Recesses while the elders continued to pass him spiritual energy so they could perform emergency procedures and transfusions. Between the spiritual energy, emergency procedures, and



blood transfusions, they had kept him alive for three days until Lan WangJi's song was finally able to shave the stone down to a manageable size.

Only once he had stabilized did Wen Qing go to check on Wen Ning and patch him up as well.

In the meantime, any cultivators not actively working to keep Wei WuXian alive had gone to take care of things at Beiluo Bridge. Bodies were still being retrieved, and before giving them proper burials, they wanted to know their causes of death and had been waiting to speak to Wei WuXian.

"It was Xue Yang and Jin GuangYao," Wei WuXian told Lan WangJi. "Yang FeiFei was Xue Yang's mother," he said as he bandaged Lan WangJi's fingers and told him of all the things he'd seen during Empathy and the sad end her life had come to. "I think Jin GuangYao and Xue Yang realized they were half-brothers when Xue Yang was arrested," he said once he had finished the story. "No, it must have been earlier than that since Yang FeiFei's body was already in the gorge when we found her."

"Mm," Lan WangJi agreed.

Wei WuXian finished wrapping the last of Lan WangJi's fingers but he continued holding the hand he'd finished bandaging last as he thought about all the information he had now. "Lan Zhan, listen to my idea—it's possible that some of the bodies down in the gorge were because of Xue Yang, but Xue Yang didn't care about hiding bodies before he had to fake his death," he thought out loud. "He wanted people to find the bodies and be scared—Jin GuangYao, though, has plenty of reason to hide people he might have killed." He paused, meeting Lan WangJi's eyes. "Lan Zhan, there were so many bodies—some of the older ones really were probably accidental, but I saw cultivator corpses down there—QingheNie, LanlingJin, QishanWen... all sorts. Cultivators can't die from falling into a gorge when they can fly. Maybe a few of them were caught by the landborne abyss before we found it, but the number I saw..."

"The landborne abyss is a good place to hide bodies," Lan WangJi said.

"That's what I think too," Wei WuXian agreed. "There were already enough bodies down there from accidental deaths to form a landborne abyss so no one would be able to investigate too closely without getting killed by it themselves," he said. "The perfect dumping ground." He looked up at Lan WangJi. "Although he sent Xue Yang to do his dirty work this time."

There were still a myriad of other questions he still needed answered—when exactly the two half-brothers had met, how had Yang FeiFei's body ended up in the gorge—but he suddenly remembered the other realization he'd had up at Beiluo Bridge. "Lan Zhan, Jin GuangShan's body was also dumped there," he said. "Xue Yang said Jin GuangYao killed him, but if they planned to hide his body there, no one knows he's dead yet."

Lan WangJi frowned. "If Jin GuangShan is dead, Jin ZiXuan is the new sect leader."

"Jin GuangYao won't want that," Wei WuXian said. "He must have plans to kill Jin ZiXuan before he acknowledges Jin GuangShan's death. That might buy us some time—he can't kill Jin ZiXuan too quickly or two deaths would look suspicious, right?"

Lan WangJi gave a slight shake of his head. "He sent Xue Yang to dump the body," he said.

Wei WuXian's eyes widened. "You think he intends to blame it all on Xue Yang," he said. "That must be why he used lingchi to kill Jin GuangShan since Xue Yang's already used that method to kill once," he said. "After that, he could blame it all on Xue Yang, claim their father set him free and Xue Yang killed him. He might be planning to blame Jin ZiXuan's death on Xue Yang too. If Xue Yang hadn't died at the gorge, he could have him executed, and then there'd be no loose ends." He began struggling out of bed. "We have to go to Koi Tower. Has your brother come back? Jin GuangYao will have another plan to kill Jin ZiXuan. He doesn't know Xue Yang is dead yet—this is our only chance."

Lan WangJi shook his head. "We have no proof."

It was true. The only proof of any of this speculation lay with Xue Yang at the bottom of that gorge—if they made him confess, he would have been the proof they needed, but he was dead now.

"Is there anything left of Xue Yang's body?" Wei WuXian asked hopelessly.

"We will have to wait for the cultivators to finish cleaning the abyss to know," Lan WangJi answered. "But even if we brought back his body, it would not be enough proof."

Wei WuXian sighed. "You're right," he said. "He has to be alive." Without a confession that could convince the sects to investigate, a body would only prove that Xue Yang had not been executed properly, but he was sure Jin GuangYao had a lie prepared for that too.

Wei WuXian tried to think of any other scrap of proof they could provide, but no one alive knew of Yang FeiFei and Meng Shi's connection. All their theories about Jin GuangYao's true plans couldn't be proven.

He was distracted when a servant brought in a tray with steaming white congee on it. "Congee?"

"Young Master Wei has been unconscious for three days. Doctor Wen said that you can only eat congee for a few meals," the servant said. "And no spices." He put the tray down on the table. "Hanguang-Jun, the visitors are still waiting to see you both," he said. "Now that Young Master Wei is awake, should I bring them in?"

"I'll see them outside," Lan WangJi said. "Wei Ying should rest."

The servant nodded. "Then I'll fetch them now."

Lan WangJi brought Wei WuXian the tray, setting it down on the bed.

"Who came to see us?" Wei WuXian asked.

Lan WangJi shook his head. "I do not know." He hesitated, lingering by the bed, and Wei WuXian smiled.

"Go and see what it's about," Wei WuXian said. "I can take care of myself here."

"I will be right outside," Lan WangJi said.

"Go." Wei WuXian laughed.

Lan WangJi looked back one more time before he left, sliding the door shut behind him. A few minutes later, he heard the murmur of quiet voices outside.

Wei WuXian relaxed, letting Lan WangJi take care of business as he stayed in bed and ate. But when he had finished eating and Lan WangJi still had not come back, curiosity overcame relaxation. He was wearing only a set of clean inner robes. His outer robes had been freshly cleaned and left folded by the bed, though, so he pulled them on before walking out. He was both surprised and relieved to find that though all his limbs were languid and relaxed, his body felt strong—just well-rested in a way it hadn't felt in far too long.

When he walked into the outer room, he saw Lan WangJi sitting at a table with two familiar faces. Tea had been poured for all three and they were discussing something in low voices clearly out of consideration for Wei WuXian because their two guests were not naturally quiet people.

"Liu FengYa? Guo Yi?" He stared at the two young cultivators.

Lan WangJi looked up as he came in and silently began pouring a fourth cup of tea as Wei WuXian sat beside him.

"Yiling Patriarch," Liu FengYa and Guo Yi both said politely.

Wei WuXian grinned. "That isn't a real title, you know," he said, taking the cup Lan WangJi put in front of him and taking a small sip. "Just call me Wei WuXian," he said and grinned. "Or Wei-Gege," he teased. "I'm okay with Xian-Gege too." He glanced at Lan WangJi. "Hm, that goes for you too, Lan Zhan. I call you Lan Er-Gege all the time, where's my 'gege'?"

"That's because you're shameless!" Liu FengYa burst out, bright red. "You think Hanguang-Jun would be as shameless as you?"

"I thought Senior Wei was injured?" Guo Yi said with a loud cough, apparently deciding to bypass both the Yiling Patriarch and gege titles altogether.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Wei WuXian said, waving away the concern though he couldn't help smiling at Lan WangJi. "Lan Zhan took care of it," he said. "What did you two come here about? Another delivery?"

Guo Yi and Liu FengYa exchanged a sheepish glance. "So first, we really didn't know at the time," Guo Yi said. "We didn't even know until we heard about what happened at Koi Tower after we got there with the letter," he said. "We really didn't know."

"Are you copying Nie HuaiSang? How many 'I don't know's do you need to say?" Wei WuXian asked, grinning. "What didn't you know? You knew about the Yin Tiger Seal attack."

"If we'd known what was going to happen, we wouldn't have delivered it," Liu FengYa hurriedly said.

"Delivered what?" Wei WuXian asked. "The letter to Jin ZiXun?"

Guo Yi frowned. "What? No. That really was—"

"The beast core was our fault," Liu FengYa blurted out all at once. He bowed so low that his head nearly touched the table top. "When we first met Senior Wei in Caiyi Town, you asked what we were delivering, and we said we didn't know, which was true at the time, but after we came back and realized we'd have to take the long way, I convinced Guo Yi—"

"It was my fault," Guo Yi said. "I should have insisted we not look."

"It was me," Liu FengYa said.

Wei WuXian sighed. "None of us work for the Tang clan so you aren't going to get in trouble, kids. Just tell us."

"Remember how we told you we had a huge package to deliver?" Guo Yi said. "When we realized we had to go the long way, we opened it to see if we might switch the goods into a smaller package," he explained and took a deep breath. "That box was so big and enforced because they were keeping a beast core inside," he said. "If not for the box, the core would have attracted all sorts of beasts."

There was only one beast core Wei WuXian had encountered since then. "And your delivery address was?" he asked anyway.

"Koi Tower," Guo Yi confirmed.

"It wasn't for Jin ZiXun, though, was it?" Wei WuXian said.

Liu FengYa shook his head. "No, it was for someone called Su MinShan. He looks kind of like an uglier version of Hanguang-Jun, actually."

Wei Wuxian couldn't help laughing a little at that. "I told you, didn't I, Lan Zhan." He nudged Lan Wangji in the side. "He's trying to copy you! Even the juniors can tell." Wei WuXian's smile grew, but he turned back to the young cultivators. "So you realized you delivered the core that made the Tiangou."

They both nodded. "It's our fault Young Master Wei and Young Master Jin almost died," Guo Yi said and they both bowed again. "Please forgive us."

"So that was what the two of you were whispering about when I caught you," Wei WuXian said.

Guo Yi looked sheepish, and Liu FengYa looked like he might start crying. "Forgive us, Senior Wei," Liu FengYa said.

Wei WuXian smiled. "Well, you couldn't have known what was going to happen," he said. "Anyway, no one was hurt." He leaned forward at the table. "But when you delivered it to him, was there anyone else there?" he asked.

Guo Yi shook his head. "No, he was alone. Well, there were a few MolingSu cultivators with him, but no one we recognized."

"That's not true. Remember, he was meeting with Lianfang-Zun," Liu FengYa said.

Wei WuXian's gaze sharpened. "Meeting with Lianfang-Zun?"

"He was in another room, though," Guo Yi said.

"Where exactly was Su She when you delivered it?" Wei WuXian asked.

"The Blooming Gardens," Liu FengYa answered easily. "They told us he'd been meeting with Lianfang-Zun there all day so that's where we went to get his signature seal," he said.

"And you left it in the Blooming Gardens with Su She?" Wei WuXian asked.

Guo Yi nodded.

"He didn't ask you to deliver it to his guest room?" Wei WuXian asked to make sure.

Liu FengYa shook his head. "He said it was something for the wedding. At the time, we just thought they were going to make a treasure out of it as a wedding gift, but..."

Everyone knew what had ended up happening there.

Wei WuXian looked at the young cultivators. "If you saw the stone again, would you recognize it?" he asked.

They both nodded.

Wei WuXian smiled. "Good job, both of you," he said and exchanged a glance with Lan WangJi. "Then, shall we pay a visit to Koi Tower?" He got to his feet. "I think we've found the proof we need."

They would not let him go.

"Not a chance," Lan QiRen said even after Wei WuXian had explained the urgency of the situation. Lan WangJi would not let Wei WuXian set a foot outside the Cloud Recesses without Wen Qing's express approval of his good health, and Wen Qing had immediately sent for Lan QiRen apparently to back her up. "Jin GuangYao is sworn brothers with XiChen. Why on earth would he do anything to harm him?"

"Uncle, he's actual brothers with Xue Yang," Wei WuXian tried to reason with him. "The Tang boys will tell you—"

"I mean, we don't know that they're actually brothers," Guo Yi said. "You're the one who said that."

"Fine, they delivered the actual beast core to Koi Tower," Wei WuXian said. "That definitely happened and it nearly killed me and Jin ZiXuan. Isn't GusuLan's motto to be righteous? That includes investigation, right?"

Lan QiRen frowned. "XiChen has been gone for some time..." he said.

“Exactly! If we go now, Jin GuangYao doesn’t know Xue Yang is dead yet or that we’ve fought Jin GuangShan’s corpse. We still have a chance to catch him by surprise,” Wei WuXian reasoned.

“Absolutely not,” Wen Qing said just as Lan QiRen seemed to be softening.

Wei WuXian sighed. “Wen Qing-Jie, my shijie is still at Koi Tower. Jiang Cheng is at Koi Tower. Lan XiChen is at Koi Tower. The future sect leader of LanlingJin is there—if I don’t get there in time to stop Jin GuangYao, then—”

“Absolutely not,” Wen Qing repeated, folding her arms. “Do you even know how close you came to dying? It took thirty-some elders to keep you alive for three days while Hanguang-Jun and I worked on you. You’ve only just regained consciousness and you already want to risk your life again?”

“But you said I’m immortal now—”

“Only if you don’t accidentally kill yourself like you’re so determined to do, apparently,” Wen Qing said. “You are definitely not risking your life like this! Leave it for someone else!”

Lan QiRen sighed. “If you’re really so concerned about your family, I’ll discuss it with the elders,” he said. “We’ll see if we can send some cultivators over to check on the situation.”

“By then it might be too late,” Wei WuXian argued. “How long will that take?”

“A day or two at most,” Lan QiRen answered. “If they’ve waited that long, they can wait a little longer.” He narrowed his glare at Wei WuXian. “That is final. You are to stay and rest. We didn’t bring you back from the dead for nothing,” he said.

After eyeing him a bit longer to make sure he wasn’t going to suddenly try to dart past him or whatever it was Lan QiRen was expecting, the Lan elder finally left the room.

“You heard him,” Wen Qing said. “Rest. I’ll have someone bring you medicinal broth and I want you drinking all of it. Second Master Lan, you’ll be around?” she asked.

“Mm.” Lan WangJi nodded.

“Watch him,” Wen Qing ordered and then she too left.

Wei WuXian sighed and slumped back in his chair. “Lan Zhan, since when did your uncle and Wen Qing get along so well?” he demanded. “They’re ganging up on me.” He pouted. “Why did you have to make Wen Qing come?”

Lan WangJi gave Wei WuXian a steady look, and Wei WuXian couldn’t help softening. “All right, all right, I know you’re just being careful,” he said, unable to stay annoyed at him no matter how worried about his family he was. “Well, if I can’t go anywhere then I want a nap,” he decided. “Lan Zhan, can we go back to the Jingshi?” he requested. “I’ll sleep better there.”

“Mm,” Lan WangJi agreed.

Wei WuXian looked at him and decided to try his luck. “Lan Zhan, since Wen Qing says I need to rest, will you carry me back?” he requested although he had clearly walked fine by himself to the outer room.

As good as Lan Wangji was to him, as much as Wei WuXian knew that Lan Wangji did care about him, he still didn’t actually expect Lan Wangji to suddenly stand and scoop Wei WuXian up, one hand around his shoulders, and the other beneath his knees.

“Lan Zhan—” Wei WuXian stared up at him, feeling his face heat up even as he grabbed Lan Wangji’s collar to steady himself. He’d been carried by Lan Wangji multiple times now but never in such an embarrassing, intimate position yet.

The two boys clearly didn’t expect to see this either.

“Uh, um, we should go!” Liu FengYa blurted out, his face bright red. “Hurry up, Guo Yi, let’s go,” he hissed and began shoving his friend out the door.

Wei WuXian thickened his face as though this were entirely normal. “Are you two staying in the guest quarters?” he asked.

Guo Yi nodded, looking in every direction except at them. “Yeah, in the last building,” he said. “Why?”

“No reason,” Wei WuXian said and turned back to Lan Wangji. “All right, Lan Zhan, let’s go,” he said and smiled as Lan Wangji carried him away.

Back in the Jingshi, Lan Wangji set Wei WuXian gently on the bed. Here, everything smelled like sandalwood instead of the medicinal scent that permeated Apothecary Pavilion, and Wei WuXian inhaled deep, relaxing as he undid his outer robes to toss them aside before lying down again.

Lan Wangji, in his usual way, bent to retrieve his discarded robes and folded them neatly, putting them away in their shared cupboard.

Wei WuXian smiled as he watched him. “Lan Zhan, you must be tired too,” he said. “Come sleep with me.” He felt a small sense of déjà vu as he patted the space beside him, glancing at Lan Wangji a few times before Lan Wangji also took off his outer robes and got into bed beside him. Their bed was still huge, and Lan Wangji, as usual, kept a careful measure of distance between them. The last time they’d shared a bed was in Apothecary Pavilion when Lan Wangji had invited Wei WuXian to sleep beside him. Wei WuXian had been too afraid to get any closer to Lan Wangji for fear of hurting him then, but now...

Wei WuXian took a deep breath and shifted that armslength of distance over, tucking himself up against Lan Wangji’s side. He felt like he couldn’t breathe, his heart thumping so hard he hoped it wouldn’t affect the core stone inside him. He felt Lan Wangji stiffen beside him at first before he slowly let out a breath. After a long moment, Wei WuXian felt Lan Wangji’s arm shift from where he was pressed against it. At first, he thought Lan Wangji planned to push him away, say something about how he didn’t want to be touched. As he braced himself for the rejection, though, Lan Wangji only gently shifted him so that Wei WuXian’s head was pillowed on his chest, and Lan Wangji’s arms circled around him.

He was being held.

Wei WuXian took a deep, shuddering breath. He bit his lip, wanting to look at Lan WangJi's face but not quite daring to—afraid of what he might see, afraid of what he might not see. But as Lan WangJi's hands stroked gently along his back, soothing, he found himself slipping into sleep before he had made up his mind about whether or not to look.

In the middle of the night, Wei WuXian woke.

He lay still for a long time, listening to the sound of Lan WangJi's heartbeat and feeling the rhythmic rise-and-fall of his chest as he slept. When he was sure Lan WangJi was still asleep, he slowly extricated himself from his arms, a little regretful he couldn't stay there longer, even as he pulled on those outer robes that Lan WangJi had folded for him.

He glanced at Lan WangJi's pale, sleeping face, so handsome under the moonlight. He really did look tired after so many days without sleep, Wei WuXian thought fondly, hoping Lan WangJi would get as much rest as he needed. Then he slipped out the door.

With the GusuLan curfew, all of the Cloud Recesses was silent with only the whisper of the breeze through tree branches to accompany him as he headed for the guest quarters.

GusuLan didn't have many guests staying over at the moment so it didn't take long to find Liu FengYa and Guo Yi's shared room by following the sound of soft snores. He slipped inside their room, noting with amusement that while Guo Yi had haphazardly hung his outer robes by the edge of the bed, Liu FengYa's were scattered on the floor.

Wei WuXian snuck up to Guo Yi's bed first and covered the boy's mouth with one hand.

Guo Yi jolted awake, eyes wide as he scrambled for his sword before he recognized Wei WuXian.

"Senior Wei?" he hissed. "What are you doing here?"

"Shh," Wei WuXian whispered before he turned and woke Liu FengYa in the same way.

Liu FengYa screamed when he woke, muffled only by Wei WuXian's hand, and then nearly punched him in the eye when he scrambled up.

"Get dressed, boys, we need to go to Koi Tower," Wei WuXian said.

"Now? But I want to sleep," Liu FengYa complained.

"Everyone there is in danger," Wei WuXian said. "Now."

Grumbling, Liu FengYa and Guo Yi nonetheless obeyed and got dressed, rubbing their eyes and fetching their swords. When the delivery boys were ready, Wei WuXian led the way, sneaking out of the guest quarters and heading for the Cloud Recesses walls he had vaulted over so many times before.

They waited until the night patrol had passed them and then Liu FengYa and Guo Yi pulled out their swords and flew up, hovering just above the wall and waiting for him.



It had been several days now since Wei WuXian had used so much physical exertion on his body. He still didn't know exactly how his stabilized core stone would affect him now. He took a deep breath, braced himself, and jumped—

—only for a strong arm to wrap suddenly around his waist. Wei WuXian turned and saw Lan WangJi lifting him up, hovering in the air with him on Bichen.

“Lan Zhan...” Wei WuXian said, staring at him. His heart beginning to sink as he wondered how angry Lan WangJi was, and how he'd explain himself. This was the third time he was leaving the Cloud Recesses without permission now.

But to his surprise, Lan WangJi met his gaze. “You are truly determined to go?” he asked.

Wei WuXian didn't want to disappoint him, had never wanted to disappoint him from the first time Lan WangJi asked him to return to the Cloud Recesses with him. But like he'd been forced into demonic cultivation back then, he couldn't stand by while his family was in danger. “I have to,” he said finally.

He didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until Lan WangJi nodded. “Then I will go with you,” he said.

And together, they left the Cloud Recesses.

Chapter 18: madam yu's tablet stops a coup d'etat

Chapter Text

As they flew, the Tang delivery boys a little distance in front of them, Wei WuXian felt the gentle warmth of spiritual energy flowing over him.

“Lan Zhan, don't,” he said. “Save your energy for Koi Tower. We don't know what the situation will be like when we get there.”

“You're cold,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian laughed and pressed closer, hugging Lan WangJi around his waist and laying his face down against his shoulder. “I'll be fine like this,” he said, and was both surprised and pleased when Lan WangJi's arm tightened more securely around his waist.

After all this was over, Wei WuXian wondered what they would do. Maybe they could go away somewhere for awhile just the two of them—travel a bit, go wherever the trouble was like Lan WangJi preferred to do, night hunt together. Thinking back on a lot of things now, Wei WuXian thought he'd always worked well with Lan WangJi. Even when they'd first met and were just classmates when Wei WuXian was more preoccupied annoying Lan WangJi into paying attention to him than anything else, they'd suppressed twater ghouls and found that waterborne abyss together. When he'd been dragged down saving Su She, Lan WangJi had been the one paying attention in time to drag them both out. That was the first time, but every time after that—when Lan WangJi stepped in at the archery tournament, when they'd fought together during the Sunshot Campaign, with Yang FeiFei's case, Koi Tower, and now—there was no one Wei WuXian synced so well with.

“Lan Zhan, have you thought about what we’ll do after all this is over?” Wei WuXian asked.

“I haven’t,” Lan WangJi said after a moment. He glanced down and Wei WuXian grinned up at him from where he’d shamelessly pillowed his head.

“That’s good. Then I can do the planning,” Wei WuXian said.

“Planning?” Lan WangJi asked.

“Mm, I want to go night-hunting with you some more. Ah, maybe less complicated cases for awhile though. We can take a break and help some ordinary citizens with their problems,” Wei WuXian said, thinking out loud. “Maybe we could start in Yunmeng. Jiang Cheng never wants to take the ordinary cases if they won’t bring YunmengJiang honor, and I haven’t been back in awhile so I’m sure there’ll be something that needs exorcising—you still haven’t visited Lotus Pier either even though I invited you so many times. You’ll come this time, right?”

Wei WuXian had a fleeting thought whether Lan WangJi might not want to go along with his plans. But then, Lan WangJi loved night hunting—his reputation was so good because he went wherever the trouble was. Surely, he wouldn’t mind Wei WuXian coming with him on night hunts. They could stay at inns—not brothels, of course—that was a one-case situation and Hanguang-Jun had a reputation to uphold, after all. So did Wei WuXian now that they were married, come to think of it. He felt a bit guilty that he must have shredded Lan WangJi’s reputation to tatters in these last few months together.

“Mm,” Lan WangJi agreed.

Wei WuXian grinned wider. “I hope this warm weather keeps up. Maybe there will still be some lotus pods we can pick,” he said. “Have you ever had the ones fresh with the stems still on them? They’re better than the ones without the stems,” he told Lan WangJi. “Oh and I want to show you my favorite pancake stall,” he said. “Jiang Cheng and me used to go there all the time—he says he’s a sect leader now so he can’t be seen eating scallion pancakes at a stall as though he doesn’t always take them when I bring them home anyway.”

The trip to Koi Tower would take some time so Wei WuXian rambled, talking to his heart’s content. Part of it was to take his mind off the situation at Koi Tower, since they couldn’t do anything about it until they got there. The other part of him simply liked to talk—especially to Lan WangJi. Just a few months ago, he’d thought Lan WangJi was such a boring person, but now he couldn’t think of anyone he’d rather talk with, anyone else he’d go anywhere with.

“Lan Zhan.” Wei WuXian paused in the story he was telling Lan WangJi. “Lan Zhan, look at me,” he said, tilting his head so he could see the face of his husband. He suddenly needed to know Lan WangJi was paying attention to him.

Lan WangJi, who had been facing the front to keep them flying in the right direction and keep an eye on the Tang delivery boys, looked down. His eyebrows tilted just slightly so Wei WuXian knew he was wondering why Wei WuXian suddenly wanted him to look down.

Lan WangJi was beautiful, his fine features as though carved from jade beneath the moonlight. Wei WuXian had always admired him since their youth, but now knowing all the things he knew about him, having seen him in that glimpse of Yang FeiFei's memory, hearing the confessions about Lan WangJi's childhood, knowing how much Lan WangJi had sacrificed for him—yes, Lan WangJi was talented, a natural gifted genius who could push his body beyond what ordinary people could when he needed to. Yet, he was also the most human person Wei WuXian knew.

His heart was suddenly full of unspeakable fondness. "Lan Zhan, you're really good," he blurted out. It was something he'd said to Lan WangJi before, but every time, he found himself meaning it more. "You're so good, Lan Zhan. You're the best. I'm glad—" I'm glad I met you, glad I married you, glad I fell—

"Hey, where are you guys going?"

Wei WuXian felt Lan WangJi's arm tighten around his waist and the sword come to a hovering stop in midair.

Liu FengYa was giving them a disgruntled look as he and Guo Yi slowly flew up to join them. Sometime during their conversation, Lan WangJi had accidentally overtaken the delivery boys to pull in front of them.

"Look." Guo Yi pointed ahead.

Koi Tower was the tallest structure in Lanling. With a thousand steps leading up to the massive tower, it could be seen even from the outskirts of the city. On an ordinary night, the moonlight outshone the few lanterns lit at Koi Tower during the night. But apart from banquets and festivals, Koi Tower would never be lit with so many lanterns and torches that even from the outskirts of Lanling City, the tower looked as though it was the gleaming sun. The last time so many lanterns had been lit was the eve of the Jin-Jiang wedding.

"They know we're coming," Wei WuXian said.

Since the Jin-Jiang Wedding Massacre, security at Koi Tower had been tight. But it had been a few weeks since then, and after the LuozhuangWang and HedongFu clans had been wiped out, there shouldn't be any major threats to the Jin clan.

And yet, Koi Tower was lit up like it was noonday.

Lan WangJi led the way, landing on the streets some distance from Koi Tower where they began walking on foot. The Tang delivery boys followed his example, looking nervously around themselves and sticking close to Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian.

The streets of Lanling City so late at night were more or less deserted. Apart from a drunk or two stumbling around and the distant sounds coming from brothels, ordinary citizens were asleep. As they approached the main road to the tower, Wei WuXian held out a hand and Lan WangJi stopped. The two delivery boys stared wide-eyed as Wei WuXian gestured for them to head to the shadows of some nearby trees overlooking a small inn. Unfortunately, a donkey that had been tied beneath the tree woke and squinted at its sudden companions.

Wei WuXian grinned and patted it on its rump. “Good donkey, stay quiet,” he said.

The donkey opened its mouth and began to bray as loudly as it could, immediately drawing several loud curses from the buildings around them.

“Shh! Be quiet!” Wei WuXian hissed, quickly feeling around its small saddlebag until he pulled out an apple.

The donkey stopped mid-bray to stare at the apple.

“You have to be quiet after I give you this,” Wei WuXian told it.

He wasn’t sure if the donkey actually understood or not, but it nipped the apple from his fingers and turned its back on them in favor of food.

Wei WuXian sighed and turned to the others. “There’s guards posted all along the stairs,” he said, gesturing to the main road up the tower. “We won’t make it to the main entrance before Jin GuangYao has us arrested. We’ll have to go another way.” He turned to the two delivery boys. “Liu FengYa, Guo Yi—if you two don’t want to continue, you can stay at this inn and wait for us,” he said. “It might be dangerous up there.”

Liu FengYa and Guo Yi exchanged a glance and then both shook their heads. “We’re coming with you,” Guo Yi said. “It was our fault the beast core almost killed you and Young Master Jin. If we’d spoken up as soon as we found out, it might not have gotten this bad.”

“We’re cultivators too,” Liu FengYa added proudly. “If anyone tries to say anything bad about you, you’ll need us.”

Wei WuXian grinned. “I’m glad you think that way, but it really will be dangerous—this won’t be cultivators fighting against fierce corpses in there,” he said. “Fighting living humans—that’s much worse.”

“We’re ready,” Liu FengYa said.

“We can do it,” Guo Yi agreed, nodding.

Truthfully, Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had been in much worse danger in their youth. Back then, with the Wen sect in power, they were liable to be dragged off to Nightless City or killed with some flimsy excuse or other, so everyone had cultivated like crazy. Now that there had been peace for a few years, the younger generations didn’t have to work so hard anymore, but there was nothing like a little danger to gain experience fast.

“All right. Then when we get inside, both of you stick close to us,” Wei WuXian said.

“How are we getting inside, though? Guards are everywhere,” Guo Yi pointed out.

Wei WuXian grinned. “There’s always more than one way into a building,” he said. “Follow me.”

He began to circle around the trees, only to be arrested by another loud bray. The donkey had gotten to its feet and was pulling at the rope securing it to the tree.

“Shh, I already fed you!” Wei WuXian scolded the donkey.

The donkey let out another discontented bray until Wei WuXian reached into the saddlebag to pull out a second apple.

But as he turned to go, the donkey swallowed the apple in two bites and then bit Wei WuXian’s outer robe.

“I uh, I think it wants to come with us,” Liu FengYa said.

“Stealing is prohibited,” Lan WangJi said.

“I don’t want a donkey. I just want it to shut up,” Wei WuXian said as he undid the rope tying the donkey to the tree. “All right. You’re free,” he said to the donkey. “Go away.” He patted it a few times on its rump.

The donkey dropped Wei WuXian’s robe from between its teeth but stood there, watching.

Wei WuXian reached for a third apple from its saddlebag, but this time, he waved it a few times in front of the donkey. “Look, an apple. You like apples, right? Go fetch!” He threw the apple as far as he could down the street.

The donkey turned to chase the apple, and Wei WuXian quickly motioned for the others to follow. Circling around the trees, Wei WuXian led them down a narrow alley and then another until they had moved some distance away from the main road up to Koi Tower until they came to the banks of a small river.

“My shijie was engaged to Jin ZiXuan since childhood so we came here at least once a year,” Wei WuXian said as they approached the river, “So Jiang Cheng and I would go exploring.” Out of sheer curiosity, Wei WuXian had poked his nose in wherever he could, charming the chefs at Koi Tower into giving them snacks, getting some of the young disciples their age to show them where the best climbing trees were, opening as many doors as he could just to see where they went. And that was how he and Jiang Cheng had accidentally stumbled onto this particular servants’ road in.

“Koi Tower is so big and rich, it actually has several servants roads that lead inside,” Wei WuXian said. “The biggest ones are to the north and the east—that’s where they get the usual deliveries, but this one,” he said as he searched around the banks of the river. “But if I remembered correctly, this is where servants bring down the laundry to wash,” he said as he finally located the tiny footpath leading up from the banks of the river toward Koi Tower.

“Why isn’t anyone guarding this road?” Liu FengYa asked, looking up the unguarded path at Koi Tower.

“Why do you think?” Wei WuXian said.

Liu FengYa scrunched his eyebrows together. “Because servants aren’t important?” he tried.

Wei WuXian laughed. “If you really think that, try living at one of these places a day without servants to run it,” he said. “And if that were true, the other roads the servants use wouldn’t be guarded either.”

“Because it’s winter,” Guo Yi said. “Laundry can’t be done at the river in the winter because it’s too cold,” he said. “They’ll be doing laundry far less, and they’ll have to carry water up and heat it for use.”

“So since no one has used this path in a few months, they didn’t remember to guard it,” Liu FengYa said, brightening. “Or didn’t think it was important enough to guard.”

Wei WuXian nodded. “Exactly,” he said. “Most likely, they set up all these guards because of Sect Leader Lan, so they should be expecting all of GusuLan to show up at their doors,” he said. “All the honorable sects who would come to LanlingJin would use the front door, so that’s what they’re prepared for. Since Jin GuangYao is cautious, I suspect the major servant roads will be guarded too, but this unofficial shortcut that servants use to bring laundry down? They’ll never guess we’d come in this way.”

“Arrays,” Lan Wangji reminded him.

“I know,” Wei WuXian said. “There will still be arrays set up once we enter Koi Tower,” he said. “But if I guessed right, they won’t have set up any alarms on this path until get inside. They’re expecting your entire sect—not just the four of us.”

He picked up a stick off the ground and began scratching in the dirt. “This is how Koi Tower is set up—Fragrant Palace here, Blooming Gardens where Jin GuangYao should be here, guest quarters, kitchens, stables, and other buildings here—” He sketched a rough layout of the LanlingJin headquarters. “With Koi Tower lit up like this, either Jin GuangYao has convinced Jin Zixuan there’s some sort of emergency, or more likely, he’s put Jin Zixuan and my shijie, probably Jiang Cheng and Sect Leader Lan under house arrest too. He won’t be able to put them in the dungeons with their status, but there’s a good chance he has them trapped in Fragrant Palace.” He jabbed at the circle he’d drawn for the palace. He traced a line down to the circle he’d drawn for the outer wall. “Here is where we are. The main gate is here, the major side doors are here and here. The most concentrated number of cultivators should be on guard at these other three locations.”

“What about Fragrant Palace?” Guo Yi asked. “Shouldn’t there be guards there?”

“Yes, but there won’t be as many as these outer defenses,” Wei WuXian said. “At least not now because they’ll want to be prepared for a full shield array.”

Shield arrays were the most troublesome to set up but also the strongest out of all defense arrays. A full shield array required dozens of practiced cultivators to stand around the area of defense. Each cultivator would set up a portion of the shield array so that altogether, it could form a full dome of impenetrable protection so that nothing could get in or out until the array was broken. Lotus Pier had set up such an array back when the Wen sect suddenly attacked. If they had had more time to reinforce it or there had been less Wen cultivators chipping away at that array, it might not have ended the way it did.

It was also a defense array that everyone had used many times during the Sunshot Campaign to protect military bases. Back then, Wei WuXian had left most of the training and commanding to Jiang Cheng

since he was the Yunmengjiang Sect Leader that their cultivators would obey on the battlefield. Wei WuXian's own army of the dead didn't need any training for him to command. Still, he'd been a part of enough military strategy meetings to know the general layout of such defenses.

"Since Jin GuangYao expects GusuLan cultivators, that gives us an advantage if we sneak through the side," Wei WuXian said. "They won't guard this door heavily and it'll be much harder for them to catch us once we're in too."

In fact, Wei WuXian had a particular familiarity with defense arrays because of his part in the Sunshot Campaign. Most of the time, Wei WuXian took on stealth missions because his army was invisible until he raised them. No one noticed a lone young man walking in and out of city walls, and by the time the dead rose, it was too late for them. He'd taken down hundreds of QishanWen Sect defense arrays from the inside. Between the corpses attacking their own family members inside and Yunmengjiang forces attacking from the outside, it had been no wonder Wei WuXian had been the subject of Wen clan nightmares.

He felt a brief moment of disappointment that it had been long enough that all the corpses at Koi Tower would have been properly buried with the funeral rites done correctly to prevent them from coming back. If he wanted to use those corpses, he'd have to dig them up first and disturb their graves—he'd done plenty of that during the Sunshot Campaign as well, but wouldn't have time today.

"Once we're in, we go straight to the Fragrant Palace," Wei WuXian instructed. "Ready?" He looked between Guo Yi and Liu FengYa.

The boys were pale but they both nodded.

"Fly low," Lan WangJi said and picked up Wei WuXian by the waist again, demonstrating for the delivery boys by flying close to the ground and at a fast speed up toward the tower.

The delivery boys didn't have as much control as Lan WangJi and wobbled, hovering about an arm's length away from the path, but traveling as fast as they could to keep up.

Lan WangJi set Wei WuXian down again once they were just outside the door. Wei WuXian was glad to see that since it was a servants door, it was just as simplistic as it had been back when he'd visited. The door itself was made of only a few planks of wood, and more importantly, it was kept locked by only a single thick plank of wood that he could see through the gap in the doorframe.

"Lan Zhan, your sword," Wei WuXian said and took it when Lan WangJi handed him Bichen.

"What are you doing?" Liu FengYa whispered. "Didn't you just say there aren't any wards on this door? Can't we just blow it open with a talisman?"

"If we just blow the door in, it'll alert all of Koi Tower we're here," Wei WuXian whispered as he stuck Bichen through the small gap in the door, gently lifting the sword up until it touched the plank of wood holding it shut. "This way, they'll at least have to search awhile before they find us." He winked at them. "I've broken into enough places to know how to do this right."

Then he lifted the sword up in one motion. They heard the plank of wood fall from its position on the other side. Wei WuXian tossed the sword back to Lan WangJi who pushed the door open and rushed in.

By the time Wei WuXian had crossed the threshold, Lan WangJi had already knocked out the half dozen or so cultivators and servants nearby.

"The Fragrant Palace," Wei WuXian said and they began heading in the direction of the main building.

As Wei WuXian had predicted, soon, there were groups of cultivators rushing back and forth in the directions of the main roads as they tried to figure out where intruders had broken in.

In the confusion, no one noticed four people heading for the Fragrant Palace.

Sticking to the shadows clearly wasn't something Lan WangJi was used to. The GusuLan Sect always attacked head-on, which was not always the best military strategy though certainly honorable. They even wore all white as though hoping to draw attention to themselves so it was impossible for a sneak attack. It seemed that sheer excellence was the way they handled this particular inflexible weakness—literally being so good that even though their attacks were easy to prepare for, they still had a good chance of winning.

As admirable as that was, though, it was proving to be somewhat of a hassle now as Wei WuXian yanked Lan WangJi back into the shadows yet again before he accidentally walked right into a group of cultivators rushing by.

"I should have expected this would be the one thing you're not perfect at," Wei WuXian whispered, waiting until the group of cultivators were out of sight before gesturing for all of them to move forward again. "You're lucky I'm good at stealth or you'd be long caught." He patted Lan WangJi on the arm as they hurried down another corridor.

With Wei WuXian sneaking them through Ko Tower, they only encountered a handful of cultivators who Lan WangJi knocked out before either Wei WuXian or the boys had to lift a finger.

Everything progressed smoothly right up until they got close to Jin ZiXuan's quarters. Peering around the corner, Wei WuXian could see a dozen guards posted by his doors alone.

"They're definitely in there," Wei WuXian said. "Lan Zhan?"

Lan Zhan nodded. "Go," he said.

With that, Wei WuXian let Lan WangJi walk out. As soon as the dozen guards saw Lan WangJi standing there alone, they shouted and ran forward, but, to Wei WuXian's relief, did not activate any summoning talismans. A dozen guarding cultivators clearly outnumbered one Lan WangJi. While someone who had seen Lan WangJi in battle would never dare to underestimate him, they were lucky this time, and apparently these cultivators thought they had a chance.

Wei WuXian, meanwhile, called the two boys to him. "We're going around the side," he said.

"What about Hanguang-Jun?" Guo Yi asked, eyes wide.



"Lan Zhan can handle it," Wei WuXian said. Then he led the way around the outside of the building. Without Lan Wangji's all-white uniform, it made hiding just himself and the two juniors a lot easier. They watched from the shadows as another dozen or so cultivators flew over the roofing to join the fight on Lan Wangji's side of things, drawn by the commotion. It left the windows to Jin ZiXuan's quarters clear, and with a quick glance to make sure no one was looking, Wei WuXian pushed open one of the windows and jumped inside.

He found himself faced with the spout-end of a ceramic teapot brandished by none other than Jiang YanLi.

She had clearly been about to pour tea when suddenly encountered with Wei WuXian bursting through her window.

"A-Xian?" she asked faintly.

"Shijie!" Wei WuXian said and swept aside the teapot to hug her. "Are you okay?"

"What are you doing here?" Jiang YanLi asked when Wei WuXian finally loosened up to look her up and down, checking for injuries. She looked thinner than she had at the wedding, and paler like she hadn't been eating enough. "Did Jiang Cheng get you? Where is he?"

"No, he—wait, where's Jiang Cheng?" Wei WuXian asked.

"He escaped three days ago," Jiang YanLi said. "With Second Master Nie," she said, eyes wide. "Didn't they go to find you and Hanguang-Jun?"

"Wei WuXian, how dare you break into Koi Tower."

Wei WuXian only then turned and saw a familiar face.

"Ah, it's the ugly Hanguang-Jun!" Liu FengYa shouted, pointing at the cultivator. "It's that creep!"

"Who?" Wei WuXian asked and watched with vindictive satisfaction when Su She's face twitched.

"I'm Su MinShan of the MolingSu Sect," Su She said, clearly annoyed. He took a step in front of the mirror. "We're here to protect Young Master Jin and his family." He stuck his nose in the air.

Inside the room, there were half a dozen MolingSu cultivators including Su She. Come to think of it, all the cultivators guarding the door had been dressed in that same off-white uniform and not the LanlingJin Sect robes. It wouldn't take Lan Wangji much longer to finish up then, Wei WuXian thought.

Apart from Su She's cultivators, the only others in the room were Madam Jin and Jin ZiXuan who were each brandishing apparently the nearest item at hand. Jin ZiXuan was holding an incense burner like a disk ready to throw. Madam Jin, on the other hand, had picked up, of all things, Madam Yu's funeral tablet and brandished it like a short club.

When they realized it was only Wei WuXian, Madam Jin coughed and put Madam Yu's tablet back down next to Uncle Jiang's tablet. She patted it a few times and bowed another few times while muttering apologies to it. Jin ZiXuan also hastily put down the incense burner and steadfastly refused to look at it as though he was trying to pretend he'd never tried to use an incense burner as a weapon.

The room looked, otherwise, much the same as it had when Wei WuXian had last been here if slightly messier—cloth had been tossed on top of a tall full-length mirror in one corner, the bedsheets had been folded, but a few dishes had been left on the table that had long since gone cold, leaving the scent of old food lingering in the room.

"Protect us?" Jin ZiXuan demanded. "Bullshit."

Wei WuXian's eyes widened.

"A-Xuan, language," Madam Jin scolded.

Even back when Wei WuXian had gotten into a fistfight with Jin ZiXuan, the dumb peacock had never sworn. That was something that had pissed Wei WuXian off even more at the time since Jin ZiXuan apparently felt he could insult Jiang YanLi but was too good to swear.

"You've taken us hostage like the coward you are," Jin ZiXuan ignored his mother to continue.

"You know very well that LianFang-Zun—"

"Don't you dare say that son-of-a-bitch's name in front of me." Madam Jin was the next to swear. She looked so livid that Su She took a step back and reached for his guqin.

"Cover your ears!" Wei WuXian said as he realized what was about to happen, but he didn't need to.

As Su She reached to pluck the first string, the doors to the room burst open and with it, a flash of silver light. The action was so fast that Wei WuXian didn't see exactly what had happened until he heard a howl of pain and saw the splash of blood painted on the wall behind Su She. The crippled cultivator sank to his knees, clutching his right wrist to his body and gasping with pain, as blood began trickling down from his wrist.

Lan WangJi stood at the door, breathing a little heavier than usual as Bichen returned to its master. And then Lan WangJi was striding into the room.

"Are you all right?" he asked, scanning Wei WuXian from head to foot.

"Good timing, Hanguang-Jun." Wei WuXian grinned at him.

He noticed, to his amusement, Madam Jin quickly putting down Madam Yu's tablet which she'd apparently picked up again when Lan WangJi came through the doors.

"Sect Leader Su," one of the MolingSu cultivators said, hovering by Su She's side as though unsure how to treat him.

Su She slapped aside his underling, his eyes burning red with hatred as he glared at Lan Wangji even as tears trickled down his face. It was clearly all he could do to keep from screaming. “You—you if I can’t fight again—”

“Then you entirely deserve it,” Wei WuXian said. It had been awhile since he’d truly tried to intimidate anyone, but now he narrowed his own eyes, looking down at Su She. “You’re lucky it was Lan Zhan dealing with you,” he said. “If it were me, losing the use of a hand would be the least of your worries.”

Although Su She stared defiantly at Wei WuXian, he also swallowed audibly, his Adam’s apple bobbing as fear flashed in his eyes. The other MolingSu cultivators seemed unsure of what to do now that their sect leader was on the ground, clutching a useless arm.

“Was this Jin GuangYao’s plan all along?” Wei Wuxian asked, crouching down to Su She’s level.

Su She spat at him and missed.

Wei WuXian sighed and touched Su She’s arm. Even that slight pressure sent more blood flowing and Su She’s entire body tensed. “Looks like Lan Wangji severed a major artery there,” he said. “Tell us what Jin GuangYao is planning or I’ll let you bleed out.”

“You wouldn’t,” Su She bit out, glaring at him.

Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t I?” he said. With each word, he pressed a little harder on Su She’s arm. “Aren’t I the one you’re all afraid of? The great lord of evil, the Yiling Patriarch?” he asked.

“I’m not afraid of death,” Su She said, face contorted with pain.

“You could have fooled me. We all saw what you were willing to do in the Xuanwu Cave,” Wei WuXian said. “And even if you aren’t, have you forgotten what my type of cultivation is?” he asked. From the way Su She’s eyes widened, he knew he was recalling all the details of Wei WuXian’s reputation. “I’ll get an answer from you one way or another,” he said. Su She turned pale. “Answer,” Wei WuXian commanded.

“Yes! Yes, he planned everything all along!” Su She shouted. “He and Xue Yang, that little creep, killed Sect Leader Jin and promised to support me if I helped—” He clamped his mouth shut.

“Helped what?” Wei WuXian prompted him but Su She refused to confess any more. Wei WuXian sighed. “How about I guess?” he said. “Jin GuangYao was born the son of a courtesan. His mother passed away hoping he would be acknowledged, but Jin GuangShan refused to do so, so Jin GuangYao found another way. After he became a hero of the Sunshot Campaign, Jin GuangShan had no choice but to accept him, but by then, it was too late—Jin GuangYao doesn’t just want acknowledgement. He wants revenge,” he said. “He killed his father with lingchi.” Wei WuXian heard Madam Jin gasp. “And he’s been trying to kill Jin Zixuan—the half-brother who had everything he didn’t. How am I doing so far?”

Su She glared at him.

Wei WuXian turned to Lan WangJi. “Lan Zhan, when Su She was still a part of GusuLan, did he stand out at all? Because I don’t ever remember seeing him until he nearly drowned me in the waterborne abyss.”

“Average grades,” Lan WangJi said mildly.

“Average? I was far above average!” Su She snapped. “I created my own sect!”

Wei WuXian snorted. “If stealing GusuLan techniques and half-assing them counts as creating a sect,” he said. “So how did Jin GuangYao get you to cooperate? Did he praise you? Remember your name unlike everyone else?”

Su She glared at him. “Lianfang-Zun is great cultivator who deserves respect.”

“Great at saying exactly what you want to hear,” Wei WuXian said. “You’re not smart enough to have come up with any of this, Mr. Average Grades. Most likely, Jin GuangYao gave you instructions. He had the beast core delivered to you in case anyone saw, and had you plant the beast core inside Jin ZiXuan’s dog. If Jin ZiXuan managed to survive it and they found the cause, all roads would lead back to you and not Jin GuangYao.”

Wei WuXian could hear the sound of Su She’s teeth grinding together.

“Next, Jin GuangYao tried to kill Jin ZiXuan by drugging Lan Zhan and myself and stealing the Yin Tiger Seal. At your level of cultivation, you would never have been able to use it,” Wei WuXian said. “So he sent Xue Yang to do it,” he said. “But that failed to kill Jin ZiXuan too.”

“How many times has he tried to kill my son?” Madam Jin said, horrified.

“Madam Jin, don’t listen to him,” Su She tried. “Lianfang-Zun—”

“You shut your mouth,” Madam Jin snapped. “ZiXun? Was he really a suicide?” she asked, glaring down at Su She.

“He deserved to die,” Su She bit out. “The Thousand Holes curse is too good for that bastard.”

Wei WuXian shook his head. “While I agree about that particular sentiment, isn’t the Thousand Holes curse a bit too poisonous?” he said. That particular curse was specifically created to make the victim suffer for a long time—it said enough about both Su She and Jin ZiXun that Shu She wanted to inflict such a curse on him. “Did you speed along his death? Or did you just put him in a device you knew he couldn’t survive?”

Su She didn’t have to say anything. The way his eyes darted around the room was enough confirmation.

“I don’t know how he was planning to kill Jin ZiXun this time, but you aren’t just here to be a guard, are you?” Wei WuXian said. “I suspect once Xue Yang came back with news that he disposed of Sect Leader Jin’s corpse, you probably had instructions to kill everyone in this room. Make it look like another suicide? Without spiritual energy, they wouldn’t be able to stop you.”

“Th-That’s not true.” Su She said. “Surely you don’t all believe him. He’s the Yiling Patriarch!”

“He’s my brother,” Jiang YanLi said. “And he has no reason to lie.”

Wei WuXian flashed a smile at her and continued his analysis. “Once Jin ZiXuan is gone, Jin GuangYao would be free to take over LanlingJin. Did he promise you a position as his second-hand man?” he asked. “To take MolingSu Sect under his wing?”

“Lianfang-Zun isn’t—”

“Isn’t what? Isn’t someone who has killed his own father, his wife, his son? Anyone expendable to him?” Wei WuXian said. “Where is he?”

“You’ll never be able to defeat him,” Su She bit out. He’d finally realized that not a person in the room would come to his defense. Even his own MolingSu cultivators looked baffled by the sudden turn of events as though they didn’t know who to believe.

Wei WuXian laughed and took a step toward him, watching Su She visibly scoot back. “Have you seen who he’s dealing with? Hanguang-Jun? The Yiling Patriarch? He doesn’t have a chance.”

“Wei Ying, don’t provoke others without reason,” Lan WangJi said.

“I have a good reason,” Wei WuXian said and took another step forward.

Su She had almost been backed up to the covered mirror, but at last stayed put, as though afraid to touch the object.

“Since we came in this room, you’ve avoided looking at this mirror,” Wei WuXian said. “The other things here, I can explain—the food, the tea left out because your servants aren’t good enough to clean up,” he said.

“You—”

The MolingSu cultivators looked like they wanted to pull out their swords at being called servants but didn’t dare to with Hanguang-Jun still in the room.

“But my shijie clearly made the bed,” Wei WuXian said. “Shijie loves to be neat. Even without servants, she would cook and clean.”

Madam Jin looked fondly at Jiang YanLi and reached out to hold her hand. “We’re lucky to have A-Li, although you do not need to cook or clean,” she said.

“Mother, I enjoy it,” Jiang YanLi said.

“Yes, my shijie enjoys it,” Wei WuXian said. “Cooped up here with nothing else to do, that’s what she would do to help,” he said. “And yet, this cloth has been covering this mirror the entire time. The only reason it would be here is if my shijie wasn’t allowed to touch it.”

He reached out and pulled the cloth off. "I've seen this mirror before," he said, "In Jin GuangYao's study that time he fought Chifeng-Zun and he went missing," he said. "There's no way that Jin GuangYao could have gone far carrying his body, but getting Chifeng-Zun into his study—that he could do."

The mirror showed nothing but Wei WuXian's own appearance when he stood in front of it. But then, every sect had secret rooms where they would hide their treasures. He'd seen the Forbidden Library at GusuLan. Furthermore, Jin GuangYao had once worked for Wen RuoHan who was known for his cruelty and having secret torture chambers. Wei WuXian had no doubt that this mirror contained just such a hidden room.

He leaned over Su She who was now shivering and pale. "Jin GuangYao put this mirror in here with everyone else you're keeping captive," Wei WuXian said. "But not just to guard—it's so Nie MingJue, inside, could also hear your cursed song and be robbed of his spiritual energy," he said.

Without warning, he suddenly stepped hard on Su She's bleeding wrist. The man let out a shriek as he did. "Let him out," Wei WuXian said. "Or I'll prove to you right now why I'm the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation."

A light sheen of sweat shone on Su She's face, and Wei WuXian felt a brief release of spiritual energy following Su She's spell.

The mirror's surface rippled.

Wei WuXian grabbed Su She up by the collar and thrust him inside first. When nothing happened, he strode through as well, followed immediately by Lan WangJi.

On the other side of the mirror, there was, indeed, a small room lined with shelves. A few items on the shelves pulsed with power including a familiar saber—Nie MingJue's own.

But the main sight was the man who was glaring at Su She. Blood stained his face, dried where it had trickled from his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. His green robes were torn and his hair fell over his shoulders in disarray. His entire body had been wrapped in heavy iron chains that kept him knelt to the ground. He looked much thinner, and his lips were cracked and dry. But even though he'd been forced to practice inedia all these weeks, though he'd suffered from qi deviation, and though he'd been bound this way, he was still a huge man.

"It's good to see you're alive, Chifeng-Zun," Wei WuXian said.

"Free me," Nie MingJue said.

"Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian said.

A few strokes of Bichen later, the iron chains fell to the ground.

Nie MingJue stumbled, unused to the movement, though he refused Wei WuXian's hand as he shakily got to his feet. He reached for the saber on the shelf, though he could only belt it to his side. Without spiritual energy or much physical energy for that matter, his sword wasn't of much use.

Though Nie MingJue had clearly been chained up here since that afternoon in the garden, he walked out of the room on his own feet. As soon as they had all left the mirror room, he reached for Su She.

"I'll kill this coward," Nie MingJue said. His voice was rough and scratchy from disuse.

Su She went completely white and, apparently forgetting his pride, ducked to hide behind Lan WangJi.

"Step aside, Hanguang-Jun," Nie MingJue said. "Let me have him."

Lan WangJi watched Nie MingJue, but did not move a step.

"Chifeng-Zun," Wei WuXian said. "If you kill him now, with your meridians blocked the way they are, you'll go into qi deviation again."

"Let me have him," Nie MingJue repeated. "Get out of my way or you'll have to excuse my impudence."

Wei WuXian could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rise at the killing intent rolling off of Nie MingJue. He didn't want to have to fight the sect leader—in this state, it would be both dishonorable and could seriously hurt Nie MingJue.

"Wait, Chifeng-Zun." Lan WangJi's voice was like a stream of cool water. "We may still need his witness against Jin GuangYao." When Lan WangJi spoke, people listened. Something about his calmness at all times, how rarely he spoke, the deep timbre of his voice—it commanded attention.

His words, likewise, directed Nie MingJue's attention where it should be. "Jin GuangYao," he said. "Take me to him."

"You'll never find him!" Su She burst out.

Nie MingJue turned back to him and Su She quickly shrank behind Lan WangJi again. "That snivelling coward is hiding?" he asked, drawing his saber. "It's good I didn't kill you yet," he said, advancing on him. With each step, Su She turned paler, backing up further. "How many limbs do I need to cut off until you tell me where he is?"

But suddenly, maybe because of blood loss or maybe due to stress and fear, Su She's eyes suddenly rolled up into the back of his head and he collapsed to the ground.

Even Nie MingJue paused at that. "Is he dead?" he asked a moment.

Jiang YanLi bent and felt for his pulse. "Not dead—just unconscious. We need to treat his wound," she said.

"Nevermind then, that rat will be in the Blooming Gardens," Nie MingJue said, already striding unsteadily toward the door.

"Wait, MingJue-Xiong, he probably isn't there," Jin ZiXuan spoke up. "It's been some time since Wei WuXian and Hanguang-Jun came and no one but the MolingSu cultivators have come to check on us," he

said. "If Jin GuangYao were here, this would be the first place he'd come once he was alerted of intruders. He must not be at Koi Tower."

"Then where is he?" Nie MingJue's eyes narrowed.

"We haven't seen that bastard since he locked us here," Madam Jin said. She nudged Su She's prone body with her foot. "I agree with Sect Leader Nie. Wake him up and torture the location out of him."

"Wait, Mother, I have a faster way." Jin ZiXuan put two fingers in his mouth and let out a sharp whistle.

Wei WuXian didn't understand what Jin ZiXuan meant by that until, from down the corridor, he heard the scramble of claws on wooden floorboards and loud panting. Before the two dogs were even visible, his knees had already gone weak and he was scrambling to hide behind the safest person he knew.

"Lan Zhan, save me," Wei WuXian wailed, ducking under Lan WangJi's arm and clinging to his waist, shivering. "Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan!" Wei WuXian almost began crying when he actually saw the dogs run in, and dragged Lan WangJi backwards with him until he was sandwiched between the wall and his husband, as far away from the dogs as possible.

Lan WangJi had gone completely stiff when he felt arms suddenly wrap around him, and Nie MingJue, Madam Jin, and the MolingSu cultivators all turned to stare at Wei WuXian who was shivering and hiding behind his husband in the most embarrassing way.

"Is this a joke to him?" one of the MolingSu cultivators asked after a moment of prolonged silence.

"No, he really is that scared of dogs," Jin ZiXuan said dryly.

The two dogs eagerly explored the room, sniffing everywhere they could and looking from one person to another in happy curiosity. One of them licked Su She's face but the unconscious cultivator only groaned. The other curiously headed in Wei WuXian's direction only for him to shriek even more loudly as he tried to climb his way up Lan WangJi's back.

"Make them leave," Wei WuXian wailed into Lan WangJi's back. "Just how many dogs does he have? You're the worst! You don't deserve my shijie!"

Lan WangJi's glare stopped that dog in place and she whined, sitting back on her haunches.

"ZiXuan," Jiang YanLi said. "You know how A-Xian feels about dogs."

"He'll have to get over it. My spiritual dogs have been specially trained—they'll lead us straight to Jin GuangYao." Jin ZiXuan whistled again to call them back to him. "Won't you, girls?" he said, bending to scratch them behind their ears. "You will, won't you? Good girl, Little Gold! Good girl, Little White!"

The dogs whined happily as Jin ZiXuan cooed at them.

"Don't you think Young Master Jin's naming sense is a bit..." Guo Yi whispered.

"...bad?" Liu FengYa finished.



“Right, we should go,” Jin ZiXuan said, straightening up again. “Mother, A-Li, we’ll find a place to hide you once we’re out, but—”

“We’ll stay here,” Madam Jin said. “I trained most of the cultivators here even if Jin GuangShan has been too soft on them. Let’s see if they remember who the real master of Koi Tower is.”

In that moment, Wei WuXian remembered suddenly that Madam Jin had not only come out of the same MeishanYu Sect as Madam Yu, but was sworn sisters with her as well. Anyone who was best friends with Madam Yu surely had to have a strong personality. Ordinarily, it would have been impossible for Jin GuangYao to take control of Koi Tower the way he had. But he’d created circumstances in which Jin GuangShan went missing during a large-scale attack, and Jin ZiXuan was injured to the point of incapacitation. That meant Madam Jin was preoccupied with Jin ZiXuan’s health more than anything else at Koi Tower. He had even managed to remove Jin ZiXun who would have been the greatest voice of dissent in Jin GuangYao’s grab for power, and to solidify his position as a leader, Jin GuangYao had led the successful annihilation of the LuozhuangWang and HedongFu clans, so all the cultivators at Koi Tower were primed to obey his command. It was truly a genius political move that no one had seen coming.

In these last few weeks, it was obvious that Madam Jin, Jin ZiXuan, and Jiang YanLi hadn’t even realized they were being kept captive until it was too late. By then, Jin GuangYao had isolated them so that only the MolingSu cultivators came in contact with them. With their spiritual energy cut off, and with no access to the LanlingJin cultivators, they had no choice but to submit. No wonder Wei WuXian had not gotten any news from Koi Tower though it had been weeks.

“A-Li.” Jin ZiXuan turned to Jiang YanLi. “What about you?”

If Wei WuXian hadn’t been too terrified to move a step, he would have liked to suggest Jiang YanLi leave with them and maybe hide her somewhere until this was all over.

“I will stay and help Mother,” Jiang YanLi said. Though she was pale, she stood tall and determined. “I’m not a strong cultivator so I won’t be of help going with you,” she said. “But there may be something I can do here.”

Jin ZiXuan hesitated for a moment and then seemed to make up his mind. With his face bright red, he reached for Jiang YanLi’s hands to give them a squeeze. “Be safe,” he said.

Jiang YanLi looked a bit startled but smiled and nodded. “You too,” she said. “Take care of A-Xian,” she said, and after a quick glance at the dogs, added, “And keep the dogs away from him.”

“Shijie,” Wei WuXian whined.

Jin ZiXuan darted a look at him, and Wei WuXian didn’t have time to wonder why before Jin ZiXuan gave Jiang YanLi a quick peck on the cheek.

“Who said you could kiss my shijie!” Wei WuXian shouted before hiding behind Lan WangJi again when the dogs looked in his direction.

"We'll be going then." Jin ZiXuan ignored Wei WuXian entirely as he crouched down to pet his dogs again. "That mirror belongs to Jin GuangYao," he said to them. "Can you find him?"

Spiritual dogs were very smart and especially trained. So although Jin ZiXuan had given them only a verbal command, the dogs seemed to understand as they sniffed at the mirror and then wandered over to Su She before sniffing their way out of the room.

Jin ZiXuan followed right after them, and behind him, Nie MingJue.

Madam Jin bent to hit a few of Su She's pressure points so the bleeding slowed. "You," she ordered one of the MolingSu cultivators who turned white.

"M-Me?" he stuttered.

"Give me your belt," she ordered.

The poor MolingSu cultivator was forced to take off his belt and hand it to her as she tied up Su She with ruthless efficiency. She glanced at the MolingSu cultivator again.

"Your shirt too," Madam Jin said and held out a hand until the poor cultivator was forced to strip off his robe shirt and hand it to her.

She ripped a strip out of it and used it to gag Su She. She glanced at the MolingSu cultivator again.

"Please let me keep my pants," he begged.

"Rip up the rest of this shirt and tie each other up," Madam Jin ordered. "And make it fast. We have a lot of garbage cleaning to do here tonight."

The poor stripped MolingSu cultivator gulped and hurried to obey.

Seeing Madam Jin clearly in control of the situation, Lan WangJi followed after Nie MingJue and Jin ZiXuan, heading toward the door where the dogs and Jin ZiXuan were already a short distance down the corridor, only for Wei WuXian to tighten his grip. "Wei Ying?" Lan WangJi asked when he still hadn't budged after a moment.

"Aren't you going to go?" Wei WuXian said. "If you don't go, how am I supposed to go?"

"First, let go," Lan WangJi said.

"Fine." Wei WuXian finally forced himself to loosen his death grip around Lan WangJi's waist. He couldn't bring himself to let go entirely, though, still holding onto the back of Lan WangJi's robes. "L-Let's go then," he said, huddling against him.

Attached to his back the way he was, Wei WuXian felt it when Lan WangJi took a step away from him. Of course Lan WangJi couldn't walk with Wei WuXian plastered against him this way, he knew, but Wei WuXian still had to will himself not to grab Lan WangJi again or to sprint for the nearest tree.

He was still bracing himself for it when he felt a large, warm hand close around his. "They will not hurt you," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian's eyes flew up to his face.

Lan WangJi gave him a reassuring look, and taking him by the hand, began guiding him down the corridor.

Up ahead, Wei WuXian could see Jin ZiXuan and Nie MingJue with the dogs, and he couldn't help the shiver that went down his back at the sight of them. The dogs were not less scary than before, Wei WuXian thought, but with Lan WangJi by his side, he felt brave enough to face them.

Chapter 19: your husband's cloak

Chapter Text

It was an odd group that made their way out of Koi Tower that night. Two dogs were sniffing happily in the lead together with their owner, Jin ZiXuan. They were followed by a haggard Nie MingJue who was clearly walking fueled entirely on rage and willpower. After that came Lan WangJi on whose arm clung Wei WuXian who was keeping a sharp eye on the dogs and ready to shrink behind Lan WangJi every time one of them so much as turned in his direction. After them, came the two young Tang delivery boys who quickly progressed from anxious to bored.

"This is taking so long," Liu FengYa complained. "Why can't we fly on swords?"

"Because those two don't have spiritual energy right now," Wei WuXian said. "Be quiet, the dogs are looking over here!" he hissed.

"And the dogs too," Guo Yi added. "It's not like they can fly."

"I'm fine with leaving them behind," Wei WuXian said.

"Are you really the Yiling Patriarch?" Liu FengYa asked, lowering his voice as requested but casting a skeptical look at Wei WuXian. "I've never heard anything about the Yiling Patriarch being scared of puppies."

Wei WuXian snorted. "Would you believe it if someone told you the Yiling Patriarch was scared of dogs?"

Liu FengYa seemed to think about it for a moment. "No, I wouldn't," he decided, glancing between Wei WuXian and the dogs. "This is really going to take so long, though. They could be anywhere by now if they're flying."

"They will not be able to go far," Lan WangJi said.

"How can you tell?" Guo Yi asked.

It was somewhat amusing to see the way the younger generation always adopted looks of awe and reference whenever Lan WangJi spoke and listened quietly.

“They wouldn’t have left until we broke in,” Wei WuXian explained. “Before then, Koi Tower was under Jin GuangYao’s control and he was well-fortified. He was expecting GusuLan to come, or maybe YunmengJiang cultivators since Jiang Cheng escaped,” he said. “He was prepared for a frontal battle, but since we snuck in and he couldn’t locate the intruders immediately, he left—Lianfang-Zun is cautious and plans for everything. He won’t want to face unknown enemies.” He paused. “Jin GuangYao must be more nervous than usual if he only took your brother as hostage, though,” he said to Lan WangJi. “I’d have expected him to take Jin ZiXuan and Madam Jin too—my shijie if he wanted to make sure he could stop Jiang Cheng.”

“The mirror,” Lan WangJi reminded him.

Wei WuXian understood. “That’s right,” he said. “Su She must have been told to put them all in the mirror with Chifeng-Zun, but we got there too quickly,” he said. Since they’d prepared for a frontal battle, Su She probably had instructions to wait until he was sure they were losing before hiding the hostages in the mirror. Jin GuangYao wouldn’t want Jin ZiXuan to discover the whereabouts of Nie MingJue, after all. But they hadn’t expected the group to break in to be Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi, and for them to head straight for the Fragrant Palace instead of fighting all the cultivators they’d left guarding the main entrances. The timing of it all had been thrown off, and in the end, it was Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi who ambushed Su She.

“They can still fly, though,” Liu FengYa pointed out. “Why wouldn’t they be far away?”

Wei WuXian shook his head. “I already told you—Jin GuangYao only left Koi Tower because he was facing unknown enemies,” he said. “He will only go far enough to observe and regroup. And besides...” Wei WuXian grinned and pointed up at the sky as a boom of thunder sounded. “It’s about to start raining. He has Sect Leader Lan with him, and Jin GuangYao isn’t Hanguang-Jun—it will be too tiresome for him to fly in the rain with a hostage.”

As he was still speaking, the rain began coming down, just a drizzle at first but soon it was steadily coming down. Although Wei WuXian had been thankful for the warmer weather, now he wished it was snow like it normally should be at this time of year—with snow, they at least wouldn’t be as wet.

“Hurry,” Jin ZiXuan told his dogs from up ahead. The rain, while it would force Jin GuangYao to stop, would also wash away scents left behind by them, and then it would be much more difficult to find them.

As they moved faster, though, a loud braying came from behind them.

At first, Wei WuXian thought some particularly early-rising merchant was arriving at the outskirts of Lanling, but when the braying got louder and headed in their direction, he turned and saw a donkey galloping at them at full speed.

“Is that... the apple-eater?” Liu FengYa asked.

They were moving slowly enough that the donkey caught up to them quickly, and came to a stop right by Wei WuXian.

“Shut it up!” Jin ZiXuan hissed.

“It’s not my donkey,” Liu FengYa said, offended. “If anything, it’s Senior Wei’s fault—he’s the one who untied it!”

“Hey! How do you even know it’s the same donkey?” Wei WuXian said, indignant.

“What other donkey have you set free tonight?” Liu FengYa said.

The donkey, meanwhile, was definitely the same one because it had nudged right up against Wei WuXian until it was all but leaning on him and forcing his arm to press right up against the saddlebag of apples, shamelessly begging to be fed.

“You chubby Lil Apple,” Wei WuXian muttered.

The donkey gave a snort and opened its mouth to bray again so Wei WuXian quickly reached into the saddlebag and shoved an apple in its mouth.

The donkey, content, quieted down, munching happily on the apple.

He heard a loud snort and turned to see Jin ZiXuan giving him a look of contempt.

“At least donkeys are more useful than your dumb, stinky dogs,” Wei WuXian said.

“How exactly is a donkey more useful than a dog?” Jin ZiXuan demanded. “They’re tracking down Jin GuangYao right now, aren’t they? My dogs are specially bred and very smart!”

“I notice you’re not arguing they don’t stink,” Wei WuXian said, petty.

Of course, wet dogs did not smell particularly nice, and maybe Jin ZiXuan was right about them being smart because they, as though they understood Wei WuXian’s accusation, looked a bit ashamed.

Jin ZiXuan turned red. “Well your donkey stinks too, and it’s not even smart!”

“Lil Apple is very smart,” Wei WuXian said. “We left it on the other side of town and it still tracked us all the way over here. I bet it’s even better at tracking down Jin GuangYao than your dogs. Send them home,” he said. “Lil Apple will take over.”

The donkey who had just been volunteered for duty played dumb and nudged Wei WuXian for another apple.

“It’s just a glutton,” Jin ZiXuan said.

“A smarter and less stinky one than your dogs,” Wei WuXian said.

“And its name is dumb too,” Jin ZiXuan said. “Who names a donkey ‘Lil Apple’?”

Wei WuXian snorted. “Says the one who names his dogs the color of their fur—Little Black? Little Gold? Little White? What are you going to do when you run out of colors? Dogs don’t come in that many shades, you know.”

“They’re good names,” Jin ZiXuan defended himself.

As their owners bickered, the unfortunately named donkey and dogs sniffed at each other. Little White’s tail tentatively wagged as Lil Apple licked the top of its head.

“Stop arguing.” Apparently Nie MingJue finally couldn’t take the delay any longer. “I don’t care which dumb, stinking animal tracks down that traitor—just get one of them to do it before the scent washes away.”

“You heard him,” Wei WuXian told Lil Apple. “Now’s your chance to prove your superiority. Track him down.”

Lil Apple ignored him and bumped his hand for another apple.

Jin ZiXuan’s dogs, on the other hand, immediately leapt to their owner’s command and resumed the tracking.

Jin ZiXuan shot Wei WuXian a victorious look.

“It’s only because Lil Apple is too smart to take orders,” Wei WuXian said. “Right, Lan Zhan?”

Lan WangJi, to both Wei WuXian’s surprise and delight, played along and uttered an emphatic, “Mm.”

“See? Lan Zhan says so,” Wei WuXian said, triumphant. “Everyone knows Hanguang-Jun doesn’t lie.”

It was probably the first time Wei WuXian ever saw Jin ZiXuan dare to rudely roll his eyes at Lan WangJi, and turn to follow his dogs.

Wei WuXian beamed at Lan WangJi and walked a bit closer to him, in a much better mood.

As they walked, the dogs in the lead once again, and a donkey now by Wei WuXian’s side as well, the rain turned from light to torrential.

Wei WuXian was squinting at the road ahead, trying to make out any buildings when he felt something warm and heavy settle over his shoulders. Lan WangJi had pulled out a fur-lined winter cloak and put it over Wei WuXian, stopping to adjust the hood so it covered Wei WuXian’s head.

Like most wealthier cultivators, Lan WangJi would have qiankun pockets and he knew Lan WangJi also carried a qiankun pouch that seemed mostly to be for Wei WuXian as it was full of talismans and charms that Lan WangJi usually rarely used. While cultivators might carry a change of clothing in those pouches when they traveled, but as the weight of the items inside remained the same regardless of space, they tended to limit themselves to lighter items to bring. This cloak was quite heavy due to the quality

material, and Wei WuXian wondered how long Lan Wangji had been carrying it, perhaps for this very purpose.

“What about you?” Wei WuXian asked, pulling the cloak a bit tighter around himself. It was embroidered with the GusuLan clouds, a beautiful white and blue pattern, and was of such good quality, that though he was already damp, no more rain got on him while he was beneath the cloak.

“It is easier to move without it,” Lan Wangji said.

While it was true—Lan Wangji had to be ready for a fight, and a cloak this heavy would certainly slow him down—Wei WuXian still felt warm with the weight of his regard.

When Nie Mingjue slipped for the third time, only just catching himself by using his saber as a crutch, Lan Wangji moved up to Nie Mingjue who, now drenched by rain, looked like he might collapse at any moment. With rain plastering his clothes to his body, it was obvious now that he was much too thin for a man of his size. He could probably use the cloak more than Wei WuXian, but when he inhaled, he could also smell the light scent of sandalwood wafting up along with the rain—this cloak wasn’t just any GusuLan cloak, but Lan Wangji’s own that he’d given to Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian didn’t want to give it up, but when Nie Mingjue slipped once again, he sighed and moved up to join them. “Chifeng-Zun, do you want to wear my cloak?” he offered, gesturing to himself.

Nie Mingjue glanced at him and then did a double-take when he registered the color and pattern of it. He frowned and actually stopped in his steps to turn. First, he clapped Lan Wangji in a brotherly sort of way on the shoulder, giving him a sort of pitying glance. Then he turned to Wei WuXian. “Young Master Wei,” he said in a serious tone of voice like he was a senior giving a junior some important advice. “You are newly married and have a lot to learn, but I advise you to stop offering your husband’s cloak to other people. A man’s coat should only be worn by himself and his wife...well...” He paused and gave Wei WuXian a sweeping look up and down. He coughed. “...close enough.”

Then, like he’d made some sort of particularly wise comment instead of spewing nonsense, he clapped Lan Wangji on the back again and actually gave a small laugh. “No wonder XiChen is so worried about you,” he said and began trudging forward again.

Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow at Lan Wangji and leaned in to whisper. “I think the inedia’s really gotten to him,” he said. “Did any of that make sense to you?”

Lan Wangji just shot him a look that Wei WuXian didn’t understand either.

He didn’t have more time to think about it, though, because in the next moment, Jin Zixuan had stopped and gestured. “There,” he said, pointing up ahead at an old farmhouse a short distance from the road.

The dogs had begun sniffing in the direction of the narrow path leading between empty rice paddies to the wooden house.

“Wait, let us go first,” Wei WuXian said to Jin Zixuan before they could start on that path between the rice paddies. “Neither you nor Chifeng-Zun has spiritual energy right now. Lan Zhan and I will go take a look. Wait here. And take care of Lil Apple too,” he added. “Don’t you dare bully it.”

“Why would I bully a donkey?” Jin ZiXuan began to demand, but Wei WuXian had already turned to the Tang delivery boys.

“FengYa, Guo Yi—stay with them and make sure they’re safe until we come back,” Wei WuXian said. “If we’re lucky, that’ll be where Jin GuangYao is. If we’re not, we’ll wait out the storm and then keep looking.”

The Tang delivery boys gulped and drew their swords.

“Make it fast,” Nie MingJue said. “If Jin GuangYao is there, I’m going to kill him.” It was a vow.

Wei WuXian nodded. Then, giving wide berth to the dogs, he inched around them to the front of the group, and together with Lan WangJi, headed for the farmhouse.

The rice paddies on either side of the path were long-empty of harvest, a few old, yellowed stalks drifting on the surface of the water, pounded by the rain coming down. The farmhouse, though weathered, was large in size and appeared shoddy in construction, mostly intended to house workers and their crop during the busier times of the year. But during the winter months, all farmhands would all be in their homes in the nearby villages, rarely coming out to barren rice paddies.

As Wei WuXian had suspected, though, light came from inside the building, glowing between gaps in the shabby panelling.

“They’re here,” Wei WuXian whispered to Lan WangJi who nodded. Wei WuXian looked around the area. Fortunately, though the front of the farmhouse faced two rice paddies, the back had a stone fence and a small courtyard, presumably for keeping animals during the times of year this farmhouse was in use.

He met Lan WangJi’s eyes and gestured for the back. In the next moment, Lan WangJi lifted him by the waist, flying them both to the back side of the farmhouse and then kept them hovering by the wall so they could just see over it.

Peering over the wall, Wei WuXian could see that someone had opened two of the sliding doors leading out to the courtyard to let in fresh air because there were some forty or so cultivators crammed inside. Jin GuangYao, as expected, was one of them. With the rain coming down, thankfully, none of the cultivators seemed interested in looking out at the yard and so no one seemed to realize they now had an audience.

At first, the only one Wei WuXian could see who wasn’t a LanlingJin cultivator was Lan XiChen who Wei WuXian was relieved to see unharmed. He even still had his sword and xiao at his waist, though the presence of weapons was an obvious sign that his qi had been sealed. He even looked more or less dry, as though Jin GuangYao had made an effort to get Lan XiChen under shelter quickly.

Jin GuangYao, in the meantime, was busy giving instructions to a few of the cultivators.

“Wang QiLing and Jin Wei, could you return to Koi Tower and scout out the situation?” Jin GuangYao asked two of the cultivators. “Be careful and don’t do anything rash. Return as soon as you can.”



The two nodded and headed for the front to leave.

Without speaking, Lan WangJi set Wei WuXian on the ground, and a moment later, was flying back around the farmhouse to intercept them.

The brick wall was too tall for Wei WuXian to see over on height alone, so with Lan WangJi gone, he grabbed the top of it, hauling himself up by arm-strength alone to continue peeking over the top of it. The wall was slippery with rain, but Wei WuXian was glad he'd continued looking because a moment later, another familiar figure came rolling out from behind a group of LanlingJin cultivators.

"Nie HuaiSang?" Wei WuXian stared at the bedraggled figure, who was crying though he appeared unhurt. According to Jin ZiXuan, he'd escaped with Jiang Cheng a few days ago, though his freedom didn't appear to have lasted long. "He got himself caught again?"

While Nie MingJue was one of the top talents in the cultivation world, Nie HuaiSang had apparently inherited none of those traits. It had taken him far longer than the average person to even cultivate a golden core. Wei WuXian was certain that while he himself held the record for the most troublesome student Lan QiRen ever had, Nie HuaiSang was probably the most hopeless student. Wei WuXian was fairly sure no one had spent as much time as Nie HuaiSang repeating classes at the Cloud Recesses.

Nie HuaiSang was apologizing and saying he didn't know anything all in the same breath. "I really don't know anything. Why don't you just let me go, San-Ge?" he asked. "I was just coming back to Koi Tower to check if my brother was there since he wasn't at home."

Watching him made Wei WuXian's teeth itch. Nie HuaiSang's skin was even thicker than his own. Even Nie HuaiSang couldn't possibly be so stupid that after having been held captive with the rest of the main Jin family and escaping with Jiang Cheng, he still thought Jin GuangYao had his best intentions in mind. And yet, Nie HuaiSang was still doing his best to pretend like he knew nothing. If Nie MingJue saw this scene, he might go straight into qi deviation again.

"You know where he is, right? I haven't seen him since the wedding, and you know what he's like," Nie HuaiSang continued, crying and babbling. "I checked all the places he usually goes for secluded cultivation and he isn't there. Aren't you worried? He's your Da-Ge after all, isn't he?"

It sounded like Nie HuaiSang must have separated from Jiang Cheng sometime after their escape and returned to the Unclean Realm to look for Nie MingJue. When no trace of him had been found at the places he'd supposedly gone to cultivate, he returned to Koi Tower and was caught. What Wei WuXian couldn't figure out was why he hadn't directly brought an army of QingheNie Sect cultivators to Koi Tower, and instead, had come alone.

"HuaiSang, please," Lan XiChen said, sounding pained.

"XiChen-Ge," Nie HuaiSang said, turning watery eyes to Lan XiChen. "What's going on? Why are we all the way out here in this dirty old farmhouse? It's raining now—can't we at least go back to Koi Tower?"

"I'm sure your brother is fine, HuaiSang," Jin GuangYao said soothingly. "Why don't you take a seat and we'll all have a chat."

Wei WuXian couldn't tell who was more thick-faced in this scene. On one hand, there was Nie HuaiSang, persistently pretending to know nothing when even he couldn't be so stupid as to think that while being held captive and now hostage by Jin GuangYao. On the other hand, there was Jin GuangYao with that polite smile on his face, telling Nie HuaiSang everything was fine as he held the man captive.

Lan WangJi came back in the middle of Nie HuaiSang's extended blubbering. Wei WuXian gave him a grateful smile when he easily supported Wei WuXian by the waist again, allowing him to relax his hold on the wall.

"The cultivators?" Wei WuXian whispered to him.

"Unconscious," Lan WangJi said. "Jin ZiXuan is taking care of them."

Wei WuXian imagined how mad the arrogant male princess was, and how he'd deal with these traitors to his sect, and felt a wave of satisfaction. While Jin ZiXuan had, admittedly, matured a bit since finally realizing Jiang YanLi was perfection on earth, he wasn't exactly the type to let things go easily—particularly not in the case of treason.

Just then, he felt a stream of warmth pass over his body and he looked at Lan WangJi.

"Are you cold?" Lan WangJi asked, his voice low.

Lan WangJi's lips were close by his ear to speak, and Lan WangJi's breath burned against his skin. Wei WuXian shivered, all of a sudden, feeling warm in a way that had nothing to do with the spiritual energy being passed to him.

"I have your cloak, I'm fine," Wei WuXian whispered back. "Save your energy."

A particularly loud whine drew Wei WuXian's attention back toward the farmhouse. "Why won't anyone tell me where my brother is? Someone must know," Nie HuaiSang was still complaining before his face suddenly paled. "Don't tell me—is he dead?"

His gasp was interrupted by a loud bang as someone directly kicked the front door open. Even from their hidden position, Wei WuXian could see the person standing in the empty frame of the door.

"Who the hell is dead?" Nie MingJue roared. "How dare you let yourself be caught!"

"Not good," Wei WuXian said as the man stepped inside.

Nie MingJue was soaked through so that every arduous breath he took was obvious. Although he was weak, he was holding his saber up, eyes burning with fury.

In the next moment, the two Tang delivery boys rushed inside as well, apparently chasing after the sect leader although too late to stop him.

"Sect Leader Nie—" Guo Yi had time to say before they were also surrounded on all sides by cultivators.

“Put down your weapons please,” Jin GuangYao said pleasantly as though he’d expected everything. “We wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Slowly, Guo Yi and Liu FengYa put down their swords. Nie MingJue, though, held tight to his saber, refusing to drop it though a group of LanlingJin Sect cultivators had surrounded him. His eyes darted back and forth as though already analyzing their formation and calculating how he’d fight his way out.

“You said you were only going to listen ,” Liu FengYa said, sounding absolutely offended that Nie MingJue had broken that promise.

Wei WuXian had rarely fought on the same battlefield as Nie MingJue during the Sunshot Campaign since he had mainly stayed in the Yunmeng area whereas Qinghe was closest to Qishan, so he was almost always occupied on the main front. But everyone knew of Chifeng-Zun’s reputation—although the Nie sect leaders were known to have more explosive tempers than most, one couldn’t become sect leader based on brute force—much less one who was as successful of a commander as Nie MingJue. The man had a reputation for bold battle strategies, but his risks were calculated if not always cautious.

Under normal circumstances, Nie MingJue would never charge into a farmhouse on his own this way, but it had been over a month since he’d been kept prisoner, and on top of that, he’d been in the middle of a qi deviation when it happened. If he’d snuck up to listen, heard Nie HuaiSang’s voice and realized his brother had been caught, that would be the last straw. He obviously wasn’t clear-minded charging in this way, but Wei WuXian hadn’t expected him to be.

“Jin ZiXuan, that idiot, bird-brained peacock, why did you leave the kids to watch him?” Wei WuXian cursed. The Tang delivery boys had no personal experience with Nie MingJue and wouldn’t be able to, or maybe dare to stop him. Jin ZiXuan, though, had had more than enough interactions with Nie MingJue as a sect heir and should know better.

“Brother?” Nie HuaiSang said, staring at him.

“Da-Ge, please put down your saber,” Jin GuangYao said.

“I am going to cut every limb off your body,” Nie MingJue said, his eyes pinned on Jin GuangYao. “I should have done it a long time ago.”

Jin GuangYao took a tiny step back as though he, too, wanted to hide behind Lan XiChen. Then he seemed to remember Nie MingJue, though he’d broken out of his prison, still had no spiritual power or his head would already be flying.

Then, like he really was afraid, he suddenly ran behind Lan XiChen. The cowardly action seemed to surprise Nie MingJue as much as Wei WuXian, because he relaxed his stance for just a moment before Jin GuangYao grabbed Nie HuaiSang, dragging him out from behind Lan XiChen. This time, Jin GuangYao held Hensheng to Nie HuaiSang’s throat.

“Put down your saber please, Da-Ge,” he said politely. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions, and I need you to calm down so you can listen.”

“Calm down?” Nie MingJue seemed to get progressively more angry now. “You attack me! Provoke me into qi deviation! Kidnap me! Hold my brother hostage! And you want me to calm down?”

“Why don’t we all calm down. If there’s a fire, let’s make some tea and talk it over,” Nie HuaiSang chimed in, looked relieved one moment and terrified the next when Nie MingJue, apparently losing track of his priorities, began shouting at him next.

“Tea? HuaiSang, what good are you?” Nie MingJue said. “ZiXuan said you escaped and you got caught again? See if I don’t burn every fan you own after this!”

“But didn’t Brother get kidnapped first?” Nie HuaiSang said, sounding unjustly accused.

“HuaiSang, do you want to die?” Nie MingJue roared.

Nie HuaiSang quivered. “Brother, can’t you save me first? I’m being held at sword-point here.”

“Save yourself!” Nie MingJue shouted. “You’re going back to the Cloud Recesses until Lan QiRen can do something about you!”

“But I’ll be his oldest student,” Nie HuaiSang whined.

“You can study there until you die of old age!” Nie MingJue said.

He was interrupted from the continued lecture when one of the wet, stinking dogs—Little White—came barrelling into the house next.

“Jin ZiXuan is letting the dogs in too?” Wei WuXian couldn’t believe his eyes. “Can he stop anyone from coming in? Lan Zhan, let’s—”

“Dog!” Nie HuaiSang gasped, stating the obvious.

The dog, for her part, was actually the most useful of the bunch when, without hesitation, she immediately sank her teeth into the nearest enemy cultivator. Unfortunately, the now screaming cultivator was not Jin GuangYao.

Wei WuXian had been about to ask Lan WangJi to fly them in, but at the sight of the biting dog, he broke into shivers all over and clung to Lan WangJi. “Oh my god, Jin ZiXuan, that idiot, how am I supposed to go in there now?” he muffled his frustrated, terrified whining into Lan WangJi’s shoulder.

Lan WangJi, for his part, held Wei WuXian a little tighter, wrapping both arms around him when Wei WuXian huddled closer. Wei WuXian was perfectly aware that this was a terrible time to be burrowing as deep into Lan WangJi’s arms as he could. But unlike with Jin ZiXuan, Wei WuXian liked the feel of him and the smell of him and the way he made him feel like he really would protect Wei WuXian from the world if he asked it of him.

“Oh my god, stop biting!” one of the cultivators wailed from inside.

“Keep biting, Little White!” Jin ZiXuan’s voice had joined the mix and Wei WuXian could now hear the clang of swords engaged in battle. “You too, Lil Apple!”

His order was followed by a loud braying—apparently Lil Apple had joined in as well, and cultivators shouted as they were kicked and bitten. From the shouts and the screams and Nie HuaiSang’s loud crying for someone to save him, and Nie MingJue yelling for them to let him at Jin GuangYao, it seemed like battle had broken out in the farmhouse. “How dare you protect this traitor,” Jin ZiXuan began lecturing the LanlingJin Sect cultivators. “If you’re loyal to the Jin clan, capture him!”

None of the cultivators listened to Jin ZiXuan, though. Although there were only forty of them, it seemed Jin GuangYao had left prepared and selected forty cultivators who were specifically loyal to him.

If ever there was a time for them to join the battle, now was it.

“Lan Zhan—”

“Mm,” Lan WangJi said, and Wei WuXian felt himself fly them up directly over the fence and straight through the open back door.

The scene that they encountered looked truly as chaotic as it sounded. Nie MingJue had gotten hold of his saber again and was waving it at anyone he could despite having no spiritual energy, so although he couldn’t do much damage, no one could actually get anywhere close to him either. Nie HuaiSang was loudly crying and looked like he was doing his best to sink into the floor, although unfortunately, Jin GuangYao had him gripped in one arm, his soft sword wrapped around Nie HuaiSang’s neck so he couldn’t do much without cutting himself. Jin ZiXuan was single-handedly trying to fight whoever he could come near, but like Nie MingJue, since he had no spiritual energy, he was quickly losing and might have already lost if it weren’t for his dog that was happily sinking her teeth into the legs of anyone she could reach. Together with Lil Apple who was kicking and biting at anyone within reach, the animals were throwing Jin GuangYao’s cultivators into disarray as some tried to fight only for their attacks to stop when teeth sank into their ankles or they were sent flying into the walls.

The Tang delivery boys, for their part, had recovered their own swords, and, apart from Little White and Lil Apple, were actually the most effective fighters at the moment as they at least had spiritual energy. Still, they were too young and inexperienced, and up against forty-some adult LanlingJin Sect cultivators, so it seemed just keeping themselves from being recaptured was their limit.

Lan XiChen was the smartest of the bunch and the moment chaos had broken out, he had begun edging toward Nie HuaiSang and Jin GuangYao, apparently looking for an opportunity to take Nie HuaiSang back.

When Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi flew inside, Jin GuangYao turned to see who had just joined the battle. The moment he was distracted, Lan XiChen acted, directly reaching out with expert precision to hit a spot on Jin GuangYao’s wrist.

Jin GuangYao let out a yelp and the hold he had on his sword loosened, allowing Nie HuaiSang to flop uselessly on the ground where he immediately scurried away on all fours, bumping into several knees and ankles as he did, but in the flurry of robes, no one could catch hold of him.

Lan WangJi began to put Wei WuXian down but in the next moment, the sword beneath their feet wobbled.

Seeing his hostage lost, Jin GuangYao had pulled out a set of strings out from somewhere, extended from his fingers, and was playing a familiar song as fast as his hands could move.

Wei WuXian hurriedly pressing his hands over Lan WangJi's ears. Lan WangJi obviously knew what was happening, but he didn't drop Wei WuXian, instead lowering him as gently as he could as he quickly landed them. Though Wei WuXian's hands had been pressed over his ears, it wasn't enough to entirely block the sound and Wei WuXian could tell before they fully landed, that Lan WangJi's spiritual energy had been blocked.

"You should have dropped me," Wei WuXian scolded him, releasing his hold over Lan WangJi's ears now that it was useless. "I've fallen enough times, I'm not afraid of getting a little hurt."

Lan WangJi frowned, opening his mouth to speak, when there was a sharp sound of metal and a sudden splash of red blood.

Jin GuangYao's song broke off and he gave a pained gasp instead.

When Wei WuXian looked at him again, he was clutching the stump of his right arm that had been cleanly cut off.

Lan XiChen stood beside him, holding his sword where a thin line of red blood ran down the silver blade. He was pale, breathing hard, as though it had taken a lot for him to do it.

"Er-Ge..." Jin GuangYao gasped, his face white, as he clutched at the stump of his arm with his other hand. His golden robes were quickly being stained red.

With Jin GuangYao's attention divided, though Lan XiChen also had no spiritual energy, he didn't need it for a simple attack like this. The Lan clan was known for arm strength so although under normal circumstances, physical strength couldn't compete against cultivation strength, when desperate times came, using pure strength to attack still worked. Lan XiChen had cleanly cut off the hand Jin GuangYao had used to strum the strings.

"I shouldn't have let you keep your sword," Jin GuangYao said, his voice small and weak.

The LanlingJin Sect cultivators stopped fighting when Jin GuangYao played the song and now stood, weapons still raised though they had stopped attacking. At first, Wei WuXian thought it was because their leader had been wounded, but then he realized it was because they too, had had their spiritual energy cut off by the song. It seemed that though he'd brought along cultivators loyal to him, he still didn't fully trust them—at least not enough to prepare them to hear the song. The only one left with spiritual energy still, then, was Jin GuangYao alone, though all his energy was going to staunch the flow of blood right now.

But even though they no longer had spiritual energy, the LanlingJin Sect cultivators continued to fight with a hint of desperation now—if they lost, Jin ZiXuan would have no mercy on them. With the playing field leveled, though, Nie MingJue and Jin ZiXuan were taking the opportunity to knock out as many

cultivators as they could. But though they had been trained sect heirs and were both better than the average martial artist, when it was two against forty-something, the odds were still against them.

“You shouldn’t have done any of the things you did,” Lan XiChen said. “Why?” he asked when Jin GuangYao didn’t answer. Then, more loudly, “Why did you kill Qin Su and A-Song?”

He had said this last question more loudly so his voice cut through the air. At this, even Nie MingJue and Jin ZiXuan stilled, and with them, the rest of the LanlingJin Sect cultivators. It seemed this was news to everyone except Lan XiChen.

In the sudden stillness, Jin ZiXuan’s voice rang out, asking the question everyone wanted to know. “You killed your wife?” he asked, incredulous. “Your son?”

Jin GuangYao gave a weak little laugh. “I don’t know what you’re talking about Er-Ge,” he said, completely ignoring Jin ZiXuan. “I loved Qin Su and A-Song,” he said. “Have I ever been anything but good to them?”

Lan XiChen didn’t answer, only shutting his eyes and tossing a letter at Jin GuangYao. With his hands occupied, the letter hit his robe and fell to the ground.

When it appeared no one else was going to reach for it or explain anything, Wei WuXian bent and picked it up, safe in the reassurance that with Lan WangJi’s sword unsheathed, spiritual energy or no spiritual energy, no one would dare come near him.

Indeed, it seemed everyone was only waiting for someone to explain, and when Wei WuXian finished scanning the letter, he looked up at Lan XiChen. “Who sent this to you?” he asked.

Lan XiChen shook his head. “I don’t know,” he answered. “It was delivered to the Cloud Recesses that day we were doing research on your hypotheses.” He was clearly reluctant to say more in front of Jin GuangYao.

“What does the letter say?” One of the LanlingJin Sect cultivators clearly couldn’t wait anymore and blurted out the question.

“It says Jin GuangYao and Qin Su are brother and sister,” Wei WuXian said without preamble and passed the letter to the nearest cultivator. In a moment, several cultivators had gathered around to read the letter as Wei WuXian continued to speak. “Jin GuangShan forced himself on Qin Su’s mother. A week before the wedding, she came to Jin GuangYao to tell him the truth, but even knowing it, he still decided to marry her.”

“It was already too late by then,” Jin GuangYao said, a bitter smile on his face. “Why couldn’t she have told us sooner?” he said. “She knew how Qin Su and I felt about each other—if only she hadn’t kept silent—by the time she told me, Qin Su had already conceived,” he said. His voice went small. “If I hadn’t taken her as my wife, she would be disgraced—and under what circumstances? If she knew the truth...” He shook his head. “I never touched her again after we were married—how could I?”

“But why did you have to kill them?” Lan XiChen asked. “Even if you had married her to save her reputation, how could you bear to kill your own wife? Your own son?”

Jin GuangYao shook his head. "I had no choice," he said. "When A-Song was born, he was weak. If he had grown any older, it would be obvious that my son was—" He broke off. "You have to understand. It was the last kind thing I could do for them."

"How was that better for them?" The letter had finally circulated to Nie MingJue whose whole face had gone white with fury once he finished reading it. "You never gave them a choice at all! You killed them with your own hands," he said. The hand holding the letter trembled. "I believed you were innocent. I believed you were targeted, but the entire time, you were the one in league with HedongFu and Luo ZhuangWang?"

"No, that wasn't Lianfang-Zun," Wei WuXian said. "That really was Jin ZiXun—he was teaming up with the HedongFu and Luo ZhuangWang sects to go against Jin GuangYao's watchtower plan, but those sects had nothing to do with the attack on Koi Tower. Jin GuangYao wanted to steal my Yin Tiger Seal and use the distraction to kill Sect Leader Jin and his family, but when Jin ZiXun happened to receive those gifts, he switched targets and conveniently had those opposing clans wiped out." He turned to the boys. "Guo Yi, Liu FengYa, tell them what you told us," he said.

And so, stumbling over one another, the two boys recounted again their own story of being charged with delivering the beast core. By the end of it, murmurs had broken out even amongst the LanlingJin Sect cultivators who had almost all read the letter by then. Their faces ranged in variation from disgusted to pitying to angry.

Jin GuangYao had sunk to the floor, still clutching his arm, face pale, apparently resigned that things were over for him.

"ZiXuan, you still have Koi Tower and LanlingJin Sect to take care of," Nie MingJue said finally. "Let me bring Jin GuangYao back to the Unclean Realm," he requested. "I will make sure he gets the justice he deserves." His eyes shone as they landed on Jin GuangYao who shivered. Even now, he couldn't face death without fear.

Jin ZiXuan appeared to consider it for just a moment before he shook his head. "No, he is my half-brother and LanlingJin Sect responsibility," he said. "You are welcome to testify at his trial and be there for his execution, but this is LanlingJin business."

At the word "execution," Jin GuangYao finally turned to Lan XiChen. "Please, Er-Ge. I know what I did was wrong, but I was forced into it," he said.

Lan XiChen swallowed. "I am not your brother anymore," he said slowly like every word was being pried from him. "When I returned to Koi Tower, I asked you to turn back before it was too late," he said. "But you—"

"I protected you when the Cloud Recesses burned," Jin GuangYao pushed, grasping at his last hope at mercy. "I've never done anything to hurt you. You alone, Er-Ge..."

Lan XiChen seemed to hesitate.



Many people had later found out after the Sunshot Campaign, that the reason Lan XiChen was so close with Jin GuangYao was because he was the one Lan XiChen had stayed with when he'd escaped the burning of the Cloud Recesses as a youth. Wei WuXian remembered hearing that news back then when the QishanWen Sect had gathered the young sect heirs and disciples from every sect for so-called "training."

It was the only time he had ever seen Lan WangJi cry. They had been together, trapped in the Xuanwu's cave, when Lan WangJi finally confessed that his father was injured so badly that he would die soon, and his brother had gone missing after escaping the Cloud Recesses, but no one had seen him since. He himself, had been trapped with Wei WuXian with no way out of the cave, both of them injured and likely not going to survive.

Wei WuXian hadn't known what to do except that he wanted Lan WangJi to feel better. But at the same time, apart from when Wei WuXian annoyed him into losing his temper, it was the most emotion he'd ever seen Lan WangJi show up until then, and it had made something inside him ache.

Later, they'd found out that Lan XiChen had met Jin GuangYao, still known as Meng Yao back then. At the time, Meng Yao had not yet gone to Koi Tower and was working as an errand boy when he'd stumbled on Lan XiChen and hidden him away. Some rumors even said that he'd helped wash Lan XiChen's clothes for him, cooked for him, risked himself to find news about the Cloud Recesses to bring back for Lan XiChen. So when Lan XiChen had later recommended him for Nie MingJue's forces during the Sunshot Campaign, when he'd worked with Jin GuangYao during the time he'd become a spy in QishanWen Sect sources, Lan XiChen always defended him as he had been Jin GuangYao's sole contact during that time.

And because half of what Jin GuangYao did truly seemed to be for good, Lan XiChen must be questioning everything now—how much of it was real and how much of it was fake? Which was the real person—Meng Yao or Jin GuangYao?

From the complicated look on Lan XiChen's face, it seemed that just like everyone else, he was thinking back to all the things that had happened, and his hands shook.

"He killed his own wife and son," Nie MingJue said, apparently seeing Lan XiChen's hesitation. "I've told you again and again, he's not what you think he is."

"Da-Ge was going to kill me," Jin GuangYao said, his voice small. "You didn't see what he was like in my rooms—and in the end, I didn't hurt him did I?"

"You kept me captive for weeks," Nie MingJue said, turning to him. "The only reason you didn't kill me is because you didn't have a chance. If I turned up dead after your performance, you would never be able to raise your head in jianghu again. XiChen, he even took you as hostage."

Lan XiChen shut his eyes. "I don't know what to believe," he said.

Wei WuXian began to speak—he himself had little interaction with Jin GuangYao so all he knew were the things he'd seen with his own eyes—but Lan WangJi to touch his back. When he glanced at him, Lan WangJi shook his head. "I believe Wei Ying when you speak," he spoke quietly so only Wei WuXian could hear. "Brother believes the Meng Yao he knew—he must make his own decision."

Wei WuXian found himself admiring his husband. Not too long ago, he'd been so impressed that Lan XiChen could seemingly read Lan WangJi's mind just with a look. But they were brothers and it went both ways—in the end, Lan WangJi also understood what Lan XiChen was going through now.

He fell silent, trusting Lan WangJi. The others, however, did not—Nie MingJue had begun explaining all that Jin GuangYao had done to him in the Blooming Gardens that Wei WuXian had seen as a paperman. With all attention on Nie MingJue, no one paid attention to Jin GuangYao who was still slumped on the ground.

Wei WuXian, likewise, was listening to Nie MingJue and wasn't watching Jin GuangYao. After all, he hadn't become a cultivator until later and wasn't as strong as any of the other cultivators present. As badly injured as he was, he looked closer to fainting than as any sort of threat.

But, with his natural fear of dogs, Wei WuXian had been keeping half an eye on Little White at all times, making sure she stayed a good distance away from him. So he was the only one who noticed when she wandered close to Jin GuangYao. And he was the only one who saw the tiny, miniscule movement when Jin GuangYao reached into his sleeve, pulled something out and fed it to Little White.

"Stop him!" Wei WuXian shouted too late as Jin GuangYao shoved his hand into Little White's throat and clamped her mouth shut, forcing her to swallow the object.

A cold trickle of fear went down Wei WuXian's back as, before their eyes, Little White began to grow. Her body expanded like she was a paper lantern being inflated. Her legs thickened to the size of tree trunks. Her claws and teeth extended until each was the length a man's forearm. Her face distorted, snout lengthening even as she bared her teeth, growling as her red eyes ceased to recognize anyone around her. Little Black had been the youngest out of Jin ZiXuan's dogs, still a puppy and not yet fully grown. Little White, though, was fully grown to begin with and as she grew, she reached the high ceiling of the farmhouse, almost twice as large as Little Black had been. The cultivators closest to her darted to get out of the way. The farmhouse that had already been struggling to hold so many people and animals now turned claustrophobic as people shoved each other to put distance between themselves and the monster.

Wei WuXian's hands automatically came to clutch at Lan WangJi's waist, eyes watering as he stared up at the fully grown Tiangou.

Chapter 20: the problems with dog people

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian clutched Lan WangJi, shivering from head to toe as he stared up at the biggest dog he had ever seen in his life. Only his death-grip on Lan WangJi was keeping him from legging it out of the farmhouse as fast as he could.

"It's all right," he heard Lan WangJi whisper to him, which was when he realized he'd been mumbling Lan WangJi's name non-stop. At some point, his arms had also come to hold Wei WuXian though his grip was loose, as though to give Wei WuXian enough space to back out of this loose embrace if he wanted to.

Wei WuXian had no intention of budging from Lan WangJi's arms. "Why does Jin ZiXuan have to have so many dogs?" he wailed.

But though he was as afraid of dogs as he'd always been, wrapped up in Lan WangJi's arms like this, he felt strangely far away from everything, safe, like nothing truly bad could happen to him as long as he stayed here. It was the same feeling he'd had when Jiang YanLi, all those years ago, had carried him and Jiang Cheng back home after he'd run away, like as long as she was holding him, he would always be protected.

Little White howled and in the next moment, Wei WuXian was being shoved behind Lan WangJi who had drawn his sword.

Under normal circumstances, Bichen was best for close quarters combat or one-on-one battles. Lan WangJi's guqin, however, was the favorite choice for long distance attacks or when he had to go against big groups of people because sound carried far and wide. Unlike Jin GuangYao's song that required the victim to hear it for it to work, Lan WangJi's guqin attack infused spiritual energy right into the soundwave itself so it didn't matter even if his enemy couldn't hear a thing—encountering Lan WangJi's guqin technique was like facing a tsunami wave. Wei WuXian had seen him throw back crowds of cultivators and corpses alike with a single strum of his guqin. But the prerequisite to his sound cultivation technique was spiritual energy.

"Your spiritual energy, Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian said. "Can you—?" As soon as he had realized what Jin GuangYao was doing, Wei WuXian had reacted, covering Lan WangJi's ears for him. Maybe...

"Blocked," Lan WangJi answered, extinguishing Wei WuXian's hope. He held Bichen in front of him, poised to defend, surprisingly, instead of to attack.

For what felt like forever but was maybe only a few seconds, the Tiangou stood, fur raised, as she growled.

Then she leapt forward, baring her fangs at the same time as a single swipe of her paw sent two of Jin GuangYao's cultivators into the wall where they fell in a broken heap. The attack was so sudden that the two cultivators didn't even have a chance to scream before they were already unconscious, or maybe dead—no one could get close enough to check.

After that, pandemonium broke out.

Thanks to Jin GuangYao's song, no one had any spiritual energy including Jin GuangYao's own loyal cultivators. For better or for worse, the Tiangou didn't discriminate—whether it was Wei WuXian's group or Jin GuangYao's cultivators, she attacked anyone within reach.

Once the Tiangou had attacked three more cultivators, the LanlingJin cultivators soon realized that Jin GuangYao had no control over the Tiangou either. They had been trapped in a farmhouse with a wild, legendary beast, and they had to either ban together to fight it, or all risk dying.

“Work together to kill it!” Nie MingJue shouted when another LanlingJin cultivator was sent flying.

“Stay back!” Lan XiChen said to Nie MingJue. “WangJi!” he called as he himself took the lead, blocking the Tiangou’s claws right before they came down on another LanlingJin cultivator.

That cultivator, looking quite young, promptly burst into tears of relief as Guo Yi and Liu FengYa hooked him up by the arms and dragged him out of the way.

Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen were the most physically strong out of everyone and automatically took the lead, swords drawn. Even without spiritual energy, watching the Twin Jades of Lan in action was something else.

Wei WuXian, shivering uncontrollably, had ended up completely ignored and shoved into a crowd of less courageous cultivators.

If only it wasn’t a Tiangou that Lan WangJi was fighting, he could enjoy their swordsmanship more. But even so, the way the two jades moved like fluid water, dancing in between the Tiangou’s claws, dodging and blocking, it was like watching a dance if one false step meant someone might be decapitated.

At the same time, Wei WuXian realized they weren’t really dealing damage to the Tiangou—not necessarily out of mercy, but because of priority. It was obvious from the LanlingJin cultivators’ panicked attacks that the Tiangou couldn’t be hurt by physical weapons—even less so now that no one had spiritual energy. With no time to actually figure out her weakness, Lan XiChen and Lan WangJi could only try to get as many people out of the way of her claws and teeth as they could. So with every block and parry, they would also be yanking LanlingJin cultivators out of the way, throwing them toward the other side of the farmhouse to join the huddling crowd.

Nie HuaiSang was also thrown back when Lan WangJi caught him by the collar and tossed him toward Wei WuXian.

“Ow, ow, ow,” Nie HuaiSang complained as he struggled up. When he looked up again at the giant dog, he hurried to huddle behind Wei WuXian who was already cowered. “You know, I’m really starting to understand why you hate dogs so much, Wei-xiong,” he said.

In the next moment, he was interrupted when Lan XiChen sent an indignant Nie MingJue also flying back into the pile of cultivators.

“Please stay put, Da-Ge!” Lan XiChen said.

“How dare you—I can fight! Let me at him!” Nie MingJue shouted as he attempted to struggle up.

“Da-Ge!” Nie HuaiSang called out.

“FengYa, Guo Yi, quick!” Wei WuXian said.

Thankfully, Liu FengYa and Guo Yi were close enough to grab the sect leader's arms before he could straighten himself up again.

"I'm so sorry, Sect Leader Nie," Guo Yi kept apologizing. "It's for your own good."

"He's going to kill us when he gets his spiritual energy back," Liu FengYa was muttering, although he still kept a tight hold on Nie MingJue.

Thankfully, Nie MingJue's fury seemed to be directed at his younger brother. "Let me go or I'll feed you to the dogs, HuaiSang!"

"How are you going to do that if it eats you?" Nie HuaiSang said.

Of no help at all was Jin ZiXuan who kept yelling at everyone not to hurt his baby puppy.

"Don't hurt her!" he shouted. "XiChen, WangJi, stop! You're making her nervous!"

"That's not a dog!" one of the closer Jin sect cultivators shouted back.

The noise seemed to attract the Tiangou's attention and she turned to the cultivator, growling, teeth bared.

The cultivator tried to run, but with so many people around, he could only grit his teeth and try to counter her swipe with his sword.

His strength couldn't match up and he was pushed back, nearly losing his balance except for Lan WangJi who picked him up and threw him back—right before the Tiangou's teeth came down where his head had been a moment earlier.

"Little White! It's me," Jin ZiXuan called out to her. "Stop attacking her and shut up!" he shouted although she clearly recognized no one, attacking anyone within reach. "You're all scaring her! I trained her myself and she's a good dog. She'll listen to me!"

Maybe because they were used to obeying their sect heir's commands, the Jin sect cultivators actually did seem to calm down.

With Jin ZiXuan slowly walking forward, once Lan WangJi and Lan XiChen had removed the closest cultivators to the Tiangou, they also stopped to watch, swords drawn, as they watched Jin ZiXuan.

Once Jin ZiXuan had passed the two brothers, he stopped. Then, to Wei WuXian's horror, he actually dropped his sword, holding out his hand. "Little White, it's me," he said.

Although Jin ZiXuan's words were brave, he was also pale. A drop of sweat trickled down his brow.

Little White watched him steadily, all the fur on her back still raised, but slowly she stopped growling.

Jin ZiXuan smiled and took another step forward. "Little White, do you recognize me?" he asked.

Wei WuXian was shivering, goosebumps rising all up and down his arms, just watching how close Jin ZiXuan was getting to her. If he died, it was all his own fault for being a dog lover. Shijie couldn't blame Wei WuXian for her husband's bad taste and bad decisions.

"You recognize me, don't you?" Jin ZiXuan said encouragingly. "I raised you from a puppy," he said. "You're my good girl."

He took another step forward and reached out his hand, nearly close enough to touch her now.

Wei WuXian had stared down enough dogs as a child on the streets that he recognized the moment Little White's hackles began to raise and her fur stand up again. "Run!" he shouted.

The warning came a second late as the Tiangou swiped down those deadly claws at her unarmed owner—only for Lan XiChen to throw himself at the Tiangou.

Lan XiChen's sudden attack threw those deadly claws off trajectory so Jin ZiXuan was hit hard by the side of the Tiangou's paw instead of her claws. His body bounced off the floor once and went still.

The Tiangou snarled and in the next moment, Lan XiChen's body was sent flying in the other direction where he hit the farmhouse wall with a terrible cracking sound, and his body fell limp to the ground.

Wei WuXian watched as Lan Wangji's eyes widened, but even as he tried to make his way to his brother, the Tiangou brought her claws down toward him, and he was forced to block the hit.

"Er-Ge!"

The name rang out unexpectedly.

Where Lan XiChen had fallen was just behind the Tiangou which meant it was near impossible for anyone else to get near his body. But Jin GuangYao, who Wei WuXian had thought slipped away in the chaos, had actually not left the farmhouse yet. Or rather, he hadn't been able to.

Little White had grown into the Tiangou too rapidly, and with cultivators everywhere, Jin GuangYao had given up on trying to get through one of the doors, and instead, backed himself up until he was huddled in a corner behind the Tiangou where the monster couldn't see him, and neither could anyone else. It seemed he'd either been hoping to get through one of the windows or else wait until the Tiangou killed everyone before he escaped.

So when Lan XiChen didn't get back up, Jin GuangYao was the only one able to reach him, which he was trying to do, half-running, half-crawling behind the Tiangou to get to him.

"Lan Zhan, your brother!" Wei WuXian called. If Lan XiChen was still alive, he'd be Jin GuangYao's hostage again. If he was dead, then Jin GuangYao could still hold his body hostage. As a sect leader who grew up as a cultivator, Lan XiChen would have undergone all the proper precautions to make sure that once dead, he could not be called back to his body but would enter reincarnation. However, there were still ways of reanimating even a corpse without a soul, Wei WuXian knew, and a corpse as powerful as Lan XiChen's would not be easy to deal with.

Lan WangJi redoubled his efforts, but without spiritual energy, the Tiangou was just faster and more powerful. No matter how Lan WangJi tried to break through, the Tiangou batted him away like it was nothing.

Behind him, Jin GuangYao was nearly at Lan XiChen's body.

"Don't you touch him!" Nie MingJue shouted from behind. "XiChen!"

Jin GuangYao ignored everyone, stumbling until he got to Lan XiChen's body.

But with that motion, he entered the Tiangou's peripheral vision and the monster turned, growling.

Jin GuangYao ignored the Tiangou, pulling Lan XiChen's still body half into his lap and turning him face up.

A trickle of blood ran down Lan XiChen's mouth, and, to Wei WuXian's surprise, Jin GuangYao began passing Lan XiChen spiritual energy. "Hang on, Er-Ge," Jin GuangYao was murmuring.

And as he passed Lan XiChen spiritual energy, he was unable to staunch his own wound and the stub of his own missing arm began to bleed again, first a little and then much more until it was dripping onto Lan XiChen's white robes and staining the ground beneath them. Even with the Tiangou's eyes locked on him, Jin GuangYao ignored it, doing nothing to get out of the way even as the Tiangou advanced.

With the Tiangou's attention on them, Lan WangJi took the opportunity, swinging his sword down to cut at her neck. Up until then, he hadn't been able to get close enough to the Tiangou for his sword to cut at anything but her claws, though, so he didn't know that her fur was impenetrable. And without spiritual energy, Bichen was only an ordinary sword.

It meant that while Lan WangJi's sword did nothing to harm the Tiangou, it effectively drew Little White's attention back onto him.

She snarled. Lan WangJi was too close to her head to back away in time. She only had to turn her head, her sharp teeth coming down toward Lan WangJi.

Everything slowed down.

Lan WangJi's pale eyes widened.

The Tiangou leapt forward at a speed faster than something of her size seemed able.

He raised Bichen in the air, but without cultivation, Lan WangJi's speed wouldn't be fast enough—not enough to go against the Tiangou.

Wei WuXian didn't even realize he'd raised Chenqing to his lips, his heart frozen in place, until he heard the shriek that came from the flute.

The Tiangou's ears twitched. She frozen in place as though startled by the sound. It lasted only a second, though, before the Tiangou snarled and launched herself at Lan WangJi again.

The series of notes that came bubbling from Wei WuXian's flute were shrill with his panic. He wasn't even sure what he was commanding. They were in an abandoned farmhouse surrounded by barren rice paddies—there were no human corpses close enough to get there in time. But there were plenty of animal corpses.

He heard the cries of horror before he saw the stream of half-rotted mice, snakes, and birds swarm in through every crack in the farmhouse they could find. They crowded over the Tiangou, clawing at her with their feet, throwing themselves on her to hold her down. Wei WuXian would never have thought so many dead rodents and pests were hidden in the fields here. But though each was weak alone, together, the sheer volume kept the Tiangou occupied. It seemed to annoy her as she shook her head violently, trying to dislodge the creatures that continued to rush forward no matter how many times she threw them off.

Wei WuXian was dimly relieved to see Lan XiChen hadn't joined his corpse army, which meant he wasn't dead yet.

Still, the sheer size of the Tiangou compared to the animal corpses Wei WuXian had called up only slowed down the beast. Every time she lifted her foot, she was able to crush several dozen little bodies beneath her, rendering them unable to move at all.

Lan WangJi had been able to get away, at least, but Wei WuXian's animal corpse army was rapidly being diminished. They wouldn't be able to hold on for much longer at this rate.

Wei WuXian's cultivation, while it fed off the resentful energy of anything and could temporarily control the dead, was limited primarily by sound. Since he controlled it with his flute, the actual song itself didn't matter, but the commands he put into the notes as he blew. But it also meant that it relied on the corpses being able to be affected by the soundwaves to obey his command. It was much like Lan WangJi's guqin attacks that sent soundwaves out powerful enough to turn into physical attacks when he infused them with spiritual energy.

Back when Wei WuXian had been half-dead in the burial mounds with nothing but a will to survive and get vengeance for his sect, he'd pieced together demonic cultivation based on ancient texts he'd read and his own hypotheses and experimentation. When he'd developed it enough to decide on a method of control, he'd remembered Lan WangJi's music technique as one of the most powerful attack methods because of how sound could travel.

But even then, the technique was limited. The further corpses were from Wei WuXian, the more difficult it was for him to call them.

No matter how much he summoned the creatures to him, the Tiangou was destroying their bodies more quickly than they could arrive. Unless he could get some more powerful corpses or move to a new location, sooner or later, Wei WuXian would run out of corpses.



The Tiangou was also getting increasingly agitated, though whether it was from his shrill song or the animal corpses covering its body, Wei WuXian couldn't tell. Even though it wasn't a real Tiangou, but an artificial one created by feeding it a beast core, it was as powerful as a true legendary beast.

And that was when an idea formed in Wei WuXian's mind. If the Tiangou was being controlled by a core stone, and Wei WuXian's own core stone was powerful enough to control animal corpses—what effect would his demonic cultivation have upon another core stone?

In that instant, Wei WuXian stopped pouring his will into summoning more corpses.

He took a deep breath, and began to play a different song this time—a song, not for the corpses, but for the Tiangou—a soothing, comforting melody that came from the depths of his mind.

And as he played this new song, he willed the Tiangou to fall under the spell of the tune, to calm down and to listen to his command.

Amazingly, it began to work. As he played, pouring all of his cultivation into the song, the Tiangou's movements began to slow. The animal corpses around it, of course, also fell away since they were no longer under Wei WuXian's control, but it didn't matter because the Tiangou didn't try to advance. Her eyes locked onto nothing in particular. Although she still stood stiff and nervous, still growling with her hackles raised, she wasn't moving.

Just a little bit more, Wei WuXian thought, as he took a deep breath and continued playing the song, willing himself to calm down and to spread that influence to the Tiangou. Something comforting, something soothing, something that made him feel safe and protected and warm.

From beside him, he heard the sharp intake of a breath. He darted a look at Lan WangJi who, instead of watching the Tiangou, was staring at him.

He wondered why Lan WangJi was staring like he'd been struck by lightning.

Then he felt a familiar throb of pain radiate from his chest, and all other thoughts flew from Wei WuXian's mind.

The core stone in his heart was moving, must be beginning to expand again with his desperate demonic cultivation. The resentful energy he had been pushing at the animal corpses was still a normal amount, but he was pouring everything he had into controlling the Tiangou. Although his cultivation was apparently working on the Tiangou, it was also taking a toll on Wei WuXian's own core stone.

"Stop, Wei Ying!" And because Lan WangJi had been watching him, it seemed he'd noticed.

Wei WuXian couldn't stop though. Every time he so much as took a breath so he could continue playing, the Tiangou would growl and start forward again. The moment he stopped cultivating was the moment Little White attacked again.

"Wei Ying!"

Wei WuXian couldn't even yell at Lan WangJi to let him concentrate, his fingers pressing over the flute as he tried to block out the desperation in Lan WangJi's voice, the pain in his chest, the panic he was forcing down so he could concentrate only on making the Tiangou as calm as possible.

Seeing that Wei WuXian unwilling to stop, Lan WangJi picked up his sword again and was studying the Tiangou, clearly looking for weaknesses. Wei WuXian wished, more than ever, that he could speak or that Jin ZiXuan hadn't gotten himself knocked unconscious that absolute dog-loving idiot, and could tell Lan WangJi the Tiangou's weakness. Lan WangJi was smart enough to figure it out, but Wei WuXian wasn't sure how much longer he could hold on.

The pain in his chest grew stronger, worse. His heartbeat sped up as did his breathing as his heart tried to pump blood through valves rapidly being blocked.

Then the door to the farmhouse burst open, and a second dog came charging inside.

Wei WuXian fumbled the flute in the sudden fear that ran up his spine, completely forgetting to keep playing as Little Gold, Jin ZiXuan's other dog came skittering in, yapping at the top of its lungs.

Upon seeing the dog charging right at him, Wei WuXian shrieked and automatically ran to hide behind Lan WangJi.

By the time he realized what he'd done, the Tiangou was roaring and its claws came down on Lan WangJi's sword.

"Play!" Nie HuaiSang shrieked.

Wei WuXian quickly raised the flute to his lips. A handful of squeaky notes sounded from his flutel as he began to play again, huddled behind Lan WangJi this time. He didn't even know he could be more scared when he was already faced with a giant Tiangou, but fear knew no logic. It took several more phrases and only with the comforting security of Lan WangJi's broad back pressed against his own, the smell of sandalwood enveloped around him, that Wei WuXian was finally able to regain control.

"Stop," Lan WangJi said. With the Tiangou contained, he turned just enough so he could meet Wei WuXian's eyes, pleading, although he brandished his sword in front of them, ready to attack the Tiangou.

At the same time, the stone in his chest throbbed again, more painful than before, and Wei WuXian dropped one hand to clutch at his chest before quickly raising it again. He met Lan WangJi's beautiful pale eyes, the worried frown on his face, and shook his head, trying to communicate without words why he couldn't stop—not if he wanted to keep Lan WangJi safe, if he wanted to keep all these cultivators safe.

And as he met Lan WangJi's eyes, trying to tell him that it was okay, that if he died this way he would be content knowing he'd done it to protect the people he loved, the roars and barks and shouts and braying faded away. For a moment, it was just him and Lan Zhan and the song.

"Don't make me lose you again," Lan WangJi said. His voice was low and pained, pleading.

Wei WuXian's heart throbbed. I'm sorry, he wanted to tell him, but he couldn't even say that much.

Even if it cost him his life, he had to do what he could to save them all. To save Lan Zhan.

"What the hell is going on here?"

The moment was abruptly broken when a streak of purple lightning arched out and whipped at the Tiangou's feet, forcing it to back up although Little White growled and bared her teeth.

Jiang Cheng was standing there in the doorway, a group of YunmengJiang Sect cultivators silhouetted in the dim light and rain.

It seemed Jin ZiXuan hadn't been completely useless after all, and before he'd come charging in with Little White, he'd sent Little Gold for help where she must have run into Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng walked in on a completely chaotic scene. Since he'd escaped some days ago, he would have gone immediately back to Yunmeng for reinforcements to return to Koi Tower. Naturally, none of what had occurred between his escape and now would be known by him. Most likely he had returned to Koi Tower with his forces only to be sent back out by Madam Jin or Jiang YanLi. Whatever had happened, Jiang Cheng had clearly come prepared for battle, but no one could expect a legendary beast to show up here.

"Sect Leader Jiang—" Wei WuXian heard a weak, gasping voice from behind the Tiangou. When he looked toward the speaker, still playing Chenqing, he saw Lan XiChen had woken up. He was propped against the wall and looked better, though Jin GuangYao, beside him, seemed to have lost consciousness perhaps due to blood loss judging by the dark pool of liquid they were now both sitting in now.

Lan XiChen was the one who had spoken and he raised two swords—his own and Jin GuangYao's.

For a moment, Wei WuXian thought he might try to attack the Tiangou, although no matter how anyone looked at him, he had bad internal injuries and seemed barely able to move much less fight.

"Sect Leader Jiang, play this song with your spiritual energy," Lan XiChen said.

Then he proceeded to rub Shuoyue and Hensheng together. The sound that came out of it did not qualify as a song by any definition of the word, making a metallic screeching so terrible the Tiangou actually began to howl and scratch at her ears.

"What kind of song is that? It sounds so bad," Jiang Cheng cursed.

Wei WuXian wanted to laugh. Jiang Cheng had always been the least musical in the family, neither appreciating it nor liking to play any instruments though he'd been forced to learn all the basics, being the young master of the Jiang clan. If Jiang Cheng said it sounded bad, it must truly be terrible.

But despite complaints, Jiang Cheng did as he was asked, grabbing a sword from one of his cultivators and rubbing it together with Sandu to imitate that same horrible, screeching sound.

It was so bad that Little Gold completely gave up and sank to the ground, pawing at her ears and whining.

But as Jiang Cheng played the song infused with spiritual energy, cultivators all around them began to exclaim.

“My spiritual energy is back!” one shouted.

“Mine too,” said another.

Nie MingJue looked at Lan XiChen. “You came up with a cure?” he asked.

Lan XiChen gave him a tired smile. “I’ve heard the song several times by now,” he said. “If A-Yao could write a song to block spiritual energy, then I can write one to cure it,” he said.

Wei WuXian had no more time to pay attention to them, because the horrible song had agitated the Tiangou even more than before. After it let out a howl that made the hairs on the back of Wei WuXian’s neck all rise up, it directly tried to bite the nearest YunmengJiang cultivator.

Wei WuXian quickly raised Chenqing to his lips again, playing the song.

He had been playing for too long and this time, the pain was so intense, his vision spotted. He tried to blink the spots away, taking a shaky breath to continue playing.

And then he heard the clear note of the guqin sound from in front of him.

Lan WangJi had unstrapped his guqin and was playing it, each note as overwhelmingly full of spiritual energy as Wei WuXian had always heard it. But no soundwaves flew out to attack the Tiangou. Instead, the guqin’s song was a familiar one—one he’d heard so many times in the last few days that he was sure he had it memorized. It wasn’t an attack song like he thought Lan WangJi would play, but that song he had written for Wei WuXian—the song that had shaved down his core stone and purified his resentful energy.

Almost immediately, Wei WuXian felt the effects stir inside him. The guqin’s notes rang out, and a powerful current seemed to sweep through him, converting resentful energy to spiritual energy, strong and secure, calming his core, calming his heart, calming his soul.

And as the two songs blended together—Chenqing and WangJi, flute and guqin, playing the two songs at once, they seemed to combine into a perfect harmonic resonance.

Wei WuXian couldn’t help the blinding smile that spread across his face as he turned to Lan WangJi. They were both still playing their individual songs, and Wei WuXian’s heart was light and full. He could pour more and more energy into his song, feeding in from Lan WangJi like a neverending fountain.

Most amazing of all was that under the force of the two songs, the Tiangou was slowly, but steadily falling under Wei WuXian’s control. The more they played, the calmer the Tiangou became. At first, her ears perked up. And then her fur began to flatten back down. Then, she sat back on her haunches, so heavy that the farmhouse once again shook from the impact.

The conscious remaining cultivators stood around her with their swords raised, staring warily at her.

Then, to everyone's surprise, Little White sat back, tilted her head, and began to howl along to the song.

It sounded almost as bad as Jiang Cheng's horrible sword song and was three times as loud, making the rafters vibrate from the howling. Wei WuXian watched more than one cultivator wince at the noise.

"Attack!" Nie MingJue shouted. The Nie Sect Leader looked much better with his restored spiritual energy. Though he was still thin and physically weak, Wei WuXian could feel the level of energy coming off of him and his saber.

"At my command," Jiang Cheng ordered the YunmengJiang cultivators.

"No wait!"

It was, unsurprisingly, Jin ZiXuan who had also regained consciousness sometime in the last few minutes. There was a large bump on his forehead that was definitely going to bruise, and he still didn't have his sword. But ignoring all of that, he pushed past the cultivators ringing the Tiangou in defensive formation.

Then, in the most disgusting and horrifying act Wei WuXian had ever seen, he grabbed Little White by the muzzle, forcing her mouth open, and shoved not only his arm but most of his upper body right into her slobbering, teeth-filled mouth.

Wei WuXian went over all the ways he was going to have to break the sad news to his sister that her absolute moron of a husband had offed himself by getting himself bitten in half, and it absolutely wasn't Wei WuXian's or Jiang Cheng's fault. They had done their best. Jin ZiXuan had brought this on himself by being an unrepentant dog person.

But a moment later, a drool-drenched, stinking Jin ZiXuan emerged triumphant from his dog's mouth, holding a small stone in one fist. "I got it!" he declared.

A moment later, Little White began to shrink down before their eyes the same way Little Black had.

For a moment, Little White lay panting on the ground as though utterly exhausted. Then she tentatively sat back up and looked around herself as though confused about what had happened.

Seeing her sibling awake, Little Gold tackled her and began enthusiastically licking her face. Then Jin ZiXuan was holding both his dogs in his slimy, wet grip, crying about how happy he was that they were safe.

Jiang Cheng and Nie MingJue began rounding up all the rebel LanlingJin Sect cultivators with the YunmengJiang cultivators. Guo Yi, Liu FengYa, and Nie HuaiSang began trying to get Lil Apple to cooperate so it could help carry the wounded Lan XiChen and maybe Jin GuangYao if he was still alive. And as for Wei WuXian...

Wei WuXian finally let his arms relax, putting down the flute. He looked over at Lan WangJi, whose fingers had likewise stilled the strings on his guqin. Lan WangJi lifted his gaze from the guqin to Wei WuXian then, and those beautiful golden eyes seemed to light up Wei WuXian's very soul, taking his breath away. He stood for a moment, just looking at his husband and smiling. For once, words weren't enough to express that feeling of absolute harmony, the feeling of a perfect duet, the feeling of meeting his perfect match, the feeling that was still left coursing through his blood. But for once, he didn't think he needed words.

Notes:

this chapter is dedicated to everyone who's been waiting for wangxian.mp3 to drop ever since they realized the title is literal haha

also quick question--do you guys want the rating of this fic to go up to M-rated or to stay the same? next chapter CAN include the papapa but whether wangxian ppp or just make out won't really affect the plot so i can go either way... (this fic is not suited for the e-rated ppp though so m-rated at most ok) uh i guess leave a comment and let me know which you guys prefer!

Chapter 21: the thing he really wants

Notes:

ok majority vote was by far for the ppp. if you're not into it and/or underage, once they start making out, ctrl+f and skip straight to "thank you" :)

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Chapter Text

The aftermath of the whole fight took awhile to sort out. Most people were badly injured. Then there was the matter of what to do with the cultivators who had followed Jin GuangYao and staged this coup d'état. And in the end, it was Jiang Cheng, the only sect leader who was in comparatively decent physical health, backed by loyal YunmengJiang cultivators who began rounding up the injured and the traitorous, barking out orders for people to assemble to head for Koi Tower.

Since this entire affair had involved so many major sects, it would be a nightmare to sort out. With over forty-some cultivators the LanlingJin sect would have to question and decide whether they would be exiled or worse, entangled together with the attempt on the Nie sect leader's life, it might take weeks if not months to hold the proper trials and sort through.

But as far as Wei WuXian was concerned, his family was safe and those he wanted to protect were taken care of. He had no interest in the rest of the politics—happy enough to leave the rest of the affairs to those who did care.

So as the group slowly made their way out of the old farmhouse, he lingered, letting the others walk in front of him.

For the first in a long time, Wei WuXian's shoulders felt light. He had finally given back what he owed to Madam Yu and Uncle Jiang, to Wen Qing and Wen Ning. And so, for the first in a long time, Wei WuXian could think about the things he wanted.

He turned to look at Lan WangJi who had come silently to stand beside him. Wei WuXian smiled. "Let's go, Lan Zhan," he said to him—not a command, but an invitation.

Lan WangJi inclined his head, and together, the two of them slipped away.

Wei WuXian woke up in the small guest room to the sunlight on his face and a peaceful silence. In the quiet, he could only hear the pages of a book slowly being turned. When he opened his eyes, Lan WangJi was sitting at a chair close by the bed, reading.

Wei WuXian smiled. The sun lit Lan WangJi's face so he seemed almost to glow. His eyelashes were long and his visage as still and flawless as a jade piece. Wei WuXian wondered how long he had been reading now. With so much sunlight pouring into the room, it must be far past Lan WangJi's usual waking time.

When they had left, only the donkey had noticed and stubbornly followed them to the nearest city outside of Lanling. By the time they reached the town, though, the sun was already beginning to rise, so Wei WuXian had booked them a room at the closest inn and been asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. He assumed it must be the same for Lan WangJi who had slept even less than he had in the past few days, though he'd still woken up first.

Wei WuXian wasn't sure how long he just lay and stared at Lan WangJi's face, drinking in those handsome features, before Lan WangJi finally noticed.

Wei WuXian felt a delicious warmth wash over him when Lan WangJi looked at him. In retrospect, he'd been trying to get Lan WangJi's attention since the moment he'd set eyes on him when he jumped over the wall at the Cloud Recesses. Of course he'd annoyed Lan WangJi half to death in those few months he'd spent with GusuLan. But as young as they were back then, Lan WangJi was like a bright light that Wei WuXian couldn't help but be drawn to. It wasn't until recently that he realized the way he had subconsciously looked for Lan WangJi wherever he went for years now, no matter how unreasonable, turning to look twice whenever he saw a white robe. Wei WuXian always noticed him the moment he arrived at the Wen sect gathering of disciples, as soon as he rode into the archery contest on his white steed, even when he was doing nothing but walking on an ordinary Yunmeng street and Wei WuXian was two stories above on a balcony. Something in him was just aware of Lan WangJi's presence anytime they were in the same place like his whole soul was attuned to him.

Wei WuXian briefly wondered if maybe, back then, part of the reason he'd been so annoyed at the way Lan WangJi asked him to return to the Cloud Recesses was because it felt like Lan WangJi was looking at him as a problem to be solved, a person to discipline or even to rescue, and not like Wei WuXian was his friend or maybe something more.

But now...

"How do you feel?" Lan WangJi asked, his voice deep and soothing.

Wei WuXian smiled and stretched a little, making himself more comfortable in bed with absolutely no intention of moving from it. “Good,” he answered.

It was true. Ever since they’d played the duet together last night, Wei WuXian felt like his whole soul was alight—that feeling of complete power like he was, in that moment, stretching himself to the limit of what he could do, but in the way he was always meant to. Like he could reach the heavens as long as he and Lan WangJi kept playing together.

“What time is it?” Wei WuXian asked with another small yawn.

“Mid-morning,” Lan WangJi answered, and then sounding slightly embarrassed, added, “We slept through yesterday.”

Wei WuXian’s smile stretched into a grin. “So even Lan Er-Gege can sleep in sometimes?” he teased.

Lan WangJi didn’t answer, only going to the table and bringing a tray laden with a long-cooled congee breakfast.

The smell of the food made Wei WuXian’s stomach growl and he finally scooped up to sit, half-amused and half-touched at how gently Lan WangJi was treating him.

“Did you already eat?” Wei WuXian asked.

“Mm,” Lan WangJi answered.

“Then I won’t be polite,” Wei WuXian said cheerfully and dug in. Food in this region was most definitely better than at the Cloud Recesses, though not as good as the spices Wei WuXian preferred from Yunmeng. He happily indulged himself until he was full, and only then did he lazily swing his legs off the bed.

“We should return to Gusu,” Lan WangJi said, “have Doctor Wen check on your progress.”

“Soon, soon,” Wei WuXian said dismissively. He felt great, and right now, more than any type of physical checkup, the thing he was most concerned about was what Lan WangJi was thinking—or, more accurately, what Lan WangJi thought of him.

Lan WangJi was good. He was really good to Wei WuXian, and Wei WuXian wasn’t naive—his husband definitely treated him differently from others. But he didn’t know if that type of different was the type of different that Wei WuXian wanted it to be.

Lan WangJi had been upset when he found out Wei WuXian was dying—more than for a stranger, maybe even more than for a friend. However, Wei WuXian was also his cultivation partner in name and now in the most literal sense of the deed, and the honorable Hanguang-Jun would of course care about what happened to his husband. But the type of cultivation partner Wei WuXian wanted to be was one who wholly and completely belonged to Lan WangJi, and he wanted Lan WangJi to belong to him. He wanted all of it.

He just didn’t know if Lan WangJi did too.



They were already so close, and yet as he dressed, he couldn't seem to find the right words to say. How was he supposed to ask Lan Wangji if he wanted to be true cultivation partners? That Wei WuXian was in love with him and hoped Lan Wangji felt the same?

In the end, he still hadn't said anything by the time he finished getting dressed and Lan Wangji had tidied up the room. And then, Lan Wangji was leading him downstairs and they were checking out of the inn, and it wasn't the right time anymore.

"Lan Zhan, I want to have fun today. Will you come with me?" Wei WuXian asked as they stepped out into the sunlight. If they spent all day together, surely, the right moment would present itself and Wei WuXian could ask or confess or whatever—he'd figure it out.

"Mm," Lan Wangji agreed, unaware of Wei WuXian's beating heart.

They stopped by the stables first to get Lil Apple who had been the only one to notice when they slipped away. Wei WuXian had fed it more apples in a single night than was probably healthy for a donkey in an attempt to keep it quiet, so apparently, it had decided Wei WuXian was its new preferred owner.

"Don't you want to go home?" Wei WuXian asked the donkey as he led it outside.

Lil Apple nudged his arm closer to the saddlebag of apples.

"You sure know where the food is," Wei WuXian said, wagging a finger at it, but fished out an apple and tossed it to the donkey.

For once in his life, Wei WuXian had no particular destination in mind. Everyone was safe. Jiang Cheng would have an opportunity, now that Wei WuXian and Lan Wangji were gone and all the other major sect leaders injured, to take the lead in sorting out the situation and win YunmengJiang that honor he'd always wanted. Of course, he and Lan Wangji had responsibilities they'd need to return to eventually, but for now, they didn't need to rush to return anywhere.

They had not left the town for long, walking along the road when Wei WuXian glanced at the donkey and then at Lan Wangji who was walking slowly beside it. An image surfaced in his mind and Wei WuXian quickened his steps to push up against him.

Although he had a bad memory, one in particular stood out to him from when he was still very young—maybe around A-Yuan's age now, he thought. He remembered a woman on a donkey whose lead was being carried by a tall man as they walked down a dusty street. She was smiling, and he was carrying a small child on his shoulders. That child was himself, and Wei WuXian remembered being delighted at the height, kicking his heels against his father's shoulders as he shouted for him to walk faster.

They already had the child back at the Cloud Recesses, Wei WuXian thought. Now all that was left was the donkey.

"Lan Zhan, Lan Er-Gege, I'm tired," Wei WuXian whined shamelessly.

"Ride the donkey," Lan Wangji answered.

"It might kick me off," Wei WuXian said innocently.

Lan WangJi gave Lil Apple, who had been very well-behaved, a skeptical glance.

"Help me up," Wei WuXian said. He was being so obvious by now that even he was starting to feel a bit embarrassed.

Thankfully, Lan WangJi stopped asking questions and lifted Wei WuXian lightly by the waist to set on the donkey's back. His grip was strong and firm, steady when he picked Wei WuXian up like he barely noticed the weight at all.

Delighted, Wei WuXian laughed, kicking his heels against Lil Apple's sides until the donkey gave him a disgruntled snort.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, it's trying to kick me off. Pick up the reins!" Wei WuXian said. "Hurry!"

"Stop fooling around," Lan WangJi said but did as he asked, picking up the lead.

Under his grip, Lil Apple calmed down, but Wei WuXian still couldn't stop smiling as they continued down the road.

They traveled at a leisurely pace, stopping by a small stall by the side of the road for tea and dumplings for lunch. When they reached the next town, they browsed their way through the market although it was still early and they could have made it to the next town over if they'd wanted to. Throughout the day, Lan WangJi responded to his every request, buying him loquats and other snacks when he asked for them, lifting him on and off the donkey when Wei WuXian pretended he needed help. But by nightfall, he still hadn't brought himself to ask the question he wanted to ask. He told himself he just had to test Lan WangJi's feelings for him a little more, be a little more sure of it before he spoke. After all, they were already married—he might like Lan WangJi that way, but if he got this wrong, if Lan WangJi didn't feel the same, it could affect their sect relations.

But deep down, Wei WuXian knew the real reason he kept putting it off was because he was afraid. There was only one answer he wanted from Lan WangJi, and he didn't want to hear anything different.

Since they'd wasted too much time at the market that afternoon, they decided to stay in the same city that night and found a nice, clean inn. Instead of staying downstairs to eat, Wei WuXian ordered a bunch of dishes to be brought to their single shared room with their single shared bed. Then he dragged Lan WangJi upstairs, waiting for Lan WangJi to voice either a positive response or a protest at each increasingly shameless demand. But he never did.

"Sorry I don't have any money so you'll have to pay this time too, Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian said. "Ah, that's a few times you've already paid for me, huh. I'll pay you back when we go back to the Cloud Recesses."

This time, he half hoped that Lan WangJi would say something like they were married—of course Wei Ying was his cultivation partner so his money was Wei WuXian's money. But Lan WangJi, man of few words, simply said, "No need. I will pay."

Of course the end result was the same—Wei WuXian didn't need to pay, but he still couldn't confirm how Lan WangJi really felt about him.

After eating, Wei WuXian asked for a tub to be brought up so they could bathe.

Once the tub had been filled with steaming water, he glanced at Lan WangJi. "Do you want to go first?" he asked.

"Wei Ying can go first," Lan WangJi said mildly. In fact, he was still eating at his usual slow pace and hadn't finished yet.

An idea entered Wei WuXian's mind. "Then how about we bathe together?"

Lan WangJi choked on the green bean he'd just put in his mouth.

"Eh? Lan Zhan, be careful!" Wei WuXian said, quickly patting his back as he feigned innocence.

Even choking, Lan WangJi's face hadn't turned very red, though his ears had gone crimson. Still, his expression was pained and made Wei WuXian feel like he'd just bullied him. It ignited that mischievous side of Wei WuXian.

He poured Lan WangJi a cup of tea, urging him to drink it.

"Are you feeling better now?" Wei WuXian asked after Lan WangJi had drank a few sips of tea and stopped coughing. He lingered by Lan WangJi's side, rubbing his back and dabbing at his mouth with a handkerchief like a young wife. "Lan Zhan, are you really feeling better? You need to be more careful."

"Mm." Lan WangJi sounded hoarse, and took another sip of tea.

Wei WuXian smiled innocently at him. "Then let's take a bath together," he said sunnily.

Lan WangJi choked, this time, on the tea.

After the second bout of coughing subsided, he spit out two words, "Too small."

"What? The tub?" Wei WuXian asked.

It was true. The bathtub was built for one person. As two full-grown men, there was no way they could both fit in it—not unless... Wei WuXian tilted his head, looking consideringly at the wooden tub. "Maybe if I sat in your lap..."

Lan WangJi had stopped trying to eat at all in this conversation, so he didn't choke this time, although both his ears had gone bright red. He was resolutely staring away from the tub.

"Stop joking. Go bathe," he said hoarsely.

Wei WuXian laughed. “All right, all right, I’ll stop teasing you, Lan Er-Ge~ge~” he said and finally left Lan WangJi in peace to eat.

There was a small screen in the room meant to give some privacy to those who were changing their clothes. Wei WuXian decided he’d given Lan WangJi enough of a shock for today so out of the goodness of his heart, he dragged the screen over to hide the tub before he stripped and got in. It was a good sign that Lan WangJi couldn’t even think about getting in a bath with him without choking, right? But then again, Lan WangJi had lost all composure that time when they were young and Wei WuXian had tricked him into seeing a book of erotic drawings, so it could just be that the upright Hanguang-Jun was just truly uncomfortable with the thought of seeing someone unclothed. In the end, it still wasn’t an answer.

Wei WuXian sighed as he submerged himself in the hot water. From the other side of the screen, he could hear the quiet sounds of chopsticks on ceramics as Lan WangJi began to eat again.

He washed himself, taking his time as he listened to Lan WangJi eat. From the hallway, he could hear the sounds of the merrymaking of the guests downstairs. The lamplight was golden and bright. Outside the air was cool but here, everything was warm and cozy.

Wei WuXian thought back to that little dream he’d shared with Lan WangJi back when they’d both thought he would die—of a little cabin in the woods somewhere, living a simple, ordinary life as simple, ordinary people. Of course, with his notoriety and all of Lan WangJi’s obligations to GusuLan, naturally, it was impossible for them for a long time still. But perhaps if they could take trips like this every once in awhile—just the two of them traveling the way Wei WuXian’s parents used to, going to nighthunt wherever the chaos was and then spending some time away to enjoy, just the two of them. It sounded like bliss.

When Wei WuXian finally made himself leave the comfortable bath again, the water was only lukewarm. Lan WangJi had finished eating, the table was cleared, and he was reading again by lamplight at the table.

Wei WuXian came out still adjusting the ties of his underrobe shirt, having foregone the pants for now. It wasn’t his imagination that Lan WangJi’s ears turned red again when he glanced at him. Wei WuXian took the opportunity to stretch his hands up so he could let down his hair again, making the robe hike up so more of his pale thigh was exposed.

“Put on your trousers,” Lan WangJi said stiffly. “You’ll catch cold.”

“Mm, okay,” Wei WuXian mumbled, his mouth occupied holding his hair ribbon as he ran his hands through his loose hair.

He obediently put on the underrobe trousers and gestured for Lan WangJi to bathe.

He intended to stay up to see if he could get away with cuddling up to Lan WangJi on the single bed, but by the time Lan WangJi finished bathing, Wei WuXian was already asleep, dreaming of bright things.

This continued for the next two days—Wei WuXian wanting to bring up the status of their relationship, but his courage failing him at the last second every time. All he had to do was imagine Lan WangJi’s look of disgust, imagine Lan WangJi telling him that he didn’t need to bother returning to the Cloud Recesses

because Lan Wangji wasn't a cutsleeve, and Wei WuXian would lose all courage to say anything. Of course, he knew that if Lan Wangji didn't feel the same, he wouldn't so unkind as to actually say or do anything like that, but Lan Wangji could let him down in the kindest way and Wei WuXian would still be lost.

On the third day when they reached Yunmeng, Wei WuXian was truly desperate and yet still hadn't found a way to ask Lan Wangji without risking their current relationship.

Since Lan Wangji appeared fine going anywhere he wanted, Wei WuXian spent the day wandering around Yunmeng as he pointed out places he used to steal chickens or stalls where they had the best fried pancakes.

"Oh look, there's a ring toss game," Wei WuXian said, pointing to a stall where a group of young children had just vacated. "Have you played this before? I'm really good at this game," he said as he stepped up to the stall. "Which prize do you want, Hanguang-Jun? I'll win it for you."

To Wei WuXian's delight, Lan Wangji played along. "You choose," he said.

Wei WuXian took a closer look at the prizes laid out. Most of the items were crudely made toys for children, more suitable for A-Yuan than for Lan Wangji. One of the less childish items was a folding fan that looked quite worn. It wasn't the sort of item that Lan Wangji would use, but it did remind Wei WuXian of something else.

"Lan Zhan, did Jiang Cheng or Nie HuaiSang ever mention how they escaped?" Wei WuXian asked, trying to recall the chaotic aftermath of the fight.

Lan Wangji shook his head.

"Hm, maybe we should have stayed a bit longer. We'll have to ask the next time we see them," Wei WuXian said and continued to peruse the items.

Among the items, there was a large turtle carved from stone that reminded Wei WuXian a bit of the Xuanwu that he and Lan Wangji had once fought together. "I'll win that one," he decided and gave the stall owner a few coins to receive three worn wooden rings in return. He backed up quite a number of steps until the stall owner called out to him.

"Young master, you don't have to back up so far," the stall owner said.

"It's no fun if it's too easy," Wei WuXian answered, rolling a ring around one finger as he crossed to the other side of the road.

"But you'll hit someone if you toss from there," the stall owner said, looking pained at the number of people walking back and forth between the road. Undoubtedly, he was also afraid of losing a few of his rings to the crowd.

Wei WuXian grinned. "If you don't trust me, Second Master Lan will pay for any damages I cause, won't you, Lan Zhan?" He winked and turned his back on the stall. Knowing full well he was showing off, he shut his eyes and threw back the ring.

A moment later, he heard a gasp and turned to see the stall owner staring at the stone tortoise Wei WuXian's ring had looped around.

"I'm pretty good, aren't I, Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian said, crossing back over the street to collect his prize. "For you, Lan Er-Gege." He proudly presented the large turtle to Lan WangJi.

From up close, although it was considered better quality goods than most of the other items laid out, it really had been crudely carved. Compared to the other things in the Jingshi, even the incense burner was clearly an expensive, quality piece of craftsmanship, and this ugly turtle certainly wouldn't fit in.

"Ah, it's really not that good," Wei WuXian said with a sigh. "If you don't want it, we don't have to take it with us," he said.

"I want it," Lan WangJi said.

A moment later, one of Lil Apple's saddlebags was weighed down with a heavy stone turtle and it was fed an apple in compensation.

There were still two more rings, though, and Wei WuXian waved them at Lan WangJi. "Want to try it?" he asked. "It's Hanguang-Jun's turn to win something for me," he said. "I won't be greedy—just one is enough. You can win yourself something you really want for the last prize," he said cheerfully.

Lan WangJi wordlessly took the rings and crossed over to the same place Wei WuXian had been earlier. Then he took an extra step further, making Wei WuXian grin.

The stall owner didn't seem to believe his eyes when Lan WangJi also turned his back, and a moment later, a ring came sailing at the stall, landing on a piece of red cloth that Wei WuXian had glanced at earlier and dismissed.

"That young master has good taste," the stall owner said with a sigh. "That's the most expensive item I have—I tempted so many young husbands to try to and win that for their wives," he said mournfully.

When the stall owner handed it to him, Wei WuXian saw that it was a fine red cloth soft to the touch, made of silk or some other high-quality material but woven so thinly that he could just see through it. It had been delicately embroidered with the lotus motif of YunmengJiang, obviously ripped off from his own sect.

"He's got a lucky wife," the stall owner said.

"He doesn't have a wife," Wei WuXian said absently.

"Oh, then a lucky future wife," the stall owner said. "Wouldn't that make a nice veil?"

Wei WuXian swallowed hard. It would, he thought, make a nice wedding veil for a bride, though he wasn't a woman. Had Lan WangJi chosen this gift for him for that reason? But it couldn't be—folded up, it wasn't as though Lan WangJi could see the actual size or shape of it. Most likely, Lan WangJi had

simply noticed the quality of the cloth and chosen it. Wei WuXian was thinking too much. But if Lan WangJi wanted...

Wei WuXian looked back across the street at him. Lan WangJi had turned this time, staring straight into his eyes, and even from the distance, Wei WuXian felt caught by the brilliant paleness of his gaze. And then Lan WangJi tossed the second ring.

Just then, a cart pulled by a pair of horses stepped between them on the road, obscuring Wei WuXian's vision of him. For a moment, he thought the ring would miss, that it would surely get lost in the crowded street flowing between them.

A brisk whisk of air brushed his hair. Then Wei WuXian felt a gentle tap around his collarbones as the wooden ring looped itself neatly around his neck.

Wei WuXian was stunned for a moment. It wasn't possible that Lan WangJi had missed the stall, right? This was Lan WangJi, the great Hanguang-Jun, the Second Jade of Lan, perfection in human form. But he had also tossed it right when that cart had gotten in his way. Was it a mistake?

"Oh it's too bad you missed that last toss," the stall owner said as soon as Lan WangJi had crossed back across the street. "But you can't win very one," he said. "That cloth you won was already my best prize. Your friend there has it," he said.

"Mm." Lan WangJi nodded at the man and turned to Wei WuXian.

As soon as Wei WuXian felt Lan WangJi's eyes on him, he couldn't help the way his entire face went red. His fingers clutched at the cloth Lan WangJi had won even as they began to walk again, joining in the crowds.

"Lan Zhan, did you miss that last shot?" Wei WuXian asked finally, voice smaller than he expected.

Lan WangJi paused in his steps and turned to him. His eyes, pale and glimmering with intensity, met Wei WuXian's own. He opened his mouth to answer.

And in that moment, Wei WuXian lost his nerve all over again. "You missed, didn't you?" Wei WuXian began to blabber and held out the cloth. "Here, I'm not so stingy that I'd steal your prize. It's the best prize at that stall. Hanguang-Jun really has an eye for quality," he said. "That man even said so himself, so since you missed that last shot, you can have this back. I'll keep this ring instead for a souvenir." He fingered the wooden ring around his neck that he realized they'd forgotten to return.

"The cloth is for you," Lan WangJi said after a moment and turned away again.

Wei WuXian's shoulders slumped as they began walking once more, disappointed and annoyed at himself.

Wei WuXian kept that ring around his neck like a clunky necklace, attracting strange looks as they walked. But he stubbornly kept it on, hoping that Lan WangJi would say something about it. If he did, then Wei WuXian could comment that Lan WangJi had never claimed his prize or something like that—he'd figure out the specifics when the opportunity came up. But Lan WangJi never asked.

In the end, Wei WuXian gave up on that idea too, suggesting that they buy some food, rent a boat, and he would show Lan WangJi his favorite lotus pond.

“Do you know why it’s my favorite?” Wei WuXian said as he gave Lan WangJi directions to guide the boat along the small river toward that pond. “It’s because it’s so out of the way that the old man who owns this pond hardly ever came to check on it so we could pick as many lotus pods as we liked.” He grinned. “Too bad it’s winter, isn’t it?”

Once they were there, he pulled out the wicker basket full of still-steaming scallion pancakes and the two jars of Yunmeng liquor that they’d purchased, setting everything out on the small table beneath the canopy of the boat. He even pulled out a delicate jade liquor set that he’d loudly praised earlier just to see if Lan WangJi would buy it for him, and now, poured one of the jars of alcohol into the flask.

The lotus pond was barren at this time of year, only a few browned stalks sticking up out of the water, and not much to look at.

Yunmeng was, surprisingly, colder than Gusu and Lanling, or maybe the warm spell had ceased and the weather was returning again. Either way, it was chilly even in the mid-afternoon, and as Wei WuXian set out their small meal, he felt something heavy drape over his shoulders. It was the same heavy white GusuLan cloak that Lan WangJi had given him that night at the farmhouse. It had disappeared the next morning and Wei WuXian had completely forgotten about it until now.

“As prepared as always,” Wei WuXian said, smiling at him. He must have kept it in his qiankun pouch until it was needed. He handed Lan WangJi one of the scallion pancakes. “Here, try this,” he said. “It’s really good.” He ripped a large piece off of his own pancake and stuffed it in his mouth. “Even better with alcohol,” he lied—that wasn’t a combination normal people would ever think to try.

He poured himself a small jade cup of liquor, swirling it a few times, and then glanced up at Lan WangJi. “Will you drink with me?” he asked.

If Lan WangJi wouldn’t, then Wei WuXian would let it go.

But Lan WangJi only nodded and pushed forward the second cup for him to fill.

Obediently, Lan WangJi took Wei WuXian’s words for face value and took a small bite of the pancake before emptying the cup. Wei WuXian felt a lump lodge in his throat watching him—only Lan WangJi would be stupid enough to believe him and eat scallion pancakes together with liquor.

A small frown appeared on Lan WangJi’s face just like the way it had the first time he’d drunk alcohol. He put his cup down, and then, still holding the scallion pancake in one hand, he leaned his head against his other hand. Before Wei WuXian had finished counting to ten, he had fallen asleep.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, how can you be like this?” Wei WuXian sighed when Lan WangJi’s eyes closed. He felt like crying. This good, pure man who would do something as silly as eat scallion pancakes with liquor just because Wei WuXian told him to— “I like you. I like you to death. What am I supposed to do?” Wei WuXian pressed his face into his hands.



He forced himself to calm down as he too, ate scallion pancakes and drank liquor—feeling like he had to do it now that he'd tricked Lan Wangji into it.

Drifting alone together on this pond with only the occasional call of a bird overhead to accompany them, Wei WuXian felt the anticipation building up in him the longer it took for Lan Wangji to wake.

When Lan Wangji finally opened his eyes again, he looked so sober that Wei WuXian almost thought he was until Lan Wangji took another out of the scallion pancake he was still holding and then tried to drink from his still-empty cup.

Wei WuXian smiled, the lump in his throat loosening as he watched, and he gently took the cup from Lan Wangji's hand. "How am I supposed to bully you when you're like this," he said. "Don't drink anymore," he said. "Just eat the pancake."

"Mm." Lan Wangji obediently ate, as slowly as always, somehow making eating street food look like he was handling a delicacy.

"Lan Zhan, you're too easy to trick," Wei WuXian said as he ate his own pancake. "If it's someone with bad intentions, you could get in real trouble, you know," he said, conveniently ignoring that he himself didn't exactly have the best intentions getting him drunk. "You better just stay with me for the rest of your life so I can protect you."

"Mm."

Wei WuXian looked up, startled. He hadn't expected Lan Wangji to answer him when it wasn't even a question. "You'll really stay with me?" he blurted out.

"I will protect Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said with utter seriousness.

Wei WuXian didn't know why those words, said with such serious intensity, made him start to blush. "Don't say things like that," he groaned. "Give me a little dignity, Lan Er-Gege, how am I supposed to react when you do that? A grown man shouldn't be blushing. It's embarrassing, don't you know."

"Mm," Lan Wangji agreed again. "I will protect Wei Ying," he repeated and then frowned, adding, "But I will not tell him."

Wei WuXian kicked his feet beneath the table. Since when could Lan Wangji say such embarrassing things with such a straight face. But since Wei WuXian was the one who had gotten him drunk, it was his own fault.

Suddenly too warm and unable to sit still for a moment longer, Wei WuXian pushed the cloak off his shoulders and got up, walking a few steps over to the narrow prow of the boat. They weren't moving anywhere but there was a bit of wind, and having come out from beneath the canopy, the air felt colder.

When he looked down at the still water, he could see his own face clearly reflected back. His skin was a darker shade than usual from the blush. A sudden idea surfaced in his mind and he turned again to Lan Wangji.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, look at me!” he said.

Lan Wangji looked at him, still eating his scallion pancake.

In his life, Wei WuXian had fallen many times. He could handle the shock of cold water, but it was still unpleasant. If someone was willing to jump in after him, if someone was willing to be with him in it, to suffer it with him, if Lan Zhan was willing, then—

Before he could finish his thought, he let go and began falling backwards off the boat.

Wei WuXian saw Lan Wangji’s eyes as he shot up, dropping his scallion pancake and reaching for him.

If Lan Wangji would dive into that cold water with him, then he’d—

But before he could feel his body submerge into icy water, he felt a pair of arms wrap around his waist, and he was being pulled up and away from the wintry cold.

He felt himself pressed full-bodied against Lan Wangji, the rapid thump of a heartbeat against his hand.

“Lan Zhan...” Wei WuXian breathed, looking up at him.

Lan Wangji’s heart was beating fast and he was holding Wei WuXian so tightly it almost hurt.

Wei WuXian began to laugh. All he had asked for was someone to fall with him—who knew that Lan Wangji wouldn’t let him fall in the first place. He laughed and laughed until he couldn’t breath and looked up at Lan Wangji’s lovely face, a frown on it now although his arms had not loosened from Wei WuXian’s waist as though afraid he might try to jump in the water again if Lan Wangji let go.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said, reaching up. He wasn’t sure exactly what he planned to do, to touch his face, touch his forehead ribbon, only that as he reached up, somehow Lan Wangji was leaning down.

And all of a sudden, he couldn’t look away. Lan Wangji was looking right back at him, his gaze burning Wei WuXian up, and in the end, he wasn’t sure who closed the distance between them. Suddenly, everything was burning. Lan Wangji’s mouth was wet and sweet, still a trace of that fragrant liquor on his tongue. Wei WuXian could feel Lan Wangji’s hands at his waist, trying to pull him closer, nearer, and Wei WuXian followed him until someone’s legs knocked against something else and they ended up toppling down in the boat. Wei WuXian ended up half sitting in Lan Wangji’s lap, unwilling for their lips to be parted for even a second even as he tried to maneuver himself into a more comfortable position, pushing aside robes until finally he could straddle Lan Wangji’s thighs.

He leaned back for just a moment to catch his breath, but the moment he opened his eyes and looked at Lan Wangji, he felt like all the air had been punched right out of him again. Lan Wangji was so beautiful, his lips wet and swollen, eyes a burnt umber, robes askew. And then Lan Wangji was pulling him right back, licking into Wei WuXian’s mouth with a skill that made him wonder, light-headed, if he had done this before even though Wei WuXian knew it couldn’t be possible.

He wrapped his legs around Lan WangJi's waist and the proximity was so good, he automatically ground up, even as Lan WangJi devoured his mouth. He felt like he couldn't get close enough. Lan WangJi's fingers tugged at the wooden ring still around Wei WuXian's neck, and Wei WuXian gasped.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian wasn't sure what he was trying to say but every time Lan WangJi ground up at him, he forgot all over again. He wanted to get closer. He wanted to touch him, and as though reading his mind, he was suddenly pushed back on the ground, but when he thought he might hit the hard ground, instead, Wei WuXian was met with softness. He'd been pushed down against the soft, thick cloak he'd discarded earlier.

Lan WangJi loomed over him, dark hair falling around them like a curtain, and Wei WuXian reached up, his legs spread around Lan WangJi's hips. "Kiss me again," he begged.

Lan WangJi complied, and as he did, he reached for Wei WuXian's robes. Wei WuXian wondered if Lan WangJi was even coordinated enough to undress him right now and began to help him, only for Lan WangJi to grab his wrists. He looked annoyed, as though he thought Wei WuXian was trying to stop him, and a moment later, Wei WuXian was even more shocked to find Lan WangJi stripping off his forehead ribbon to bind his wrists together, pushing his hands up so Wei WuXian couldn't move his arms.

"Lan Zhan! Lan Er-Gege, who knew you were into this kind of play," Wei WuXian said, a breathless laugh on his lips. He was surprised, but more than that, turned on, and he wiggled, pressing his ass against Lan WangJi in an attempt to get him to move. "Aren't you going to undress me?" he asked, raising his eyebrows provocatively.

Lan WangJi's frown became a full glare, reminiscent of all the times Wei WuXian had been on the receiving end of such a look. The first time he'd seen it was that night they'd first met, and every time since, he'd felt a delicious thrill of danger and pleasure from it. But all of those times paled in comparison to the way Lan WangJi was eyeing him now.

"Hurry up," Wei WuXian begged as Lan WangJi fumbled at the ties of his robes. "This is your fault. If you hadn't tied me up, I could help you, but since you're the one who tied me up, you have to undress me too," he said, intending just to tease him a bit.

Who knew that in the next moment, Wei WuXian heard a loud ripping sound and suddenly his robe was falling away, torn open. Wei WuXian gaped at him.

"Are you a beast?" he demanded, unbelievably turned on. His robes had been made of good quality and thick material, the type that was specially reinforced and worn by cultivators so they could function as an additional layer of protection when they were on night hunts. Wei WuXian's naturally, did not have the sorts of protective talismans and spells woven into the average cultivators' robes or he wouldn't be able to demonically cultivate, but the material was the same and they were definitely not something even a cultivator would normally be able to tear apart with his bare hands.

Lan WangJi ignored his protests, running those strong hands down warm, bare skin, and every place his fingertips brushed ignited, all of Wei WuXian feeling overly sensitive. Lan WangJi's thumb traced just beneath the skin-warmed wooden ring around Wei WuXian's neck, and he felt like he couldn't breath.

"Lan Zhan, touch me," Wei WuXian gasped. "If you don't touch me right now, I—"

Lan WangJi kissed him, still running his hands down Wei WuXian's skin, lighting a trail of fire as he went until his hand reached into Wei WuXian's trousers.

Wei WuXian's whole body arched back as Lan WangJi's hand wrapped around him, a litany of praises pouring from his mouth as he begged Lan Zhan, Lan WangJi, Lan Er-Gege, please and more and hurry and faster—

He could feel Lan WangJi's hips stuttering against his, Lan WangJi's hand moving around him to the same too-fast rhythm. Lan WangJi's mouth was on his, the two of them unable to do anything but breathe the same air—and then everything burned white hot as Wei WuXian's mind went blank of everything except Lan Zhan's name.

When he came back to himself, Lan WangJi was a dead weight on him, so heavy it was a little hard to breath, but Wei WuXian didn't ever want to move from that secure weight on him. They were so close together that even though Lan WangJi's clothes were still in between them, he could feel Lan WangJi's ragged breathing in sync with his own.

They were a tangled mess of limbs and half-ripped clothes. Wei WuXian's legs were still spread around Lan WangJi's hips. Wei WuXian's hands were still tied with Lan WangJi's ribbon, and though he wanted to be untied so he could touch Lan WangJi, he wanted to get these words out first.

But even now, he didn't know where to start. How was he supposed to explain all the things he felt for Lan WangJi, what he wanted with Lan WangJi, how he didn't want anyone or anything except for Lan WangJi.

"Thank you," he began in the end, staring up at the canopy, smiling at the weight of Lan WangJi on him. "If not for you..." He wanted to thank Lan WangJi for all that he'd done for Wei WuXian. If it hadn't been for him. If he hadn't married Wei WuXian, protected him, brought him into GusuLan to keep him safe. If he hadn't protected the entire Wen clan. If he hadn't defended Wei WuXian again and again even from himself when he was being eaten alive by resentment so he couldn't see that everything Lan WangJi was doing was for him. If he hadn't looked for a cure. If he hadn't come to the wedding to give him face when all the other sects wondered why the righteous Hanguang-Jun would marry him. If he hadn't saved Jiang YanLi and saved Wei WuXian. If he hadn't gone to find a cure in the form of a song that had both saved and given Wei WuXian his life back. If not for all of this, Wei WuXian didn't know where he'd be now. Maybe still in the Yiling Burial Mounds, maybe eaten alive by resentful energy, maybe dead.

Wei WuXian didn't know how he'd gotten so lucky to have Lan WangJi as a husband who he loved so much. He was about to say more when Lan WangJi suddenly sat up. It was cold without Lan WangJi's body covering his with his robes torn open and trousers half-off, and he shivered. "Lan Zhan..."

But when Wei WuXian looked up at him, Lan WangJi was very pale, breathing hard, and looking at him like Wei WuXian had just slapped him.

Wei WuXian felt his heart drop to his stomach and he struggled to sit up. "Lan Zhan..."

Lan WangJi reached forward, and for a moment, Wei WuXian felt a warm rush of relief, only for Lan WangJi to loosen his bound hands with a few tugs. Once his forehead ribbon was back in his hands, Lan

WangJi took a few stumbling steps back and began tying it back on as quickly as he could. His hands were shaking, and it took him several tries before he could tie it on properly. He wouldn't look at Wei WuXian.

Wei WuXian felt the rest of his words die in his throat. He wiped off his chest and wrapped the remains of his robes around him, feeling cold down to his bones for reasons that had nothing to do with the weather.

"I...I'm sorry," was the only thing Wei WuXian could say. He felt so ashamed he wanted to dig a hole and bury himself in it. He had gotten Lan WangJi drunk and taken advantage of him. Lan WangJi was a man, after all, and being provoked that way, of course, he would... Wei WuXian didn't know what else he could say.

He wished they were anywhere but in this small boat right now. He wished he could take back everything—maybe then he and Lan WangJi could have remained friends, cultivation partners in name if nothing more. At least then he could stay by Lan WangJi's side, but now...

Wei WuXian shivered.

Then, he felt a gentle, warm current run over him, familiar. Lan WangJi was passing spiritual energy to him. Even at a time like this, he noticed Wei WuXian was cold—he just didn't know for what reason.

"Don't touch me," Wei WuXian forced the words out, hunching in on himself more. He didn't want Lan WangJi's pity for not liking him the way Wei WuXian wanted. Even at a time like this, Lan WangJi still cared about him enough to feel guilty about rejecting Wei WuXian, or maybe just cared about him enough to want him to be warm. It would be okay, he told himself. "I—" He took a deep breath so he could steady his voice. "I just need some time."

He didn't look at Lan WangJi as he pulled the wooden ring off from around his neck, dropping it to the ground. He didn't want to take Lan WangJi's cloak, but with his robes the way they were, he had no choice but to pick up that GusuLan robe and wrap it around his shoulders.

Lan WangJi didn't answer, but after a few moments, the boat began to move. Lan WangJi was guiding it back to shore.

The trip back to Yunmeng took far too long this time, and as soon as the boat touched dock, Wei WuXian stumbled out of it. "I'll meet you back at the Cloud Recesses later," he said and without waiting for a response, hurried away into the crowds in the Yunmeng sunset.

He knew, of course, exactly the way to go to return to Lotus Pier.

That was another thing Lan WangJi had given him that he'd so ungratefully thrown back in his face. If not for Lan WangJi, Jiang Cheng would have no choice but to break ties with Wei WuXian and who knew when he'd be able to come back here. But now, he could walk through the gates of Lotus Pier without a single alarm sounding and head straight for the rooms that were still his.

Lotus Pier was quiet. It had only been a few days, so Jiang Cheng was likely still with most of the other senior cultivators at Koi Tower tying up loose ends, and Wei WuXian didn't have to answer any unwanted questions.

He sat alone in his room, staring into space for a long time. By the time he thought to take a bath and change out of his torn robes, night had already long fallen, so Wei WuXian decided to go heat up his own water instead of disturbing anyone.

The mundane task kept him busy as he took several trips back and forth from the kitchen to bring water back to his room. He washed himself absently, but wouldn't let himself touch a drop of alcohol—not after what he'd done to Lan WangJi. Once he'd finished bathing and dressing himself, he still couldn't sleep so he went out again for a walk, hoping the night air would tire him.

Beneath the moonlight, he once again visited all his favorite places in Lotus Pier, and then in the rest of Yunmeng when he ran out of places to go.

But he'd taken Lan WangJi to all these places just earlier that day, and where once the memories had all been ones of him and his family and his sect, now they were overlayed with his memories of Lan WangJi, so happy just earlier that day when he'd been so hopeful that maybe, just this once, everything would work out for him.

By the time he returned to Lotus Pier, the sun had risen.

Notes:

i'm neck-deep in cql right now haha it's so hard to refocus to write this fic

Chapter 22: zhanyang

Notes:

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian slept poorly that day, dozing in and out of consciousness, exhausted in every meaning of the word, but every time he shut his eyes all he remembered was that look on Lan WangJi's face as he pushed him away.

Though he had moved out of Lotus Pier a few months ago, Wei WuXian's rooms had been left the way they were, and in nearly the same state as he'd left them when he'd gone to Koi Tower with Jiang Cheng and ended up sequestering himself in Yiling with the Wen family. Servants had tidied up a bit for him, but he had not yet had a chance to return and pack his things properly to bring to the Cloud Recesses. When Jiang Cheng had arranged his marriage with Lan WangJi and brought news to Wei WuXian, things had moved so quickly that Wei WuXian and the Wen family had gone straight to the Cloud Recesses. It had been as though Jiang Cheng was worried that Jin Zixun might try something to ruin the marriage or that if he gave GusuLan too long to think about it, they might rescind the arrangement.

So returning to Lotus Pier should feel like coming home. The dumb childish doodles he'd left on his bed were still there, his old clothes were still haphazardly stuffed into drawers ready for him to wear, the scrolls and talismans he'd worked on here were just barely stacked onto his desk. This was the place he'd grown up, and yet, the only place he wanted to return to now was that quiet, clean room with the cool scent of sandalwood and their ugly obnoxiously large bed and Lan Wangji.

Since Jiang Cheng had taken most of the more seasoned cultivators with him to Lanling, only a handful of servants noticed his return. When Wei WuXian made it clear that Jiang Cheng wasn't to be bothered with messages and that Wei WuXian would explain things once the sect leader returned, he was left alone the way he wanted.

After the Sunshot Campaign concluded, Jiang Cheng had poured himself into rebuilding YunmengJiang and training disciples much like Madame Yu used to train them. Over the years, the way Jiang Cheng treated him had gone from casual competition to sometimes real hostility when disciples showed a bit too much interest in Wei WuXian's method of cultivation as opposed to the proper YunmengJiang style cultivation. And so, over the years, Wei WuXian had increasingly phased himself out of helping out at Lotus Pier beyond tasks that Jiang Cheng explicitly assigned to him. He also spent more time outside of home, often visiting other towns when nothing important was happening, or sometimes just staying the night at one of the many inns in Yunmeng when Jiang Cheng was in a particular mood.

Since the Fall of Lotus Pier, all of the other disciples their generation had died, and since Wei WuXian had left the recruiting and training of all new disciples to Jiang Cheng, he simply didn't have the close relationship he used to have with his various shidi and shimei. With the younger generation, Wei WuXian had tried to make things easy for Jiang Cheng by playing the irreverent shishu to the younger disciples—trying to get them to shoot kites with him or play hooky from Jiang Cheng's training. But although they were all things he used to do with Jiang Cheng, as sect leader now, Jiang Cheng didn't appreciate it, and they'd had more than one fight about Wei WuXian disturbing the discipline of the sect as well.

Of course in the most recent years, Wei WuXian's own condition hadn't been well and with his increasingly volatile temper, it had just been easier to entertain himself with corpses, knowing that others didn't want him around or want to be around him.

Then, he had married Lan Wangji, and in these last few months, Jiang Cheng seemed to have relaxed. Wei WuXian was no longer a part of YunmengJiang sect and spent most of his time at the Cloud Recesses instead. Wei WuXian was incredibly grateful that things had worked out with Jiang Cheng, but he wouldn't be able to stay for long at Lotus Pier without putting Jiang Cheng in a difficult position again.

But Wei WuXian could put off figuring out what to do next until Jiang Cheng discovered he was here.

So Wei WuXian spent the next few days wandering around the empty Lotus Pier. He forced himself to eat and at least lie down more or less at his usual bedtime though the bed felt too hard and too big when it was just him in it. He wondered when he'd gotten used to having Lan Wangji beside him, falling asleep to the rhythm of Lan Wangji's heartbeat.

He didn't try to leave Lotus Pier again after that first night wandering Yunmeng and finding none of his old places brought him comfort anymore.

Instead, he began spending time at Madame Yu's old pavilion. Lotus Pier had been largely destroyed during the Wen attack, but Jiang Cheng had largely rebuilt most of the buildings exactly the way they used to be. One of them was Madame Yu's pavilion, set in the most beautiful location at Lotus Pier where it looked out across the lake and gave a perfect view of the sunset over the water. It had, apparently, been Uncle Jiang's gift to her when they were first wed and she moved to this place.

Wei WuXian had seen Madam Yu sit alone out at this pavilion overlooking the water, staring out long past sunset every time she and Uncle Jiang fought. And he had, just as many times, seen Uncle Jiang watching that straight back before he sighed and turned away.

While it was cold now and all the lotuses were dead, at sunset, the golden glow of the light lit the entire lake a brilliant red as far as the eye could see. Since it was some distance from the rest of the buildings in Lotus Pier, it was also quiet except for the occasional call of a crane that had been left behind the autumn migration.

In the past, he had not dared to come here very often. It seemed to upset Jiang Cheng, especially, and he always felt like he'd somehow annoy Madam Yu even after she was gone if he set foot there. But without Jiang Cheng present, Wei WuXian found himself coming to the pavilion, staring over the dead waters, and waiting for the sun to set.

When he had first moved here, he had believed Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu loved each other even though they fought often. As he'd grown older, he realized one of the reasons Madame Yu could never believe that Uncle Jiang loved her was because of Wei WuXian's existence—that at one point in his life, Uncle Jiang had wanted to marry Wei WuXian's mother. And Madam Yu was never overcome the insult and hurt of being in an arranged marriage when her husband wanted to marry someone else.

When he was young, Wei WuXian always thought it was silly and something they could talk about if only they could put down their pride for long enough.

But now, as he looked out across the barren purple waters, Wei WuXian understood the hurt that Madame Yu must have felt for so many years. That though she loved her husband, her husband did not love her. That though he treated her well, it was not the same thing as what she truly wanted—not someone who cared for her because he was kind and good, but someone to love her for every part of who she was. That though she had responsibilities to the sect and to her children, there was nothing more painful than being married to the man she loved when he did not love her back. And with every gentle, kind thing he did for her, it would be another twist of the knife.

Madam Yu had not treated Wei WuXian poorly although she had also never disguised her disapproval of him even as she compared him to her own son. Now, Wei WuXian knew it was because every time she looked at him, she was reminded of what she didn't have. And every time she looked at Jiang Cheng she was reminded of what she did.

"You might not hate me as much anymore," Wei WuXian said softly, his voice just audible above the quiet waters. "What I made you go through, now I'm going through as well." He cracked a bitter smile.

A breeze stirred up then, passing through his hair as though Madam Yu's spirit had heard him.



But when he shivered, this time, there was no one to put a warm cloak over his shoulders.

Like this, three days passed.

Wei WuXian waited, no real plan in mind although he knew he'd have to think of something—he couldn't stay in Lotus Pier forever. At the very least, the Wen clan had to stay in the Cloud Recesses. And even if Lan WangJi didn't love him the way he wanted, Wei WuXian hoped that maybe he would allow him to stay by his side. Lan WangJi was an honorable, good man—maybe if Wei WuXian offered to move out of the Jingshi and asked to stay with the Wen family, Lan WangJi might be willing to be friends, maybe night hunt together sometimes. And when Lan WangJi eventually found a woman he wanted to marry, Wei WuXian would quietly step aside and pray for their happiness.

Then, just after sunset on the third day, Jiang Cheng returned.

Wei WuXian had already retired to his room and was picking at the plates of bright red food the servants had brought him, when his door burst open and Jiang Cheng came striding in. He was still fully dressed in his sect leader robes, obviously having come straight to Wei WuXian's rooms after returning to Lotus Pier.

"It took you long enough to come back," Wei WuXian said without moving from his slouch at the table. He waved his chopsticks at Jiang Cheng and turned back to his food. "Anyone could take over Lotus Pier while you're gone and you'd have no idea."

"Cut the crap," Jiang Cheng said. "Do you know how much clean-up still has to be done at Koi Tower and you pull this stunt?"

"Why? What's happening there?" Wei WuXian asked. He didn't really care about the answer for once.

"It's already troublesome enough that Jin GuangYao and his lackeys all have to be under guard at all hours and that's not including all the cultivators we have to question about their loyalty. I swear to god, it was easier without Sect Leader Nie around—he refuses to stay in bed, and Nie HuaiSang is less than useless trying to get his sect to cooperate, and that Su She managed to escape somehow so—" He broke off and glared at him when Jiang Cheng realized Wei WuXian wasn't really listening. "Don't deflect. I came back early for you—why did Lan XiChen and I receive letters saying you and Lan WangJi are dissolving your marriage agreement? What the hell did you do?"

Wei WuXian froze. "Dissolve the marriage agreement?" he echoed.

He wasn't sure if it was his voice or his face that might have given something away, but after staring at him a moment, Jiang Cheng frowned. "He didn't tell you?"

Wei WuXian's silence was enough answer.

Jiang Cheng sighed and pulled out another chair at his dining table to sit down. He grabbed the pot of tea and poured himself a cup, downing it before he took a deep breath. "All right. I'm ready," he said. "Tell me."

If it hadn't been about his marriage with Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian would have laughed at the look of braced dread on Jiang Cheng's face. He clearly wished he was anywhere else other than here but was trying his best to be supportive now that Jiang YanLi was no longer here.

Wei WuXian let out a wet laugh. "It's not a big deal," he said. His mouth wobbled as he formed the words. It had been three days, but he hadn't said any of it out loud, and he found it more difficult than he expected. "Second Master Lan has just had enough of me by now." His words trailed into a raspy whisper.

He couldn't meet Jiang Cheng's eyes and looked back down at his food, stuffing two pieces of spicy meat into his mouth just to have something to do. He should miss this cuisine, having been subjected to a bland diet for so long now, but the food only made his mouth burn like ash.

"That's bullshit. He's obviously in lo—in—likes you." Jiang Cheng's face had turned an unflattering shade of red. "A lot," he added as though to clarify.

"Obviously he doesn't," Wei WuXian said. He took a deep breath and did his best to steady his voice. "If he wants to dissolve the marriage, it's fine," he said. "If you don't want me to come back here, that's fine too—I'll look for a place on my own—"

"Bullshit," Jiang Cheng interrupted. "If you're really leaving the Cloud Recesses, you're welcome here."

Wei WuXian wasn't stupid, and he knew that at least part of the reason Jiang Cheng had arranged the marriage was so that Wei WuXian would no longer be his problem to worry about. They'd been compared so much as children, and Wei WuXian had been arrogant enough to rub it all in Jiang Cheng's face so that by the time Jiang Cheng was sect leader and Wei WuXian was his subordinate, Jiang Cheng always felt the need to prove himself. With the increasing pressure on him given by the sects and Wei WuXian's waning control over the resentful energy accumulated from demonic cultivation, if it hadn't been marrying him out of the sect, Jiang Cheng probably would have had to break ties with him some other way. Wei WuXian had never expected to return to Lotus Pier after he'd sequestered himself in Yiling. The surprise must have shown on Wei WuXian's expression because Jiang Cheng coughed, looking embarrassed.

"I know it wasn't—I know the last few months haven't been easy, but you're still my brother." Jiang Cheng paused. "Wait, don't change the subject." He narrowed his eyes at Wei WuXian. "Why are you okay with this? Don't you—don't you like him? I get goosebumps every time I look at you two."

"Obviously I like him if even you can tell. I like him so much." Wei WuXian gave another wet laugh. "But what does that matter? This marriage wasn't ever going to work out—maybe if I hadn't started liking him..." But thinking back on everything, he could see now that it was always inevitable that he would fall for Lan WangJi, that maybe he already had a long time ago.

From the very first time he laid eyes on Lan WangJi, he'd been struck by that cold, austere beauty that turned to respect and admiration when he found that Lan WangJi was truly as good and principled as he expected everyone else to be—that he helped people because it was the right thing to do, that he followed the rules because he was setting an example. And that admiration had turned to a desire for Lan WangJi's attention to be on him, to get some kind of rise out of him, to be close to him, to be seen by him, to be loved by him. It was only that he never spent much time with Lan WangJi alone after those

few months in the Cloud Recesses. Then the circumstances, their responsibilities, everything had made it impossible for Wei WuXian to consider any sort of relationship until he suddenly found himself married Lan WangJi. And then that seedling inside him had grown the way it always would have if only it had been given any attention earlier. It was always inevitable that once he could spend time with Lan WangJi, once he got to know him even better, once he was married and the possibility of being with Lan WangJi in every sense of the word became something within his reach, Wei WuXian was always destined to fall deeper, harder, more desperately in love with Lan WangJi. It was always him. It couldn't not be him.

"It doesn't matter now," Wei WuXian said. "He doesn't love me. If he wants to dissolve the marriage agreement, then it's best to do it now."

It was better this way, he told himself. If they didn't end this arranged marriage now, Wei WuXian would forever hope, like Madam Yu, that no matter how much he knew it wasn't true and it couldn't happen, someday his husband might love him back. And the hurt would dig deeper with every year it didn't happen. He didn't want to become resentful the way she had. Better to end things now than to drag it out. Maybe—maybe after it was all over, he and Lan WangJi might be able to still be friends at the end of all this.

Jiang Cheng sighed. "You two should at least talk about this—he can't just do whatever he wants even if he doesn't want to stay married to you anymore."

"What else is there to say?" Wei WuXian asked. "He doesn't want to be married to me. I'm not going to force him—he'll just—he'll just end up hating me if he doesn't already." He gave a small shrug, putting down his chopsticks, having completely lost his appetite now.

"We got the letters today," Jiang Cheng said. "Sect Leader Lan also rushed back to the Cloud Recesses today to talk to Lan WangJi." He got to his feet, and went to the door to call for a servant.

The servant came back with five jars of Yunmeng liquor that Jiang Cheng stacked on the table.

"Drink," he said, ripping the paper off one of the jars and helping himself. "It's not Emperor's Smile but it's good."

Wei WuXian stared at the jars, thinking about the last time he'd drank this same alcohol and everything that had come after. But then, it wasn't like he could make things worse than they already were.

"Drink," Jiang Cheng ordered and kicked his leg until Wei WuXian finally picked up one of the jars.

"If I get drunk and cry on you, you asked for it," Wei WuXian said, lifting the jar to his mouth.

"That's why I'm drinking too," Jiang Cheng said, rolling his eyes, and got down to business.

It had been a long time since Wei WuXian had gotten puke-drunk with Jiang Cheng—that was to say, Jiang Cheng puked, and Wei WuXian was drunk enough that he remembered the funny bits and not the disgusting bits. As it was, they spent most of the morning nursing hangovers until Jiang Cheng stumbled off sometime in the mid-afternoon muttering about how he had to make sure the disciples weren't slacking off.

Soon after, a set of servants barged in with a large wooden tub and harassed Wei WuXian on Jiang Cheng's orders until he cooperated and got in on his own. The bath came littered with flower petals that made Wei WuXian's skin both feel and smell nice. He was left to soak until he smelled the mouth-watering scent of a full spread of his favorite savory, spicy foods that had been brought in while he was bathing. Jiang Cheng had even managed to procure a jar of Emperor's Smile from somewhere that would be difficult to find anywhere outside of Gusu.

But although Jiang Cheng was clearly trying to make Wei WuXian feel better, nothing could change the fact that Lan WangJi wanted to dissolve the marriage agreement.

Eventually, Wei WuXian knew he'd get over it. Life went on. He'd gone through enough by now to know that life never went the way he wished, but it wasn't all bad. At least he'd gotten some time with Lan WangJi. He had his family. He had the Wen clan. Even if he could never be Lan WangJi's cultivation partner the way he wanted, he would be fine eventually.

He had to compose himself, he told himself. Now that Lan WangJi didn't want him, he would return to Yunmeng. He'd do better this time, as Jiang Cheng's second-in-command. He'd still be able to visit Shijie and Jin ZiXuan, be a great uncle to their future children. He wouldn't lose face for Jiang Cheng when Lan WangJi came to dissolve their marriage.

Wei WuXian tossed and turned that night as well, half wishing Lan WangJi would come already and get it all over with so Wei WuXian could begin to properly move on.

But when, just after Wei WuXian's usual waking time on the fourth day, a disciple came to call Wei WuXian into the Great Hall because the GusuLan entourage was here, he felt like throwing up despite not having eaten yet that morning.

He dressed mechanically and just before he left his room, he grabbed Suibian, belting it to his waist. Its weight there felt foreign after so long, but just this once, he should be properly attired. Then he followed the disciple past the barren lotus lake, feeling like he was on his way to his execution.

The Great Hall didn't have doors, so as soon as Wei WuXian got near, he could see inside. Jiang Cheng was sitting on the raised dais with a few of the more senior disciples standing around him, all dressed in the most formal purple robes of YunmengJiang. Beside him, a small writing desk had been set up with his sect leader's seal and ink.

In front of them stood Lan XiChen, Lan WangJi, and a larger entourage of GusuLan sect cultivators than Wei WuXian had expected. A steady stream of YunmengJiang servants were bringing in a series of expensive-looking gift boxes to stack at their feet, and it took Wei WuXian a moment to realize that these extra cultivators had come to bring back the pinli and pinjin dowries that the Lan clan must have sent to Jiang Cheng to bring Wei WuXian into the family. He had been in the burial mounds at the time and had almost fallen over laughing at Jiang Cheng's face when he told Wei WuXian that Lotus Pier had been sent a bridal price dowry from the Lan clan.

"Do I count as a bride?" Wei WuXian had asked.

"I offered to send the Lan clan a dowry with these circumstances," Jiang Cheng said. It would cost the Lan clan quite a bit to bring in Wei WuXian and the entire Wen family, so it was only etiquette for Jiang Cheng to offer compensation. "They refused," he said, sounding relieved as they both knew YunmengJiang didn't have much to offer. Most of their treasures had been lost during the Fall of Lotus Pier, and in recent years, they had poured all funds into rebuilding Lotus Pier. "Anyway, since you're the one marrying into the Lan clan, technically, you're the bride," he said.

"More money for you," Wei WuXian had shrugged and then laughed. "Does that mean I should dress like a bride when we go? Can you imagine Lan Zhan's face if I showed up like that?"

"If you do anything to make GusuLan rescind this offer, so help me—"

"When is Shijie coming? Maybe I can borrow some of her robes, and—"

"Wei WuXian! Do you want to die?"

At the time, Wei WuXian had assumed the Lan clan might send a minimal dowry as a formality. This was just a hastily arranged marriage for political purposes, and the Lan clan wouldn't have time to put together proper commissioned gifts anyway. It was probably just the GusuLan pride that if they were allowing a man to marry into their precious clan, at least, it would be under their family name and honor.

But looking at the mountain of boxes rapidly accumulating on the floor, Wei WuXian was astonished. This dowry could rival the one that the Jin clan had sent for Jiang YanLi, and everyone knew how ostentatious LanlingJin was. The bride's price dowry was meant to show the value the groom's family placed on the bride marrying into his family—the higher the worth of the bride, the more the groom's family was expected to send to honor her and her family. Wei WuXian was well aware of just how little honor he brought to the Lan clan, and yet, this had been the pinjin they sent. Of course, such a generous gift also showed the honor of the Lan clan, but even a third this amount would have been more than adequate to show their generosity.

"Wei WuXian, come in," Jiang Cheng said, having noticed him.

Lan WangJi turned and Wei WuXian felt his heart jump up to his throat, locking up there. Had it really only been four days? His eyes drank in Lan WangJi, his dark hair, his handsome, jade-like face, those pale eyes that glowed gold in the light. He missed him, Wei WuXian thought. It had only been a few days and he missed him so much.

Wei WuXian took a step forward, but Lan XiChen turned to Lan WangJi then, saying something quiet enough that Wei WuXian couldn't hear.

Lan XiChen looked paler and thinner than last Wei WuXian had seen him, but he must still be recovering from his injuries, and had been pulled from helping the situation at Koi Tower the same way Jiang Cheng had. It looked like Lan XiChen had been sleeping about as well as Wei WuXian had been these last few days.

Whatever Lan XiChen said, it was Lan WangJi who spoke next.

“Jiang WanYin, do you know how to play guqin?” Lan WangJi asked, turning to Jiang Cheng.

“The basics,” Jiang Cheng said, raising an eyebrow. “Why?”

Jiang Cheng had never particularly enjoyed their musical studies even though YunmengJiang, like all the other major sects, required every disciple to study all the Six Arts. Wei WuXian had always enjoyed flute the most. Jiang Cheng had enjoyed none of them and could only just get by when forced to play. Really, that awful song he’d played rubbing the two swords together was only barely worse than his usual music when Jiang Cheng was trying to make it sound good.

“This score.” Lan WangJi held out a thin booklet. “Play it for Wei WuXian as often as he cultivates.”

Wei WuXian’s eyes widened.

“What is this?” Jiang Cheng asked, taking it from him. He flipped the booklet open. “ZhanYing?” he asked.

“The name of the song,” Lan WangJi said.

“You named this song ‘Clear Infant’?” Jiang Cheng asked.

It took Wei WuXian a moment to realize what characters had been used in that name Jiang Cheng had just spoken. Zhan, the deep, profound clarity at the bottom of a dark pool, and Ying, the innocent, young child pulled from that darkness. The song that Lan Zhan had written for Wei Ying, reaching deep within him to save that heart beating erratically in his chest now.

“The name—you chose it, didn’t you?” Wei WuXian asked. His voice shook, more uncertain and weak than he would have liked.

“Change it if you wish,” Lan WangJi said. “It’s yours.” He turned to Jiang Cheng again. “Play it for him.”

“Why?” Jiang Cheng asked.

Lan WangJi turned to Wei WuXian, frowning. “You haven’t told him?”

“When would I have had time to tell him?” Wei WuXian said. Lan WangJi had always been with him after he’d written the song anyway, and after the fiasco at the farmhouse, he hadn’t seen Jiang Cheng until just the day before where they’d both proceeded to get drunk. With the impending loss of his marriage to Lan WangJi, Wei WuXian had forgotten completely about that issue until just now.

“What are you supposed to tell me?” Jiang Cheng asked.

“I need someone to play me that song with spiritual energy to stay alive,” Wei WuXian said shortly. “It has to do with demonic cultivation.”

“What do you mean stay alive?” Jiang Cheng’s voice rose.

“I’ll tell you later. It doesn’t matter anymore since I have this song,” Wei WuXian said.

“WangJi, you never mentioned this. When did it happen?” Lan XiChen asked, also turning to him.

“What do you mean stay alive?” Jiang Cheng repeated.

Lan WangJi glanced at Wei WuXian, and Wei WuXian hated that even at such a time, he was being considerate of him. He would not say anything if Wei WuXian did not wish to reveal the truth about his golden core.

“It doesn’t matter,” Wei WuXian said, wrenching his gaze away from Lan WangJi. “Aren’t you here to dissolve the marriage? Get on with it!” He clenched his fists, nails biting into his palms.

That silenced everyone.

“Young Master Wei,” Lan XiChen was the first to speak after the silence. “Are you sure there hasn’t been some kind of misunderstanding?” he said. “I know my brother...may not always know how to best communicate,” he said tactfully. “But he truly cares—”

“Brother, Wei WuXian has made it clear what he desires,” Lan WangJi said.

That was true, Wei WuXian thought bitterly. Lan WangJi had also made it clear what he wanted, and it wasn’t Wei WuXian.

Lan WangJi pulled a small booklet from his robes. He held it out to Jiang Cheng. “This is our marriage agreement, and the divorce document. The original agreement was for him to marry into GusuLan so that the other sects would not persecute him. His core stone can be purified with the song,” Lan WangJi said. “And no one will persecute him anymore.” Not now that Jin GuangYao and Jin ZiXun had been taken care of. With Jin GuangShan dead and Xue Yang gone, and Jin ZiXuan tied to the YunmengJiang Sect by marriage, Wei WuXian’s position in the cultivation world was secure. Nie MingJue and Lan XiChen were both safe, and after working together with Jiang Cheng this last time, it would probably only be a matter of time before Jiang Cheng was able to solidify his position as one of the top sect leaders. “Brother has already signed the agreement to nullify our marriage,” Lan WangJi said. “If Sect Leader Jiang also signs, Wei WuXian will be free to return to YunmengJiang.”

Lan WangJi’s face showed no discernible expression as he held out that thin booklet.

After a moment, Jiang Cheng sighed and took it from him.

Wei WuXian’s eyes dropped to the ground, unable to watch Jiang Cheng dissolve his marriage with Lan WangJi, to destroy that future he’d hoped they could have together just days ago. He’d never again be able to wake in the same bed beside Lan WangJi. He’d never again be able to call out for Lan WangJi’s attention when he wanted it. He’d never be able to cook for him again. He’d never be able to take care of him or be taken care of by him in all the ways he wanted. Once Jiang Cheng signed that document, all of it—all of this would be over.

He heard Jiang Cheng sigh. “It’s up to Wei WuXian what he wants to do,” he said, and Wei WuXian suddenly felt the booklet and Jiang Cheng’s seal being pushed into his hands. “It’s your marriage. If you

want to sign it, then sign it yourself,” Jiang Cheng said when Wei WuXian looked up, surprised. “You two sort it out.”

“Wait, Jiang Cheng—” Wei WuXian swallowed hard. His entire life, Wei WuXian had always been the brave one, the one to support his siblings, the one to protect them. He had always stood on his own, and maybe being with Lan WangJi had softened him. He’d let himself come to count on Lan Zhan for standing beside him, for supporting him, for protecting him. And now, he didn’t know where his courage had gone because he wished anyone else was holding that booklet except himself.

Jiang Cheng turned red and looked away, rubbing his nose. “Whatever you decide, A-Jie and I will support you.” He clapped Wei WuXian once on the shoulder and moved away. “Leave them to talk,” he ordered.

Wei WuXian saw Lan XiChen also touch Lan WangJi gently on the shoulder, and then all the cultivators left the room, leaving just Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi in the silence of the Great Hall.

Wei WuXian had always counted himself lucky. He’d had parents who loved him before they died. Uncle Jiang had found him on the streets and adopted him. He’d gotten to become the head disciple of YunmengJiang. He’d studied at the Cloud Recesses. He’d survived the Lotus Pier Massacre. He’d even survived having his golden core taken out and inventing demonic cultivation. He’d gotten the revenge he so wanted, saved the Wen clan, gotten married to the man of his dreams, and even managed to save himself and his family a second time. It could be said that he’d received everything he wanted from life.

But he knew he’d also needed to be brave to get it all. He’d never been afraid of leaping even if it meant he’d fall. Up until now, it had always brought him many more blessings than he’d ever have if he didn’t take those risks. He’d stared the xuanwu and the tiangou in the eyes. He’d commanded armies of the dead and razed entire clans to the ground. He couldn’t walk anywhere without hearing whispers of the feared Yiling Patriarch even now. And yet, he had never been as afraid as in this very moment.

But Lan WangJi had already given him too much. He had never asked Wei WuXian for anything the entire time they had been together until now. For him, Wei WuXian had to do this one thing. He had to set Lan WangJi free.

He flipped open the booklet. Written in neat lines was his marriage contract. The handwriting was too refined to belong to Jiang Cheng, so Lan XiChen must have written it. It detailed the original stipulations—the adoption of the Wen family and Wen Ning, Wei WuXian marrying into the Lan clan and moving to the Cloud Recesses, all of it. A second, smaller page had been added to the document in the neat handwriting Wei WuXian recognized as Lan WangJi’s own, though in some spots, the ink seemed to be darker than others and then thinner in other areas as though he’d written it all at once in a hurry. According to custom, divorces usually required claims of wrongdoing for one spouse to divorce the other, but though Lan WangJi could have claimed a number of things—unrepentant demonic cultivation, bringing dishonor to the clan, failure to keep sect rules, sexual assault—he had only claimed a no-fault divorce and that the marriage be dissolved due to personal incompatibility.

In this way, it brought no shame to YunmengJiang or Wei WuXian, though Wei WuXian was fully aware he was at fault.

Even now, Lan WangJi was so kind to him.



Wei WuXian stared at the document and opened his mouth to accept, to agree, to say he would sign it, but for once in his life, he couldn't force the words to come out. He poised his hand to stamp Jiang Cheng's seal on that document beside Lan XiChen's own, but he couldn't make himself put that final stamp, sealing away their marriage forever. Finally, after a long moment of silence, he looked up.

It was like being struck by lightning.

He had only ever seen Lan WangJi cry once. It had been when they were trapped together in the Xuanwu Cave that time when his father had been dying, his brother missing, the Cloud Recesses burned, his own leg broken, and the two of them likely to die there in that cave. Wei WuXian had made one abortive attempt to comfort him, before Lan WangJi told him to shut up. So Wei WuXian had sat mutely by him, unable to give comfort the way he wanted, knowing that any words he spoke then could not bring any type of comfort. They hadn't been close enough then for Wei WuXian to pull him into his arms the way he wanted, to hold him so at least he wasn't alone.

This was the second time now that tears were running down Lan WangJi's face in two thin, silver lines.

Lan WangJi was standing in the exact place as before, hands by his side, in those white mourning robes, looking as composed as ever except for the tears on his face.

And for Wei WuXian, it was making that thing in his chest that felt like it had died for half a week now resurrect in a tiny bud of hope. "Lan Zhan," he said hesitantly. "Why are you crying?"

Lan WangJi brow furrowed, and he reached up with his free hand to touch his face as though he hadn't realized he was crying. He didn't seem to know how to answer.

Wei WuXian took a cautious step closer to him. When Lan WangJi didn't move away, he took another step, and then another, until he was standing right in front of him, the booklet in his hand trembling.

Wei WuXian looked up at him. "Lan Zhan..." He reached up to brush away the tear tracks left on one cheek. His long, dark eyelashes were wet, and his face, though pale, was hot to the touch. "Lan Zhan, why are you crying?" he asked again.

Wei WuXian cupped Lan WangJi's face, smoothing away another tear that slid down with his thumb. "Is it...is it because you don't want to annul our marriage?" he asked, staring up into his glimmering amber eyes. "Is it because you want to stay married?" He grew bolder with each question when Lan WangJi did not deny it. "To me?"

Lan WangJi shut his eyes, and seemed to stiffen beneath his touch, but Wei WuXian had nothing left to lose. He swallowed down that lump in his throat, and willed himself to be bold just this one last time. "Please tell me it's because you love me," Wei WuXian said and took another shuddering breath, "like I love you."

Lan WangJi didn't answer, but his face trembled beneath Wei WuXian's touch.

"Please tell me it's because you like me like I like you," Wei WuXian continued. "That you want to be with me like I want to be with you. That you want to be my cultivation partner—my cultivation partner

in name and in deed like I want you to be,” he said. His voice cracked and he felt his own vision blur. “It always had to be you,” he said, voice catching in his throat. “Please, Lan Zhan, look at me.”

Lan Wangji’s eyes flew open and when he looked at Wei WuXian, it felt like he was staring right down into Wei WuXian’s soul, but likewise, he was staring into Lan Wangji’s. And what he found reflected there was the same as his own.

“I love you,” Lan Wangji said, his voice halting, “like you love me.” He took a shuddering breath. “I like you,” he said, “like you like me.”

Wei WuXian realized then that Lan Wangji truly was complying with his request, saying all the things Wei WuXian had asked him to say.

“I want to be with you like you want to be with me,” Lan Wangji said. “I want to be your cultivation partner in name and in deed,” he finished and took another deep breath. “It has always been you.” The place where Wei WuXian had placed his hands burned and where his hand had trailed down Lan Wangji’s neck, he could feel Lan Wangji’s pulse racing. “Wei Ying, will you marry me?” he asked.

Wei WuXian’s tears flooded over. “Yes,” he said and pulled Lan Wangji down for a kiss.

Notes:

...full disclosure, originally the song lwj wrote was going to be called “Wuji” but I didn’t finish writing this before The Untamed came out and then I couldn’t name it that anymore so it became “ZhanYing” instead...OTL I had to change so much dialogue this chapter because of this lol

Chapter 23: epilogue pt1: babies' first night hunt

Notes:

i recently saw all of mxtx's mood-ruining original chapter title names and that is exactly my type of dumb humor so now all my chapters have also been named  $\cap(\smile\nabla\smile)\cap$  hope you enjoy

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian’s eyes flew open before the sun had risen that morning as he leapt out of bed at full energy, pulling on clothes as he went.

He pushed his bedroom door open as quietly as he could and was happy to see the sun still hadn’t come up yet when he snuck down the corridors. When he passed the kitchens, he snuck in to grab himself a snack, and then tiptoed to the main pier. He peeled off flakes of the onion pancake to pop in his mouth as he sat, kicking his feet and waiting for the sun to rise.

When it did, the lotus lake was dyed a beautiful golden orange, and with that first light came the silhouette of a boat.

Wei WuXian was on his feet and already waving before he could make out any of the figures on board.

As the boat drifted in with the rising sun, his eyes lit on the first white-robed figure standing at the prow of the vessel and stayed on him, Wei WuXian's smile growing ever wider.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei WuXian called, bouncing a little with excitement and waving harder.

As soon as the boat drew near enough, Wei WuXian readied himself to jump that last distance into Lan WangJi's waiting arms, only to have his collar yanked back.

Wei WuXian yelped and stumbled back a few steps.

"Did you really think I didn't know you were going to try this again when the last dozen times didn't work?" Jiang Cheng said, rolling his eyes as he kept a firm grip on the back of Wei WuXian's robes.

"Let go! We're technically already married," Wei WuXian said.

"Not according to Second Master Lan, you're not," Jiang Cheng said. "No touching. No kissing. No impropriety of any kind," he lectured for the umpteenth time, glaring at Lan WangJi as he stepped onto the dock. "Wei WuXian is hopeless so Hanguang-Jun better not disgrace his cultivation partner before marriage again." He narrowed his eyes on Lan WangJi.

"Mm," Lan WangJi agreed with a serious nod.

Wei WuXian pouted.

Five months ago, when Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had finally sorted everything out, Jiang Cheng, Lan XiChen, and the other cultivators had come into the Great Hall to find Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi in an embarrassing state of disarray.

Jiang Cheng had roared bloody murder and immediately forced Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi to the Ancestral Halls to kneel and apologize to every ancestor who had ever graced the halls of Lotus Pier.

"Are you still mad about that? I don't know what you're so offended about. We were only kissing a little before you interrupted us," Wei WuXian said petulantly.

"With half your clothes off," Jiang Cheng snapped. "If you make me think about it again, so help me I will call this marriage off."

"You can't," Wei WuXian said cheerfully. "It's too late! They've been preparing at the Cloud Recesses for months now—you wouldn't risk sect relations just to spite me," he said. "Now let go, I want to say hi to my husband."

"Fiance," Jiang Cheng bit out. "You're not married yet."

After Jiang Cheng had made them bow enough times to the ancestors, Wei WuXian had been ready to drag Lan WangJi off to his rooms to properly consummate marriage only for Lan WangJi to stay kneeling as he asked Madam Yu and Uncle Jiang for permission to wed Wei WuXian properly.

"I apologize that the ceremony was rushed," Lan WangJi said, holding up his incense sticks as he spoke to the silent tablets. "I wish to marry Wei WuXian properly this time, to choose the most auspicious day, to go through the proper rites, to give him the wedding and banquet he desires. I ask for your blessing for our marriage." Then he bowed three times low.

Wei WuXian couldn't contain himself and as soon as Lan WangJi straightened, he had thrown himself at him and peppered his face with kisses until Jiang Cheng forcibly separated them and made Wei WuXian bow all over again.

Although some of the GusuLan elders had been a bit concerned about whether it was more proper or improper to redo a wedding ceremony, Jiang Cheng had been absolutely gleeful at the suggestion. He had immediately pried them apart, rudely telling Lan WangJi, right in front of the altars and tablets and incense that he wasn't allowed to deflower his partner until after the wedding and to get out.

Long story short, Jiang Cheng had sent back the load of engagement gifts and ordered Wei WuXian to officially move back into Lotus Pier so they could do the whole thing again properly.

While Wei WuXian was sure Jiang Cheng was only supporting this second wedding out of spite to keep him and Lan WangJi from being together for as long as he could, Lan WangJi was so sweet about wanting to woo him properly that Wei WuXian couldn't help but give in even if it meant it would be months before they could be together properly again.

A few weeks later, YunmengJiang received an even more exorbitant amount of pinli dowry gifts and pinjin dowry gold that might have single-handedly doubled the Jiang wealth. And after that, Lan WangJi faithfully visited every week, always bringing with him some new gift for Wei WuXian even though Wei WuXian had assured Lan WangJi he knew how much he treasured him.

"What did you bring me this time? It's your last chance to impress me before the wedding," Wei WuXian asked cheekily, holding his hands out to Lan WangJi. "Tomorrow."

"I will give Wei Ying gifts after we are married as well," Lan WangJi said seriously. "As often as you wish."

"What if I want a gift every day?" Wei WuXian asked.

"Then I will give Wei Ying a gift every day," Lan WangJi said in full seriousness.

Wei WuXian laughed. "So generous, Lan Er-Gege," he said and batted his eyelashes at him. "Don't worry, I won't make you spend the entire Lan family fortune on me," he said. "I'll count it gift enough if you satisfy me in bed every day," he said. "Although that probably counts as a gift to Lan Er-Gege too." He winked.

Lan WangJi's ears turned red. "Wei Ying," he said, sounding strangled.

"I'm here!" Wei WuXian said cheerfully.

Lan WangJi wordlessly reached into his robe and shoved a small box at Wei WuXian, choosing not to acknowledge the innuendo at all.

"You really brought me something? Lan Zhan, I told you to stop bringing gifts," Wei WuXian chided. "You're going to spend all of GusuLan's money at this rate."

"You are worth more than all of this," Lan Wangji said simply, and Wei WuXian had to busy himself opening this newest gift before he did something embarrassing like throw himself at Lan Wangji or start crying.

When Wei WuXian opened it, he let out a small gasp when he saw the hairpin. Like the comb that he'd fashioned for Jiang Yanli's gift, this one was made of the same materials—gold and a fine, rare purple jade the color of YunmengJiang's flag, but fashioned in not the YunmengJiang lotus, but the delicate gentian bloom.

"This one is not for your family, but for you," Lan Wangji said. Then, eyes gentle, he picked it up off the cloth and Wei WuXian tilted his neck, feeling his cheeks warm as Lan Wangji twisted it into his hair. Lan Wangji's fingers lingered by his ear and Wei WuXian tilted into the touch as he remembered the last time Lan Wangji had put a gentian in his hair.

Wei WuXian really wanted to reach up and pull him in for a kiss, but with Jiang Cheng glaring daggers at them, Wei WuXian just reached to grab Lan Wangji's hand, giving his fingers a small squeeze.

"No touching," Jiang Cheng hissed.

"Holding hands is fine!" Wei WuXian said.

They were interrupted by a soft laugh as Lan XiChen and a handful of other GusuLan cultivators came off the boat as well followed by Wen Qing, Wen Ning, and little A-Yuan. A second and third boat also came into dock with more GusuLan cultivators that got off. While Lan Wangji's visits usually consisted of just him, since the wedding party would travel together tomorrow, everyone to be a part of it had also come along to stay the night at Lotus Pier.

While the adults began unloading things from the boats, A-Yuan ran straight for Wei WuXian's legs.

"Xian-Gege!" A-Yuan shouted.

"A-Yuan came to see me?" Wei WuXian said, delighted. It had been five months since Wei WuXian had seen the child and he laughed, picking up A-Yuan to hug him close. "Oh, you're getting heavy. Did you get bigger in just five months?"

"Me too!" A second small child came barreling at him and Wei WuXian was surprised to see Lan Jingyi had also come along.

"He snuck on board," Wen Qing said. "A-Yuan helped hide him, didn't you?" she said sternly.

"A-Yuan is sorry..." A-Yuan said, looking sad and pitiful.

"You're a bad influence," Wen Qing accused Wei WuXian. "And you, A-Yuan, learn more from Hanguang-Jun, would you?"

"I am the best influence he could have," Wei WuXian feigned offense. "Right, Hanguang-Jun?" He widened his eyes and batted his eyelashes at Lan WangJi.

"Mm," Lan WangJi agreed.

"You're a bad influence on him too." Wen Qing shot them both a disgusted look.

"Xian-Gege, my turn!" Lan JingYi demanded, tugging on Wei WuXian's leg.

"JingYi, be polite," Lan XiChen reminded him gently. "Wait your turn."

Lan JingYi immediately turned red and stopped demanding to be picked up only for his eyes to go wide when Lan WangJi lifted him into his arms.

Lan JingYi looked like he might faint from happiness as he began chattering non-stop at Lan WangJi.

Just then, a second series of boats came to dock, though, and Wei WuXian saw Nie HuaiSang, of all people, grimacing as he lifted his robes to clumsily hop off his boat followed by a large group of QingheNie cultivators who all looked a bit like they were worried Nie HuaiSang might fall into the water.

"Oh, everyone's already here," Nie HuaiSang said, giving the customary bows before he immediately struck open his fan. "Goodness, Yunmeng is really humid this time of year, isn't it. It'll be nice to go up to the Cloud Recesses tomorrow."

"What are you doing here?" Wei WuXian asked, surprised.

Nie HuaiSang gave him a pained look. "Didn't Jiang-xiong tell you? My brother insisted on commissioning the palanquin to bring you up tomorrow, which is all fine and well, but why do I have to be part of the escort? That'll take hours flying by sword, and you know I'm no good at that," he complained. "At least he should have ordered me a palanquin too."

"Maybe you can ride with my shijie," Wei WuXian said. "She should be arriving later tonight, right?" he asked Jiang Cheng.

"Should be," Jiang Cheng grunted. "But really? You want to be on the same level as a pregnant woman?"

A few months ago, Jiang YanLi had sent news that she'd become pregnant and Jin ZiXuan had apparently gone insane, hovering around her constantly and panicking every time she so much as left their bedroom. Apparently, they'd had their first fight as a couple when Jiang YanLi insisted on coming to help Wei WuXian prepare for his wedding while Jin ZiXuan wanted her to stay at home and rest. The compromise, in the end, was that she would come but in her own palanquin that Jin ZiXuan would personally escort, and that she was not to strain even a pinky.

"If it'll get me a sedan, absolutely I do," Nie HuaiSang said with shameless enthusiasm before he turned to Wei WuXian. "Congratulations, by the way, Wei-xiong, WangJi-xiong, on your..." he said before his eyes shifted down. "...your kids?" His eyes widened. "You have kids?"

Wei WuXian laughed when he realized what it must look like—two small boys in Lan clan clothing being held by himself and Lan WangJi. “I—”

“Think of Hanguang-Jun’s reputation even if you don’t care about your own,” Jiang Cheng elbowed him in the back before he could start speaking nonsense.

“How do you know I can’t give Lan Zhan a few Young Master Lans,” Wei WuXian said and grinned at Lan WangJi. “Want to see if we can create a few Lan heirs?” He nudged him with his elbow.

“Wei Ying...” Lan WangJi sounded strangled.

“Our motto is to attempt the impossible, after all,” Wei WuXian said.

“Well you’re not allowed to start attempting until after the wedding,” Jiang Cheng said heartlessly.

Wen Qing massaged her temples. “You’re just as bad as Hanguang-Jun. I knew I should have visited sooner to give you the health talk too,” she said. “Didn’t you say you looked at spring books before?”

“Wen Qing! How could you in front of the kids?” Wei WuXian said in mock scandal, clapping one hand over A-Yuan’s ear and pressing the boy’s head against his chest to block the other.

Wen Qing sighed. “He’s your problem now, Second Master Lan,” she said.

“Xian-Gege, I want to see,” A-Yuan complained, fidgeting in his grip.

“All right, all right,” Wei WuXian began to put A-Yuan down only for the boy to whine, clinging onto him. “You don’t want to come down? Didn’t you say you wanted to look at something?” he asked before he realized the child was staring up at his new hairpin. “Hm, do you like my new hairpin, A-Yuan?” Wei WuXian asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” A-Yuan said shyly, reaching up to touch it gently, eyes wide.

“Am I pretty?” Wei WuXian said.

“Pretty,” A-Yuan said.

“Do you want it?” Wei WuXian asked.

“Wei Ying, stop,” Lan WangJi said, catching him teasing the child again.

Wei WuXian laughed. “I wasn’t going to give my gift away,” he said. “After all, Lan Er-Gege made it just for me. Does it suit me?” he asked, grinning, and was pleased when Lan WangJi’s earlobes turned pink.

“It suits you,” Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian laughed again, leaning in close to tap his head gently on Lan WangJi’s shoulder.

“No touching!” Jiang Cheng barked.

Wei WuXian ignored him and reached to hold Lan WangJi's hand again with his free one. "Since the kids are here this time, let's show them around!" he said cheerfully, swinging their joined hands. "Jiang Cheng, I'm leaving Lotus Pier to you," he said.

"This is your wedding," Jiang Cheng said. "Why are we doing all the work?"

Wei WuXian grinned, mischievous. "A-Yuan, JingYi, greet your new uncle," he said. "He really loves playing with kids the most so make sure you—"

"Go! Get out of here!" Jiang Cheng ordered, going pale at the threat of having to entertain small children.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Permission attained," he said triumphantly and grinned at the kids. "A-Yuan, JingYi, this is where your Xian-Gege grew up!" he said.

Since A-Yuan and Lan JingYi had never been to Yunmeng, Wei WuXian was delighted to bring the kids around the city together with Lan WangJi.

They spent the morning wandering around the pier as Wei WuXian tried to teach the kids how to shoot kites—Lan JingYi had surprisingly good arm strength for a three-year-old though terrible aim, while A-Yuan had great aim but not quite the arm strength of a Lan. Wei WuXian won the contest and then rubbed it in the kids' faces until Lan WangJi couldn't watch him tease them any longer and made him stop.

"It's good for the kids to keep them humble," Wei WuXian said, grinning. "Give them something to aspire to," he said with a wink. "Lan Zhan, since I won, don't I get a kiss?" he requested. "Give me my prize."

"Stop fooling around," Lan WangJi said, the tips of his ears pink.

Wei WuXian pouted. "Lan Er-Gege, give me some face," he whined. "Are you going to be so cruel to your soon-to-be husband?" he said. "I'm just a delicate, fragile man. How am I supposed to take this kind of emotional torture."

Lan WangJi sighed, but just when Wei WuXian thought he should stop teasing him, Lan WangJi leaned in and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

Wei WuXian froze and blushed bright pink, clapping a hand to the place Lan WangJi had just kissed and looking around. Thankfully, no one had been paying much attention to them, attention drawn by Lan JingYi and A-Yuan who were still trying to practice their shooting, unsatisfied that Wei WuXian had won.

"Lan Zhan, you can't just—"

Lan WangJi raised an eyebrow. "Did you not ask for it?" he said.



Wei WuXian was speechless. "Who taught you this? Hanguang-Jun, did you become even more shameless than me?" he demanded but leaned in closer to Lan WangJi, tangling their hands together and tilting his head up for a real kiss.

"Your brother..."

"We're going to be married tomorrow, Hanguang-Jun—this is our last chance to break the rules," Wei WuXian said.

"Xian-Gege, I'm hungry," Lan JingYi announced.

Wei WuXian looked down to see Lan JingYi staring up at them with his arms crossed.

"JingYi," A-Yuan said, tugging on his friend's robe.

Wei WuXian blinked and laughed. "All right, all right," he said, taking one of Lan JingYi's hands and one of A-Yuan's hands to begin leading them down the dock again. "We'll continue this later," he said to Lan WangJi and winked.

For breakfast, Wei WuXian bought them all sesame shaobing and fried youtiao so the kids had their hands full with the hot pastries. Naturally, the kids were excited, but kept dropping crumbs everywhere until Lan WangJi had them sit down at a table by the stall.

"No speech while eating," Lan WangJi reminded them once they'd settled down, and the two juniors, eyes wide, nodded as they ate in complete silence.

Wei WuXian laughed, watching them and glanced at Lan WangJi. "It's really unfair they listen to you so fast," he said. "I have to tell them at least a few times before they'll listen to me," he said, sitting down next to Lan WangJi so close that their legs were pressed together. "Hm after this, where should we take them? To the market? The lotus pond? They're only now just starting to bloom, though," he said.

Lan WangJi had visited him enough times now that Wei WuXian had brought him everywhere in Yunmeng and he was sure Lan WangJi knew it quite well too.

"Well whatever you do, don't go near the Li's lotus lake."

Wei WuXian looked up to see Nie HuaiSang standing by their table, apparently just having walked past.

"Nie-xiong? Weren't you planning on staying at Lotus Pier?" Wei WuXian asked.

Nie HuaiSang fanned himself a few times. "And have to help put the palanquin together? No thank you," he sniffed. "But speaking of Yunmeng, what are the good shops around here? Since my brother sent me, I can at least do some shopping. Maybe a new fan or pendant or something...do you think my brother would believe it if I said I had to commission new robes?"

Wei WuXian had no doubt Nie HuaiSang intended to excuse all his spendings on this trip as wedding expenses, but he was more interested in what Nie HuaiSang had said first. "Before that, what's this about a lotus lake?"

Nie HuaiSang's eyes lit up at the prospect of juicy gossip and he waved Wei WuXian closer. "I was just talking to that cute maiden there—she's the daughter of a robemaker," he said and held his sleeve out. "Actually, the one who made my outer robe," he said. "They do their embroidery with gold thread they import from the Bai family up in Qishan. Thank goodness they're not a cultivation family, or they probably wouldn't exist anymore."

"The Bai family or the robemaker?" Wei WuXian asked.

"Both, I suppose," Nie HuaiSang said. "Although the robemaker lives down here so it's not like they would have been affected by the Wens. Anyway, Maiden Gu was just telling me she got engaged, but her fiancé's lotus lake is being plagued by corpses. She was trying to get me to help her, but you know my cultivation—I can barely even fly—so I told her to report it to your brother."

Wei WuXian looked over at the young woman who was some distance away, shopping at a stall with her maidservant. "It'll take Jiang Cheng forever to look into this—we'll handle it, won't we, Hanguang-Jun?" he said.

"Mm," Lan WangJi agreed and Wei WuXian beamed at him.

"Nie-xiong, why don't you invite her over to join us for breakfast," Wei WuXian said.

"Really?" Nie HuaiSang brightened. "Great! If you help her, maybe her father will give me a discount next time I buy a robe," he said and scurried over.

A few words later, the girl was walking over with Nie HuaiSang while her maidservant stayed at the stall to finish her bargaining.

"Maiden Gu, these are my friends, Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi, and uh..."

"Wen Yuan and Lan JingYi," Wei WuXian introduced the children.

Nie HuaiSang nodded. "Wei-xiong, WangJi-xiong, this is Gu LiJuan like I told you before," he said, making quick introductions and then turning to Gu LiJuan. "I was just telling them about your corpse problem, and they said they can help. They're much stronger cultivators than I am."

Wei WuXian had grown up flirting with women, and although the one who had conquered his heart, soul, and body in the end was a man, old habits died hard and he automatically turned to the girl with a charming smile. "Won't you join us for breakfast, Maiden Gu? Please tell us about the case. What's happened at this lotus lake?"

Nie HuaiSang dusted off the bench next to A-Yuan and sat down, gesturing for Gu LiJuan to do the same. Gu LiJuan's eyes roved between Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi, and the two children as though wanting to ask their relation to one another. Wei WuXian purposefully didn't answer that particular question.

"People have been drowning there," Gu LiJuan said once she'd sat. A-Yuan politely pushed a plate of shaobing closer to the newcomers.

“Very polite, A-Yuan,” Wei WuXian praised him, patting him on the head.

Lan JingYi’s eyes widened and he quickly shoved the plate of shaobing closer to the guests as well. “Jiejie, Gege, have one,” he said loudly.

Wei WuXian laughed and reached across the table to also pat his head. “Very good. Both of you are well brought up,” he praised.

“Thank you,” Gu LiJuan said to the children with a stiff smile. “But I don’t think this is an appropriate conversation to have in front of children. Second Master Nie, couldn’t you just—”

“Oh I couldn’t, absolutely not, I don’t know anything,” Nie HuaiSang said, waving both hands at her. “Really, Wei-xiong and Wangji-xiong are the best cultivators for the job. Please tell them.”

“But...” Gu LiJuan hesitated.

Wei WuXian eyed the kids and then smiled. “Hm, JingYi and A-Yuan, why don’t you ask the nice jiejie questions about her case,” he suggested. “You two are training to be cultivators in the future, aren’t you?”

Lan JingYi and A-Yuan immediately brightened. “Really?”

“You two may as well start getting some experience and no better time than when Lan Zhan and I are here,” Wei WuXian said with a short nod. When he glanced up at Lan WangJi, he made no protest, supporting Wei WuXian. “Nothing bad will happen,” he said to the children. “Maiden Gu has a case where she says some people have drowned in a lake so we’re going to help,” he said. “Why don’t you two ask her some questions.”

“You’re talking about death with children?” Gu LiJuan asked.

Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow. “Do you think children do not know about death?” he asked.

“Yeah, Ning-Gege died,” A-Yuan said cheerfully.

“He is so dead and we’re not scared of him at all!” Lan JingYi puffed out his chest. “Yesterday he caught me when I almost fell out of a tree.”

In fact, for future cultivators, the earlier they were exposed to death, the better. Children naturally feared very little until they were taught to fear it, so if they never learned to fear death, they never needed to worry about too much yin energy attracting spiritual beings or monsters. Being exposed to Wen Ning since a young age had definitely helped with that as well.

Wei WuXian laughed. “Go ahead and ask her,” he said to the children. “See if you can solve this case.”

“Discuss!” Lan JingYi declared and grabbed A-Yuan by the head to begin whispering furiously.

The two children whispered for a time while Wei WuXian watched, amused. Lan WangJi continued eating at his slow pace. Nie HuaiSang had absently helped himself to a shaobing, looking relieved he was

no longer being asked anything, though Gu LiJuan still looked a bit disgruntled that her case had suddenly been left to a pair of toddlers.

When the two children finally straightened, A-Yuan asked, “Who died?”

Wei WuXian felt quite proud of him. It was the best question to begin with after all—knowing victims was often important, particularly when they weren’t sure about their attacker yet.

Gu LiJuan sighed, and when it appeared Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi weren’t going to stop the children, she finally answered. “All sorts of people,” she said. “Six in total in the last two weeks, but we don’t know any of them except for the first. No one has been able to identify them.”

“Who was the first?” Wei WuXian asked.

“A guest at the inn—it seemed he’d gotten drunk and fallen into the lake at night. No one noticed until the morning so it might have been an accident,” Gu LiJuan said. “At least that’s what we thought until the next body turned up.”

Wei WuXian held his tongue as he turned to the children. “What do you want to ask next?” he asked.

“There were more people?” A-Yuan asked.

Wei WuXian nodded. “This jiejie says there were five others who they didn’t know,” he said.

“How did everyone else die?” Lan JingYi asked next.

The children were really doing quite well, asking the exact questions Wei WuXian would have started with himself.

“No one knows,” Gu LiJuan said and then shrugged, as though resigned to telling her case to the children now. “The bodies just turn up the next morning, but it might be the ghost.”

“There’s a ghost?” A-Yuan asked, eyes wide.

Lan JingYi turned pale. “Xian-Gege, I don’t like ghosts,” he whined.

Wei WuXian laughed and reached across the table to pat him. “Isn’t Hanguang-Jun here?” he said. “You don’t have to be scared, and especially not of ghosts,” he said. “You know why? Ghosts feed off of yin energy, so the braver JingYi is, the hungrier the ghosts will get because you’ll be full of yang energy. Is JingYi brave?”

Lan JingYi nodded. “JingYi is brave!” he said loudly.

“Good boy,” Wei WuXian said. “And you know what will help JingYi be braver? Ask Gu-Jiejie more questions about the ghost. The more we know about it, the less scary it is,” he said.

“Okay!” Lan JingYi said. “Gu-Jiejie, what’s the ghost’s name?” he asked. “Is it a boy or a girl? What does it look like? Did you see it? Is it really big?”

“Goodness, is this child really related to you?” Wei WuXian asked, grinning at Lan WangJi. “He could rival me in talking.”

“Attempting the impossible is the Jiang sect motto,” Lan WangJi said, rendering Wei WuXian speechless for a moment before he collapsed with laughter.

“Ah Lan Zhan, where did you learn to tease so well?” Wei WuXian asked. “Am I a bad influence on you? Or a good one?” If they weren’t in public, he would have reached across the table for Lan WangJi’s hand, just wanting to be close to him.

“Wei-xiong,” Nie HuaiSang whispered. “What about the case?”

“Right, right, aren’t you going to answer JingYi’s questions?” Wei WuXian asked.

Gu LiJuan looked startled at suddenly being addressed again. “It’s a ghost,” she said. “We don’t know its name, but they say it looks like a girl, maybe a year or two older than you. I haven’t seen it myself.”

“Did she die at the pond too?” A-Yuan asked next.

“No, we’ve never seen a body that looks like hers,” Gu LiJuan answered.

“How do you know she killed the people then?” A-Yuan asked.

“Strange dead bodies turning up every few days at the lake—how else do you explain it but a ghost?” Gu LiJuan answered.

“No, A-Yuan has a good point,” Wei WuXian said. “If you think she’s killing people, then most likely her body is there and it’s causing resentment to build up. If her body isn’t there, then it’s unlikely that she’s the one doing the killing,” he explained.

Ghosts, like Yang FeiFei, generally had some purpose or other for sticking around. For most of them, it meant they would attach themselves to their place of death, or their killer. In Yang FeiFei’s case, she had attached herself to Wei WuXian, drawn by his resentful energy. If the girl ghost at the Li lake really was the killer behind these mysterious deaths, then it was more likely that her body was there and had not yet been found—if she was after her killer, it was unlikely for her to attack unrelated people.

“Well, we’ll know for sure once we take a look,” Wei WuXian said. “Shall we go?”

Gu LiJuan looked surprised that they were offering to see the lake so quickly but she nodded and stood. “All right then,” she said.

“Ah, hold on,” Wei WuXian said and gestured over the stall owner. “Wrap these up for us, will you? No use in wasting good food,” he said, making him wrap the leftovers up.

Lan WangJi wordlessly reached for the package from him once he’d finished, making the stall owner gawk. “Hanguang-Jun, why don’t I just send it back to Lotus Pier for you and Young Master Wei,” the stall owner said.

Apparently the sight of the great Hanguang-Jun holding a package of leftover shaobing was too much for the stall owner to handle and Wei WuXian laughed. "Sure, thanks then," he said. "Let's go, Lan Zhan."

As they headed toward the Li lotus lake, Wei WuXian took over asking questions as the children alternately clung to his legs or trotted by his feet, half-playing and half-listening.

By the time they reached the lake, Wei WuXian understood the situation. The Li family were a group of civilian merchants who made a decent living and owned one of the more popular inns at the border of Yunmeng, one of the first that travelers would encounter upon entering the city. The lotus lake in question was one that bordered this inn made popular precisely because of its idyllic positioning. Dinner guests could sit out on the balconies overlooking the lotus lake, and the ones who were staying overnight could have rooms that caught the sunrise over lotuses in full bloom.

It was at this lake that several of these bodies had been turning up, floating in the water as the sun rose and scaring some of those early-rising travelers.

At first, everyone had assumed all the bodies belonged to deceased guests of the inn—maybe a tavern brawl gone wrong or other such circumstance. After all, the first corpse had been a guest who had gotten too drunk, fallen into the lake sometime during the night and was discovered drowned the next morning. But when they questioned the Li family and their employees, apart from the first body found, no one could identify any of the other dead bodies that turned up. Furthermore, apart from the first, all of their guests every night were healthy and accounted for in the morning.

Wei WuXian found it amusing that the Li family was additionally nervous due to the exaggerated rumors of the Chang clan massacre had finally made their way to Yunmeng though it had been months since the events in Yueyang. But it seemed that no matter how many guards the Li family hired to catch the culprit, they couldn't find the one who had murdered these people or identify any of the victims.

As they came up to the entrance of the Li inn, though, Wei WuXian was surprised to find two cultivators already there. Though he'd never seen these particular robes before, one dressed in all white and the other in all black, they held the same sort of untouchable aura that Lan Wangji did. The two cultivators were a few years younger than himself and Lan Wangji, he thought, fresh-faced with the sort of eager righteousness of youth.

"Who are these young masters?" Wei WuXian asked as they drew near.

The one in white bowed to him. "I am Xiao XingChen, and this is my companion, Song ZiChen, Song Lan, of Baixue Temple," he introduced them both with a smile.

"Xiao XingChen?" Nie HuaiSang asked. "Aren't you Baoshan Sanren's disciple who just came down the mountain a few months ago?" he asked.

Xiao XingChen nodded. "Yes, I thought it would do more good for me to help the people here in Jianghu than to stay on that mountain," he said. "ZiChen agrees so we've decided to travel together."

Song ZiChen, beside him, gave a short nod of agreement.

“Wei-xiong, doesn’t this make him your shishu?” Nie HuaiSang asked.

Wei WuXian nodded and smiled, bowing back to him. “I’m Wei Ying, Wei WuXian—my mother was Cangse Sanren so you would be my shishu,” he said. “This is my husband, Lan Zhan, Lan WangJi,” he continued. “Our juniors, Wen Yuan and Lan JingYi.” He gestured to the children. “But what are you two doing here? Have you heard about the Li lotus lake too?”

Xiao XingChen and Song ZiChen exchanged a glance. “The Li lotus lake?” Xiao XingChen asked. “We’re here about the walking corpses in Yunping City.”

Once full introductions had been made of everyone and they all walked into the inn together, Wei Wuxian ordered a table and since they hadn’t really finished breakfast, Lan WangJi ordered a series of dishes for an early lunch as they could discuss the two cases.

There were so many people gathered at their table, in fact, that it took a servant a few moments before he noticed Gu LiJuan.

“We didn’t know you were visiting, Maiden Gu,” he said quickly. “I’ll fetch Young Master Li right away.” His eyes flitted to the second story where guest rooms would typically be and hurried away.

“No hurry,” Gu LiJuan said, looking a bit pale. “I’m sure he’s busy.”

As they waited for the dishes to come, Xiao XingChen began telling them the details of the case he and Song Lan had come across. It seemed the pair had been night hunting when they heard about a case of walking corpses in a nearby city, and had decided to stay a few days so they could exorcise them. But upon investigation, they found that it was a series of gravesites that had been disturbed, awakening the corpses, and that it hadn’t been just one city. A series of small neighboring cities had all had a few graves disturbed, and the pair had been following the trail that had led to Yunmeng.

For the most part, they were harmless, low-level walking corpses, easily exorcised and re-buried. The problem, Xiao XingChen explained, was the missing corpses.

“Missing corpses?” Wei WuXian asked, absently making room as servants reappeared, bringing with them hot dishes and bowls of rice for everyone. One of them also placed down two pots of tea and an additional jar. “Are some of the corpses missing?”

Xiao XingChen nodded. “Yes, even though we should have hunted all the ones we came across, there were still a handful of empty graves. We’ve been tracking the movement of those corpses and they led...”

“Here,” Wei WuXian said. “How many in total?” he asked.

“Thirteen,” Xiao XingChen said.

Wei WuXian exchanged a troubled look with Lan WangJi. So far, six corpses, five unidentified, had appeared in the Li lotus lake. If these corpses were the ones Xiao XingChen was looking for, then there were at least eight more still unaccounted for. In other words, whatever the goal of the gravedigger, they were far from finished.

This also deepened the mystery. While Yunping and Yunmeng were close, it was still enough of a distance to travel that no one had even thought to check for missing corpses from other cities. Farther still, if they had been tracking these disturbed graves from city to city. If Xiao XingChen and Song ZiChen hadn't been looking for these missing corpses, it might take much longer before Wei WuXian figured out where these lotus lake corpses were coming from.

"Why would corpses walk all the way to Yunmeng?" Wei WuXian wondered out loud, accepting the bowl and chopsticks Lan WangJi handed to him.

He automatically began to eat, the taste of spice on his tongue prompting him to smile at Lan WangJi. When he surveyed the table, he noticed that unlike the usual spread Lan WangJi ordered or cooked when it was just the two of them, half of the dishes were bland, and Lan WangJi had been serving the two children while Wei WuXian talked. He really was detailed, Wei WuXian thought fondly.

"I want to try that one," Lan JingYi demanded, pointing to one of the red-flaked fish dishes. "I want to eat what Xian-Gege is eating!"

Wei WuXian grinned. "You really want to try this one?" he asked.

A-Yuan hurriedly shook his head. "JingYi, no, that looks like Xian-Gege's cooking!" he whispered.

"Hey, is that any way to treat your senior?" Wei WuXian said. "What's wrong with my cooking, A-Yuan? Don't tell me you miss it?"

A-Yuan wisely clamped his mouth shut. "No speech while eating," he mumbled and went silent beside Lan JingYi, making Wei WuXian want to laugh.

"I want to eat it!" Lan JingYi said, though, so Wei WuXian picked a piece of fish to put in his bowl.

Lan JingYi immediately picked it up to put in his mouth, only for his face to change about five different expressions in the span of a second and then his eyes welled up in tears as his mouth dropped open and the piece of fish came sliding back out into the bowl.

"Wei Ying..." Lan WangJi said.

"He wanted to try it," Wei WuXian said innocently. "Hm, I thought maybe he would have gotten your taste in food, but I guess not," he said but gave Lan JingYi a cup of tea anyway, helping him drink it and then feeding the child a few mouthfuls of plain white rice.

"Feel better?" Wei WuXian asked.

Lan JingYi, cheeks bulging with rice, nodded tearfully.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Ah, better stick to what your Hanguang-Jun feeds you," he said, grinning at Lan WangJi.



It was only then that he noticed that the foods Lan WangJi had put into his own bowl were also the bland, unseasoned dishes like the children. It couldn't be...until now, Lan WangJi always ordered or cooked spicy when he was with Wei WuXian, so Wei Wuxian always thought that they had similar palets. Could it be that Lan WangJi actually didn't prefer spicy foods after all?

Lan WangJi noticed Wei WuXian's gaze and nudged a cup toward him. When Wei WuXian smiled and took it, he was surprised to find that unlike the tea that had been served to everyone else, his own cup held good Yunmeng liquor.

"Did you order this for me?" Wei WuXian asked, smiling.

"Mm," Lan WangJi said.

"And the food?" Wei WuXian asked.

"For everyone," Lan WangJi said.

"Hmm so you aren't going to admit it?" Wei WuXian said. "Doesn't matter, I know now," he said, and under Lan WangJi's gaze, picked out a few pieces from the bland dishes to put in Lan WangJi's bowl. "I can't believe you let me think you preferred spicy food this entire time," he said. "Ah, Lan Zhan, admit it! How long have you liked me? You were eating spicy food with me since we were married the first time."

"Don't fool around," Lan WangJi said, though his ears had turned red. "No speech while eating."

Wei WuXian laughed. "All right, all right, I'll focus on the case," he said. "Little shishu," he said. "The identities of the missing corpses—do you know who they are?"

Xiao XingChen nodded. "Thankfully they were all relatively newly dead so most of their grave markers were in tact or they had family or neighbors who could identify them," he said and began rattling off a list of names, unfamiliar, at first, until he got to the sixth name. "Yang FeiFei."

"Yang FeiFei's grave is empty?" Wei WuXian asked. "You mean corpses have been missing from all the way in Yueyang?"

Xiao XingChen nodded. "That's where this all started," he said. "ZiChen and I were coming from Yi City when we heard about the fierce corpses in Yueyang, and began tracking them."

"Then Xue Yang's corpse?" Wei WuXian asked.

"Also missing," Xiao XingChen said. "Are you familiar with them?"

It had taken the Lan sect weeks to fully clear out the land even after the Jin sect had finally sorted through things at Koi Tower and had sent people to help. It had taken even longer to identify as many bodies as they could and give them proper burials. Naturally, the Jin sect had taken Jin GuangShan's body back to Lanling. As for Yang FeiFei and Xue Yang, Wei WuXian had personally arranged for them to be buried in Yueyang City where they had both lived in their youth.

He had not expected to hear about either of them again, but now...

"The ghost?" Wei WuXian said, looking over at Lan WangJi who gave a small shake of his head.

"A girl," he reminded him.

"You said the ghost was definitely a girl, right?" Wei WuXian turned to Gu LiJuan.

"Yes," the woman said, looking surprised. "What of it?"

"You're sure it was a girl and not a woman?" Wei WuXian repeated.

"Yes, just a little older than them." Gu LiJuan gestured to the children.

"It's not Yang FeiFei then," Wei WuXian said. "But if there's still eight missing corpses and a ghost, and two of them are likely Yang FeiFei and Xue Yang, then...this is bad. I have to leave." He got to his feet, Lan WangJi already beside him as Wei WuXian swept up the children, one in each arm, already striding for the door.

"Where are you going? Wei-xiong?" Nie HuaiSang called out.

"Is he just going to leave?" Gu LiJuan asked.

Lan WangJi was just picking up Wei WuXian by the waist, ready to fly them back to the protection of Lotus Pier ward arrays, when the first of the corpses burst through the door.

In a flash, Wei WuXian found himself behind Lan WangJi's broad back and the clear sound of the guqin ringing out, cutting through the noise of the inn and the snarls of the corpses piling through the door.

"Fierce c-c-corpse!" Wei WuXian heard Nie HuaiSang gasp behind him, and turned just in time to see him duck under the table.

As the other guests in the inn noticed, the panicked screaming began in earnest, as some guests dove under tables like Nie HuaiSang while others tried going up the stairway to the second floor, and still others began trying to climb through windows.

Xiao XingChen and Song ZiChen, however, rushed forward to assist Lan WangJi, each brandishing a sword. It left Wei WuXian enough time to back up a safe distance with the children.

With Lan WangJi leading the battle, Wei WuXian didn't worry much about the outcome. His husband had fought far more than eight corpses at a time before, and judging from the swordsmanship of Xiao XingChen and Song ZiChen, those two weren't bad either if still not as experienced as himself or Lan WangJi.

"Lan Zhan, I'm taking the kids ahead," Wei WuXian called.

It was too noisy for Lan WangJi to speak clearly, but just then, Wei WuXian heard the strum of his guqin that sounded like one of Lan WangJi's quiet "Mm" agreements, and he smiled.

“Maiden Gu, the back entrance?” Wei WuXian said.

“What?” Gu LiJuan, who until now, had been quite composed, was shaking as she watched the fight going on.

“The back entrance,” Wei WuXian said. “The corpses are here for me—we need to go now,” he said.

Although Lan WangJi’s “ZhanYing” could keep Wei WuXian’s core stone at a safe size by shaving it down and converting the excess energy to spiritual energy, it also meant Wei WuXian had to regularly practice demonic cultivation so his core stone would never get so small as he’d lose immortality. It was a precarious equilibrium that had to be carefully maintained. But since Lan WangJi could only visit once a week lately, and Wei WuXian refused to let anyone else play him “ZhanYing,” he had to wait until Lan WangJi came to release that resentful energy. This time, he hadn’t listened to “ZhanYing” yet, so a week’s worth of resentful energy had been accumulated in him.

In other words, he was a walking resentful energy magnet. While this usually made Wei WuXian’s night hunting easier as he barely had to hunt at all before prey came to him themselves, he had two young children with him this time.

“Xian-Gege, what about Lan Er-Gege,” A-Yuan said, clinging to Wei WuXian with wide eyes. “We need to help him!”

“Very filial,” Wei WuXian said approvingly, and then more reassuringly, “Your Lan Er-Gege is fine. He can handle much stronger corpses than these. For now, be good and come with Xian-Gege.”

Even if he’d let them help with the case, he had no intention of putting either child in danger until they were completely trained for it.

“Wait for me, Wei-xiong! I’m coming too!” Nie HuaiSang stumbled after them as Gu LiJuan led them toward the back entrance.

Just then, a few servants and a plain-looking man came stumbling down the stairs of the second story. “LiJuan? What’s going on?”

The man was heavy-built like a construction worker, and looked a bit disheveled, collar loose and hair in disarray, as he stared wide-eyed at the scene going on at the front entrance and the guests screaming around the inn. Though his face was plain, his clothes were of good quality.

“Surname Li, it’s about time you showed up,” Gu LiJuan snapped. “Your whole inn is being attacked!”

It was then that Wei WuXian realized this young man must be Gu LiJuan’s fiancé and the young master of this inn, Li HeTang.

“Attacked by who?” Li HeTang looked even more bewildered.

“By the corpses in your lotus lake!” Gu LiJuan snapped. “Hurry and evacuate everyone!” she shouted.

“No! Go back upstairs,” Wei WuXian ordered. “Get as many of these people upstairs as possible—once I leave, the corpses will follow,” he said.

“R-Right,” Li HeTang said. “Quick, everyone, go upstairs,” he said, gesturing for guests who began stampeding up the stairs. “LiJuan! Are you coming up?” he shouted. “Hurry!”

“I’m showing Young Master Wei out,” Gu LiJuan said, ignoring him. “This way,” she said to Wei WuXian.

As she led him down corridors to the outside, Wei WuXian thought he caught a glimpse of something white, but the corpses should all be outside and all the people were heading up the stairs to hide.

He was a bit surprised to find Nie HuaiSang had followed them out the back entrance as well instead of going up to hide. “Aha, I figure it’s safer with you, Wei-xiong,” Nie HuaiSang said before his eyes widened and he moved to duck behind Wei WuXian.

A corpse was standing in front of them, and it was a familiar one.

The last time Wei WuXian had seen it, the boy had been in his mother’s embrace as she pulled him down into the landborne abyss. Time hadn’t done Xue Yang any favors, his skin grey and slimy, and clothes rotted. Something was dripping off of him, wet and dark.

Wei WuXian could feel unusually strong resentment coming from the boy as he snarled, jerking forward.

Lan JingYi let out a whimper and buried his face into Wei WuXian’s neck.

Though demonic cultivation certainly had its uses, one thing it could not do was allow Wei WuXian to fly on a sword, which, at a time like this, was a skill he really wished he still had.

“A-Yuan, JingYi, I need to put you down now,” Wei WuXian said. “When I put you down, I want you to go hide with HuaiSang-Gege and LiJuan-Jiejie, all right?” Then, slowly, keeping his eyes on Xue Yang, Wei WuXian put bent to put down the children. He heard a quiet gasp and the quick patter of feet.

“Hurry, Wei-xiong!” Nie HuaiSang said, but his voice was coming from further back, so he must have retreated to a safer distance with the children.

Wei WuXian needed no prompting, pulling Chenqing from his waist and raising the flute to his lips. The moment he began to play, he felt the resentful energy from Xue Yang’s corpse rush at him, only for his own cultivation to redirect that resentful energy and bend Xue Yang to his will.

But something about Xue Yang’s movements were oddly restrained, and it wasn’t entirely because of Wei WuXian’s flute. He was jumping forward in the manner of low-level walking corpses, the sort that hadn’t been buried properly but weren’t resentful enough about anything else to do much. With bodies hardened with rigor mortis, they could only jump forward, which was why raised thresholds in houses were often enough to prevent them from coming inside.

Xue Yang was not a low-level corpse, and yet he was jumping—and it was because his ankles had been bound together, Wei WuXian realized. Someone had tied a length of rope around the corpse’s feet, binding them together, so that Xue Yang had no choice but to jump in order to move.

It made Wei WuXian's job easier. Even though he could feel the corpse struggle against him, perhaps recognizing him as the reason for his death, but just as in life, Xue Yang had been no match for Wei WuXian, now in death and without the Yin Tiger Seal, he was quickly forced to submit. In a moment, Xue Yang's corpse was standing motionless, expression blank as it awaited orders.

"Nie-xiong, come exorcise it," Wei WuXian said.

Nie HuaiSang jumped. "Me?"

"Do you see another cultivator here?" Wei WuXian said. "I can't cultivate like that anymore, so it has to be you! Hurry!"

"I-I-I—" Nie HuaiSang stuttered but obediently pulled out his sword. It was probably one of a handful of times Wei WuXian had ever seen him actually unsheathe his sword, and even his pose while holding it was shaky. The clumsy movements Nie HuaiSang made sent out a weak pulse of spiritual energy—maybe enough to subdue the weakest of walking corpses, but Xue Yang was far more resentful than the average corpse.

"Hurry," Wei WuXian said, a drop of sweat sliding down his brow.

"I'm trying," Nie HuaiSang wailed.

The two boys clinging to his robes were wide-eyed with terror as the worst thing happened. In usual cases, if Wei WuXian was only trying to control a corpse, it was simple enough. All he had to do was use the resentful energy to bend the physical body to command. If the corpse itself was full of resentful energy and inclined to follow Wei WuXian's orders, it was all the easier. But while Xue Yang's corpse was under Wei WuXian's command, in order for his soul to be exorcised, Wei WuXian had to allow a metaphorical outlet, of sorts, for the soul to exit the body. He couldn't control it fully if he wanted an exorcism, in other words, and trying to maintain partial control over a corpse while also allowing its soul enough freedom to leave the body was difficult even for him.

The longer it took Nie HuaiSang to exorcise Xue Yang, the harder it was for Wei WuXian to maintain control.

"Use a talisman then!" Wei WuXian said.

"R-Right!" Nie HuaiSang said, dropping his sabre to fumble in his qiankun pockets.

"What's taking so long?" Wei WuXian demanded when he was still rummaging moments later. He could feel his grip on the corpse weakening, and the resentful energy around it strengthening as it struggled against Wei WuXian's control.

"I can't find them," Nie HuaiSang said. "I'm sure I remembered to pack them, didn't I?" He rummaged some more.

Wei WuXian couldn't believe this was happening. Him, the one and only demonic cultivator, the most feared person in the entire cultivation world was actually losing to a fierce corpse because the second heir to the Nie clan couldn't be bothered to restock on talismans when he went traveling.

"Xian-Gege! Xian-Gege!" A-Yuan said anxiously as Xue Yang's corpse hopped a step in their direction.

Lan JingYi had transferred his grip from Nie HuaiSang's robes to A-Yuan's waist though neither had actually started crying yet.

Wei WuXian could feel his control slipping even when he poured his willpower into his flute.

Three things happened at once then. First, Wei WuXian had to relinquish control over Xue Yang's corpse for a moment so that he could take a breath and control it completely, hopefully to wait until Lan WangJi came this time. As he did, though, Xue Yang had been waiting for the opportunity and pounced forward, hopping straight for Nie HuaiSang who was so startled, he spilled the contents of his qiankun bag everywhere, a few talismans and charms but mostly a bunch of useless goods—fans, paintings, and the such scattering to the ground as he fell and scrambled backwards. Third, Gu LiJuan darted forward, slapping a talisman onto the back of Xue Yang's head just before he could reach the children.

Xue Yang's corpse immediately froze in place.

At that moment, Lan WangJi came flying into the courtyard, followed quickly by Xiao XingChen and Song ZiChen.

"Lan Zhan!" Wei WuXian said, relieved to see him. "You've finished inside? Was Yang FeiFei there?"

"Mm," Lan WangJi confirmed, his eyes quickly glancing over Wei WuXian, and once satisfied he was safe, turned to the children still cowering with Nie HuaiSang.

"Come," Lan WangJi said.

A-Yuan and Lan JingYi needed no second bidding to come running to Lan WangJi and Wei WuXian.

"Okay, okay, you're safe," Wei WuXian comforted them, bending to pat the children on the head. "You both did very well."

As though on cue, Li HeTang and a handful of servants also came running into the courtyard, eyes wide. "There's still one more!" Li HeTang shouted, pointing at Xue Yang's frozen corpse. "Kill it! Kill it!"

"It's already dead, Young Master Li," Wei WuXian said dryly. "That's the whole problem."

"Well kill it again!" Li HeTang said.

"Don't worry, it can't do anything now," Wei WuXian, straightening up and moving in front of the children. "Thanks to your fiancée's quick thinking," he said and turned to Gu LiJuan. "Maiden Gu," he said. "Would you like to explain why you have a frozen corpse talisman?"

While there were plenty of conmen on the street selling fake protection talismans to civilians, for a civilian to actually own one that worked was highly unusual. Since civilians weren't trained in cultivation, most wouldn't know how to properly use a talisman and a real one would do more harm than good. For Gu LiJuan to both own a real talisman and know how to use it—this woman had come well-prepared.

"Maiden Gu, just who did you hire to import these corpses to the Li lotus lake?" Wei WuXian asked.

"No one," Gu LiJuan snapped.

"Then you did it yourself," Wei WuXian said. "Lan Zhan, how many corpses did you fight inside?" he asked.

"Seven," Lan WangJi said.

"With Xue Yang here, that's eight," Wei WuXian said. "The exact number of missing corpses my little shishu and Song-daozhang were tracking down. All the missing corpses were here and...wet," he said.

"Lan Zhan, the ones you fought inside, were they hopping?" he asked.

"Mm," Lan WangJi answered.

"Because their feet were bound?" Wei WuXian continued.

"Mm," Lan WangJi said.

"Just like our friend, Xue Yang," Wei WuXian said. "Li HeTang, have you seen any of these corpses before?"

The young master startled at being addressed but he shook his head. "N-No, these aren't the ones we found before," he said. "Those corpses should be in the shed out back. I don't know where these new ones came from."

"They came from your lotus lake," Wei WuXian answered.

"What?" Li HeTang's eyes widened, glancing over at the lotus lake some distance away. From here, the view was beautiful in the bright noon light, sun glistening over the calm water. "Our lake? Why would there be corpses in our lake?"

"Because your fiancée put them there, isn't that right, Maiden Gu?" Wei WuXian said.

"I-I don't know what you're talking about," Gu LiJuan said. "Why would I put corpses in his lotus lake?"

"Because you don't want to marry him," Wei WuXian answered.

"You don't?" Li HeTang asked, staring at her.

"She thinks you're cheating on her," Wei WuXian said.

"What?" Li HeTang sounded even more astonished.

"Yes, yes, when we first came in, the servants were surprised to see us and looked up at the second floor where you were," Wei WuXian said. "Second stories are typically guest rooms at inns, and you came down disheveled when the corpses broke in. Maiden Gu thinks you're entertaining up there... or maybe hiring entertainers. Either way, it means the same to her."

"I'm not, though," Li HeTang said. "I wouldn't cheat!"

"Then explain what you've been doing all these months" Gu LiJuan snapped. "Every time I come to visit, you're upstairs doing who knows what," she said. "I'd rather die than be married to you!"

"So you came up with this plan to break your engagement," Wei WuXian said. "Let me guess. Your parents arranged this marriage between the two of you a long time ago. If you were to say you didn't want to marry him, your family would lose face, all the more if the reason is because he was caught cheating before you were even married," he said. "So you decided to make a reason you couldn't marry into the Li family."

Gu LiJuan clamped her mouth shut.

"You probably got the idea when that first corpse turned up in their lake—that one really was an accident, the first man who drowned," Wei WuXian continued. "But what happened? Maybe your parents are superstitious, thought that was a bad omen for your upcoming wedding and postponed it?"

Gu LiJuan's face gave a small twitch though she stayed silent.

"Young Master Li, maybe three or four weeks back, did Maiden Gu take a trip?" Wei WuXian asked.

"Y-Yes," Li HeTang said. "Four weeks ago, she went to visit a temple. She said she wanted to pray for our marriage."

"The trip she took was for your upcoming marriage, but definitely not to bless it," Wei WuXian said. "Maiden Gu probably thought that if she gave her parents a few more corpses, they would break the engagement without her having to say anything," Wei WuXian said and turned to her. "You probably thought to get corpses from other cities so no one would guess a few robbed graves had anything to do with corpses turning up in the Li lotus lake," he said. "You were quite careful too, only taking one or two corpses from each city to bring back. It's just too bad you weren't very good at grave-digging and disturbed other graves, leaving behind a few walking corpses in each city," he said. "If not for that, Xiao XingChen and Song ZiChen might not have discovered there were missing corpses at all."

Gu LiJuan's lips were pressed together so tightly, they had gone bloodless.

"To hide them when you came back, you tied ropes around their ankles and sank them to the bottom of the lake and cut one loose every couple of days," Wei WuXian continued.

"It wasn't me," Gu LiJuan said suddenly. "I can't swim," she said. "If, as you say, these corpses were kept in the Li lotus lake and I had to swim down to cut them loose, that's impossible for me."



Li HeTang nodded slowly. "It's true, LiJuan really can't swim," he said. "I, uh, I played a trick on her when we were kids and dragged her in the lake, and she almost drowned," he said sheepishly. "She's refused to go near water ever since."

"There, even he says so," Gu LiJuan said. "There's no way I could go near that lake much less swim in it."

"You've got servants," Wei WuXian said.

"You can question any of them—none have gone near that lake," Gu LiJuan said with a sort of foolproof confidence that meant she was telling the truth. Neither she nor her servants had gone anywhere near the lotus lake. She may have procured the corpses, but she hadn't been the one to cut them loose.

"What's there?" Nie HuaiSang suddenly yelped, pointing at the lotus lake. "A corpse! A corpse!"

Everyone's attention suddenly turned to the water, and in one fluid motion, Song ZiChen flew over to the lotus lake, yanking something from the shallows of the water. Though a moment ago, there was only the calm floating lotus pads and reeds at the side of the lake, a loud yelp was heard, and then a small child, kicking and screaming, was being dragged out of the lake, dripping water.

Wei WuXian looked over at Nie HuaiSang, narrowing his eyes, though Nie HuaiSang's whole attention seemed to be stuck on the child.

"Oh thank goodness, it's just a child," Nie HuaiSang said with visible relief.

"Let go of me you son-of-a-bitch! Asshole coward of a motherfucker! Let go!" The child screeched, letting out a stream of profanity that made Wei WuXian's ears itch, and he just hoped A-Yuan and JingYi wouldn't be asking him too much about those insults later.

"Good eyes," Wei WuXian said as Song ZiChen let the sopping wet child drop to the ground in the middle of their group. When she scrambled upright, Wei WuXian saw a girl around five or six years old, maybe around the same age Wei WuXian had been when his own parents had died, leaving him on the streets, and it was clear that this child must be in a similar situation. She held a stick and her eyes were milky white like those of the blind. The pale clothes she wore were too big, dragging on her thin frame and rolled up several times at the ankles and wrists. Even as she stood there, a puddle was quickly forming at her wet feet.

"Who are you?" she shouted, brandishing her walking stick like a weapon. "Do you like bullying blind kids?" she accused. "A lot of good you high-and-mighty cultivators are good for!"

Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow. "How do you know we're cultivators?" he asked.

"What—obviously you are," the girl said. "Who else would come investigate anyway? They've been talking about getting cultivators from YunmengJiang to investigate!"

"Hmm..." Wei WuXian said. "How do you know so much about what's going on at the Li tavern?" he asked.

"I—I beg around here, obviously," the child blustered. "Have you got something against blind people? Just because I'm blind, doesn't mean I'm deaf or stupid."

Wei WuXian grinned. "The little miss obviously isn't deaf or stupid," he said. "But I think you are guilty of haunting this inn and making these rumors worse." He folded his arms, considering the small child. "I also don't think you're blind."

"Says who?" the girl demanded. "Does it look like my eyes can see?"

"How would a blind girl know what her own eyes look like?" Wei WuXian said.

"I—obviously people have told me," the girl snapped.

"You also seem to know exactly where everyone is standing," Wei WuXian said. "You haven't gone anywhere near that corpse even though it's right next to you." He gestured at Xue Yang's frozen corpse.

"Because of the smell, stupid," the girl answered.

"Of course the biggest piece of evidence is that you can clearly swim," Wei WuXian said. "And swim well enough to cut this jieje's corpses loose from the bottom of the lake."

Gu LiJuan had stayed silent through the entire exchange but had gone pale when the girl was discovered.

"I think you probably picked this girl up when you were digging for corpses," Wei WuXian said. "Or maybe the little girl found you digging and offered her services. Either way, you came up with a plan together for this girl to hide at the Li inn, diving down every few days to release another corpse. At some point, people must have started catching sight of you, so you pretended to be a ghost," he continued. "It helped spread more rumors about the Li inn too."

He glanced at the girl. "What happened? Did you panic when you saw all the corpses come out of the lake on their own? You went there to hide?"

"You have no proof!" the girl said.

Wei WuXian grinned. "Lan Zhan, let's catch her and bring her back to Lotus Pier," he said. "I think a little chat with Sect Leader Jiang will loosen your tongue..."

Gu LiJuan looked like she wanted to protest, but couldn't speak up for the girl if she didn't want to convict herself.

"Little girl, just tell the truth and nothing will happen," Xiao XingChen said.

"He says he's going to torture me!" the little girl wailed.

"She won't be tortured," Wei WuXian said. "Even Jiang Cheng wouldn't do that to a blind child," he said. "But if she isn't, and he finds out..." He gave her his most evil grin. "Well, Zidian is really something else, but if purple lightning doesn't scare you, then his dogs..."

The girl turned to look between Wei WuXian's evil grin and Xiao XingChen—at least Wei WuXian thought she did though it was impossible to tell with her eyes—and then she darted to hide behind his little shishu.

“Daozhang, help me,” the girl begged. “The scary mister wants to feed me to dogs!” she wailed. Though she seemed to want to hide behind Gu LiJuan, she was smart enough to continue the farce, turning instead to Xiao XingChen.

Xiao XingChen, looking victimized, sighed. “Child, just tell the truth and nothing will happen.”

The girl was clearly crying crocodile tears as she clutched Xiao Xingchen's robe. “Promise,” she said.

If they had really been on opposite sides, though Xiao XingChen and Song ZiChen were both cultivators with strong foundation and skill, when it came down to experience, they could not compete against Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi. So it was amusing to watch Xiao XingChen grimace and lie through his teeth that he would protect her against the big, bad Wei WuXian.

“If you tell the truth, ZiChen and I will be here,” Xiao XingChen said. “And see that man?” He pointed to Lan WangJi.

The girl's face automatically tilted up to follow his finger, and Wei WuXian had to give it to Xiao XingChen that he had tricked such a reaction out of her so naturally. “That's Hanguang-Jun. He helps the weak, takes any case regardless of honor, and goes where the chaos is.”

Although Xiao XingChen couldn't have left the mountain for long, apparently Lan WangJi's reputation as a justice-bringer and light-bearer spread just as far as Wei WuXian's own rotten reputation.

“He won't let anyone bully you if you just tell us the truth,” Xiao XingChen said.

The girl looked skeptical, so Wei WuXian added, “It's true. I, the great Yiling Patriarch, am completely helpless to Hanguang-Jun,” he said. “He's completely defeated me, heart, soul, and body.”

Song ZiChen choked and Xiao XingChen's face began to go pink.

Lan WangJi coughed. “Wei Ying...”

“What? The great Hanguang-Jun defeated me. I'm telling the truth,” Wei WuXian said. “And now it's your turn, little girl.”

“My name is A-Qing, not little girl!” the girl said.

“A-Qing then,” Wei WuXian said. “Tell the truth. If you haven't done anything bad, Jiang Cheng won't be unreasonable even at trial,” he said.

“Fine, it's as you said,” Gu LiJuan spoke up, just as Wei WuXian had hoped. She didn't seem like a bad person, and though she had masterminded this entire situation, he had counted on her being unable to

watch Wei WuXian continue to bully A-Qing. “Let her go, she’s just a girl I picked up in Yi City. I asked her to help—”

“Gu-Jiejie, don’t tell that bully anything!” A-Qing said. “He has no proof!”

“It’s all right,” Gu LiJuan said. “My family is going to lose face no matter what. I may as well tell the truth. It’s just as you said, Young Master Wei,” she said. “I came up with the plan to put corpses in the lotus lake after the first one was found. It’s working—my parents are planning to meet with the Li’s tomorrow to break our engagement,” she said and gave a bitter smile. “If you’d come one day later, it would have all been over.”

“Hold up,” Li HeTang interrupted. “Don’t I get a say here? No one can break this engagement without my permission,” he said. “You’re always so impulsive, LiJuan.”

“I’m impulsive? You’re the one who should think things over first!” Gu LiJuan burst out before apparently thinking better of it and taking a deep breath. “Why on earth do you still want to marry me?” she said. “We’ll both be happier this way—you can sleep with as many courtesans as you’d like. I can—”

“That’s what I’m trying to say,” Li HeTang said, exasperated. “Where are you getting courtesans from? I haven’t cheated on you! LiJuan, we’ve been remodeling the second story guest rooms these past few months,” he said. “Didn’t anyone tell you? You know I’ve always been interested in architecture so my father put me in charge of the project—I’ve been redesigning the whole thing and we’ve been starting the construction. How have you not noticed?”

“Construction?” Gu LiJuan echoed. “You’ve been working on construction up there?”

“Well yeah, if I was going to be entertaining courtesans, I’m not stupid enough to do it at my own family’s inn,” Li HeTang said. “And especially not now,” he added. “Who would want courtesans this early in the day?”

Gu LiJuan seemed to have been shocked silent. “B-But A-Qing never told me...”

“What’s a courtesan?” A-Qing asked.

As precocious as she was, A-Qing was still just a five-year-old girl, after all. As street-smart as she was, apparently, she hadn’t learned about the red light district yet.

“I-I—this was all a misunderstanding?” Gu LiJuan asked, going pale.

Li HeTang smiled then. “Of course. Do you think a courtesan would look twice at a face like mine?” he asked.

“Then I’ve broken our engagement for nothing?” Gu LiJuan said. “My parents will be furious—I-I’ll have to join a nunnery. I can never show my face—”

Li HeTang laughed. “LiJuan, are you saying you changed your mind? You still want to marry me?” he asked.

“You still want to marry me?” Gu LiJuan echoed, staring at Li HeTang.

“Of course,” Li HeTang said. “My feelings for you have never changed. Remember what I said when I almost accidentally drowned you? I’d protect you for the rest of my life to make up for it,” he said.

“But I almost ruined your business,” Gu LiJuan said. Her voice, just like her protests, were clearly getting weaker.

“My family has run this inn for generations,” Li HeTang said dismissively. “A few corpses isn’t enough to ruin us,” he said. “Besides, who better to rebuild our reputation than a clever wife,” he said, taking a step closer to her and holding out his hand.

As he did, though, maybe it was the wind or maybe it was resentful energy that had been slowly accumulating around Xue Yang’s corpse, but the talisman Gu LiJuan had slapped on the back of his head suddenly came loose.

Xue Yang immediately turned to attack the nearest person—Song ZiChen.

“Watch out!” Nie HuaiSang yelled.

Song ZiChen’s eyes were wide, his hand going to his sword. But Xue Yang had realized a faster way to reach a victim wasn’t by hopping, but by his unbound arms. Instead of trying to hop to Song ZiChen, he reached up, aiming for Song ZiChen’s face.

A flash of white darted between them, and Wei WuXian heard a pained cry.

“XingChen!”

Lan WangJi’s sword was there in the next instant, severing Xue Yang’s arm—the one that had punctured a hole straight through Xiao XingChen’s side.

The corpse screeched, even as Wei WuXian subdued it with his flute.

And then, to his surprise, two small figures ran forward, and A-Yuan and Lan JingYi slapped the discarded frozen corpse talisman back onto Xue Yang’s single-armed corpse.

Wei WuXian met Lan WangJi’s eyes, and with a quick nod, they both began to play—Wei WuXian on his flute, and Lan WangJi on his guqin. Between the two of them, the musical array expanded over Xue Yang’s corpse and pressed down on it, forcing his soul out of the body.

Nie HuaiSang was, for once, ready with a spirit-sealing pouch, and as soon as Xue Yang’s soul left, Nie HuaiSang neatly caught it in his pouch and tied it up. “Got it!” he said.

“How is he?” Spirit contained, Wei WuXian turned to the injured Xiao XingChen. Red was quickly blooming over his white robes, and Song ZiChen was holding him, passing spiritual energy to him.

“Let me look,” Wei WuXian said, crouching down to pull aside Xiao XingChen’s robes. Xue Yang’s arm was still halfway through Xiao XingChen’s side and Wei WuXian grimaced. “This is going to hurt,” he announced, and before anyone could react, he reached in and yanked that arm out.

Xiao XingChen went white with pain and Song ZiChen glared at Wei WuXian. “You—”

“Me what? Your spiritual energy isn’t doing him any good with that arm still in there,” Wei WuXian said. “He’ll heal much more quickly now—well, if you keep passing him spiritual energy,” he said. “Are you just going to let him bleed?”

“You—” Song ZiChen looked like he wanted to protest the rough treatment more, but another pained gasp from Xiao XingChen had him quickly pressing his hands to the wound, passing spiritual energy directly into him. “Why did you do that?” he said even as he worked. “This is going to leave a bad scar.”

Xiao XingChen gave him a faint, pained smile. “He was trying to take your eyes,” he said. “A cultivator can live with a few scars, but you’ll need eyes if we’re to start our own sect.”

“Daozhang!” A-Qing cried, interrupting the moment as she dove to hold Xiao XingChen’s hand. “I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have put him in the lake!”

“Lucky for you two, the best doctor in the cultivation world happens to be at Lotus Pier right now,” Wei WuXian said. “Let’s get him to Wen Qing—she’ll be able to treat him.”

“Mm,” Lan WangJi agreed.

“To Lotus Pier? I’ll arrange for transportation right now,” Li HeTang said, calling for a few of his stunned servants.

“As for you two...” Wei WuXian looked over at A-Yuan and Lan JingYi. The two children looked nervously up at him. “What you did was very dangerous,” he said. “You could have been hurt.”

“Well done,” Lan WangJi said.

A-Yuan and Lan JingYi both stared at him and broke into wide, delighted grins. “Hanguang-Jun said we did a good job!” Lan JingYi said loudly.

Wei WuXian smiled. “Yes, yes, that was good thinking using that talisman, the two of you,” he said. “It looks like you’re well on your way to becoming good cultivators.”

It wasn’t until they had all arrive back at Lotus Pier, that Wei WuXian remembered Nie HuaiSang.

Upon arriving, Xiao XingChen had immediately been rushed off to Wen Qing, Song ZiChen, and, surprisingly, A-Qing, hovering over him. Li HeTang and Gu LiJuan had meanwhile bid their goodbyes, planning to go speak to both sets of their parents to sort out the lotus lake complications, though, from the look of things, the two were well on their way to making up.

Since most people at Lotus Pier had been working through the day on wedding preparations, and Wei WuXian's own party was tired after the day, a light dinner was served to everyone in Lotus Pier's Great Hall, now lined with small sitting tables for the guests they had.

Wei WuXian pulled one of the servants aside for a few special instructions and was satisfied that he and Lan wangJi were seated together as usual, A-Yuan and Lan JingYi given their own small table to their left, and Nie HuaiSang to their right.

Wei WuXian waited until Nie HuaiSang had already drunk three cups of liquor before he started with the questions.

"Nie-xiong, don't you think today's case was a bit strange?" Wei WuXian asked casually.

"How so?" Nie HuaiSang asked, cheerfully helping himself to the dishes set before him.

"Just a bit of a coincidence, isn't it," Wei WuXian said. "You happened to run into Gu LiJuan and then happened to run into us. If not for that, I probably wouldn't have even heard of the Li lotus lake." And without Wei WuXian's presence, those corpses beneath the lake would have stayed slumbering there quietly until A-Qing cut them loose.

Tomorrow, Wei WuXian would be moving to the Cloud Recesses. By the time he came back to Yunmeng, it would be months later, and Gu LiJuan's engagement would have been long broken. He probably wouldn't have heard about this incident at all if not for Nie HuaiSang's coincidental appearance.

"It's a small world, a small world," Nie HuaiSang said, waving him away. "Anyway, the case is over. Let's have a drink," he said, pouring himself another cup of liquor and urging Wei WuXian to do the same.

Wei WuXian watched him for a moment and then smiled and poured himself a cup. "Nie-xiong, I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit here. If not for you being unable to find the right talisman in your pocket, Maiden Gu would never have used her talisman, giving us proof she was behind it," he said.

"Oh no, you know how weak of a cultivator I am," Nie HuaiSang said. "I really just couldn't find it. I'm no good under pressure."

"Maybe not, but you were also the one who noticed A-Qing in the lake," Wei WuXian said. Though Nie HuaiSang had claimed it was a corpse at the time, he'd noticed something in the lake. Wei WuXian wondered just how much he actually did know behind the case. "And come to think of it, back at Koi Tower, how exactly did you and Jiang Cheng escape that time? Weren't you all heavily under guard?"

Nie HuaiSang looked a bit surprised at the sudden change of subject, but he waved a hand. "It's a bit embarrassing," he said. "I have a delicate stomach, and the food they were giving us, well, it certainly wasn't the best," he said. "I couldn't very well have indigestion right in front of Madam Jin, could I, so the guards let me out. Next thing I know, your brother is beating up the guards, and after that, it would definitely look like I was trying to escape, and I didn't want to end up beaten for it," he said. "Can you imagine me? Being beaten? So of course I tagged along with Sect Leader Jiang. Who knew I'd get caught again."

While Nie HuaiSang's words seemed to make sense on the surface, beneath the dismissiveness, it didn't actually fit together as well as he wanted Wei WuXian to think.

"And the Tang delivery boys?" Wei WuXian asked.

"Who?" Nie HuaiSang asked.

"The two you overheard talking that day after the Koi Tower Massacre," Wei WuXian said. "They were discussing how they'd brought the beast core to the tower, and you were there the entire time," he said. "You knew they had evidence against Jin GuangYao. You knew that Jin GuangYao was holding your brother somewhere but you weren't strong enough to force his hand, so you escaped Koi Tower with Jiang Cheng, faked returning to the Unclean Realm, but actually went to the Tang service posts—probably several judging by how long it took you to find the Tang boys," he said. "You must have dropped a few hints to them about finding Lan Zhan and I, and telling us about the beast core."

Nie HuaiSang laughed. "Go ahead and ask them then," he said. "I'm sure they'll say they've never met me before." He paused. "Well, unless they remember me from your sister's wedding."

If Wei WuXian's hypothesis was correct, Nie HuaiSang would have been careful to disguise himself. The Tang delivery boys would not recognize him. In any case, Nie HuaiSang's scheme had worked and Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had uncovered Nie MingJue's whereabouts and saved him. As for the case today...

"With Koi Tower, you just wanted to find your brother," Wei WuXian said. "With the Li lotus lake..." If Nie HuaiSang really was the sort of man who could so intricately plot a series of events this way, then there was no way he wasn't keeping track of all the players after the events. Jin GuangYao, who had been taken to the Unclean Realm, was easy to keep an eye on. So was Su She, who had been incarcerated in the Jin dungeons the way he'd forced Jin ZiXun to be. The only remaining person who had played a part in Nie MingJue's disappearance and near-murder was Xue Yang, who had died in the landborne abyss. Once his body had been buried, Nie HuaiSang had probably kept ears in Yueyang to report to him should anything abnormal happen, so when the graverobbing began and Xue yang's body disappeared, Nie HuaiSang must have also tracked it here to Yunmeng.

He hadn't really done much apart from involve Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi, ensuring that Xue Yang's corpse was once more taken care of. But this time, Nie MingJue was in no danger. None of them would have been if Nie HuaiSang hadn't brought Wei WuXian into it in the first place. If Nie MingJue had died, Wei WuXian thought, even death wouldn't be able to stop Nie HuaiSang's revenge.

Wei WuXian lifted his cup. "Nie-xiong, you've really outdone yourself," he said. "Cheers." He tilted back the cup and drank.

Nie HuaiSang smiled. "I don't know what you're talking about, Wei-xiong. I don't know. I really don't know," he said.

By the time dinner had concluded, A-Yuan and Lan JingYi had nodded off, and Wei WuXian found both him and Lan WangJi each carrying one of the children, asleep after the excitement of the day.



With the quiet sound of the water along the piers, the gentle glow of lanterns lighting their way, Wei WuXian sighed, enjoying the peacefulness of this moment, made better by knowing they'd have so many more.

"I wish you could stay with me tonight," Wei WuXian said as they walked up to Wei WuXian's room, mindful of A-Yuan in his arms and speaking quietly so as not to wake him.

Lan WangJi, with the other guests, would be staying at the guest quarters tonight before they all rose early tomorrow to prepare for the wedding.

"One last day," Lan WangJi said. He shifted JingYi in his arms to reach out and brush a strand of hair away from Wei WuXian's face, gentle.

Wei WuXian smiled and reached out to take Lan JingYi from Lan WangJi as well. "They can stay with me tonight and keep me company," he said. "You should go get some rest."

Lan WangJi nodded. Still, with arms free now, he lingered.

Wei WuXian tilted up his head and Lan WangJi obliged, leaning into kiss him. First once, tender and brief, then a second time, longer and lingering.

Wei WuXian sighed when they parted again. "Then, see you tomorrow," he said.

Lan WangJi pressed their foreheads together briefly before he finally pulled away. "See you tomorrow, Wei Ying."

Notes:

my laptop screen broke like 2/3 the way through this chapter and i had to finish the rest on my phone...and now i'm praying apple store can fix it or i'll have to buy a new one ;o; apologies for potential weird autocorrects in advance i'll do editing later when i have time...

Chapter 24: epilogue pt2: and so, it started with a wedding

Notes:

to skip the ppp in this chapter, just go to the next line-break after it starts!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Chapter Text

Wei WuXian woke gasping for breath. When his eyes finally focused in the dark of the too-early morning, he realized it was because two heavy children were sitting on his chest.

"Wake up, Xian-Gege!" A-Yuan leaned over to shout right in his ear.

"Curse you, GusuLan sleeping schedule," Wei WuXian groaned. He tried to flip over, but the kids wouldn't let him.

JingYi bounced on his stomach. "Xian-Gege, you're going to be late for your wedding!"

"No shouting in the Cloud Recesses," Wei WuXian said.

"We're not in the Cloud Recesses!" Lan JingYi said cheerfully.

"Then why did you two wake up so early?" Wei WuXian said, squinting at them as he propped himself up on his elbows. "Get off, you're so heavy," he said. "My waist..."

A-Yuan and Lan JingYi obediently scrambled back off of him and Wei WuXian sighed as he sat up, giving up on sleep because apparently these GusuLan children already had that eerily accurate GusuLan internal clock set, and if they weren't asleep, Wei WuXian clearly wasn't going to be able to sleep either.

"My last morning sleeping in and you two wake me like this." Wei WuXian gave an exaggerated sigh and pout.

"But Xian-Gege is marrying Lan Er-Gege today!" A-Yuan looked effervescent at the idea, beaming at him.

"Right I'm marrying..." The realization sank in as he came fully awake. "I'm marrying Lan Er-Gege. I'm marrying Lan Zhan today!" Wei WuXian threw back the blankets and scrambled out of bed. "All right, kids, let's get breakfast and start getting ready!"

Marriage customs technically started the moment Lan WangJi proposed and Wei WuXian accepted. There was the tedious process of choosing the most auspicious date for them, all the gifts Lan WangJi had to choose for him, gifts their families had to exchange, tea pouring ceremonies, so on and so forth. And those were just the traditional wedding rites that didn't include the sect marriage traditions. Each clan had their own customs, and GusuLan wouldn't be GusuLan if they didn't have twice as many as everyone else. Though there were enough rules to make his head spin, Wei WuXian had gone through them all, in part because he got to marry Lan WangJi, and in part because he really did want to bring honor to his husband's clan—if it took following all of these rules, then he was happy to suffer through them.

Of course in Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi's case, they were both men and so it had gotten a bit confusing. Cutsleeves, while not uncommon, were never married into family since a cutsleeve marriage could never produce legitimate heirs, which was always a clan's primary concern. The first time around, the reason the Lan clan had agreed to the terms of their arranged marriage was because Lan WangJi was the second-born and therefore it wasn't so critical that he have heirs unlike Lan XiChen. Even then, there had been quite a bit of protest amongst the elders.

"Why did they agree to you marrying me in that case?" Wei WuXian asked when they'd been talking about it one day when Lan WangJi was visiting. "I know they agreed to let me into the clan to keep a leash on the terrible Yiling Patriarch, and it's not that I'm not happy that it ended up being you, but any random GusuLan disciple could have married me and it would have served the purpose."

He heard a sharp inhale of breath and Lan WangJi's hand, which had up until then, been wrapped loosely and gently around his own, tightened.

Wei WuXian had said it absently—just a simple question he'd been curious about—but when he looked at Lan WangJi's face, he began to grin. "It couldn't be you were jealous?"

Lan WangJi's brow had furrowed into a small frown.

Wei WuXian waved a finger from his free hand at Lan WangJi, and he felt the grip around his other hand tightened. "Lan Zhan, Lan Er-Gege, I can't believe the great Hanguang-Jun can still drink vinegar," he said, delighted.

"Wei Ying..." Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Is that really the reason? Second Master Lan wouldn't let anyone else marry me even if it was an arranged marriage?" He leaned over to prop his head up on Lan WangJi's shoulder, smiling at him. "Jiang Cheng told me you didn't want to marry me at first, though. He said it took awhile for you to agree to even marry me. If you already liked me so much back then, why didn't you want to marry me?"

"I wanted you to be happy," Lan WangJi said seriously, threading their fingers together as he met his gaze. "I wanted you to marry for love, and back then, you—"

"I loved you," Wei WuXian interrupted before he could finish that sentence. "I've always loved you, Lan Zhan—even if I wasn't aware of it yet, I think since we met, I was always destined to fall for you. I always wanted to marry you. It can't be anyone but you." Thinking back now, Wei WuXian had been excited, in his own way, to get married to Lan WangJi though he'd passed it off as mischief—he wanted to see how the uptight Hanguang-Jun would react to seeing Wei WuXian in makeup and a veil, how he'd behave seeing Wei WuXian's things strewn about the Jingshi, how he'd be in the marriage bed. Of course, Lan WangJi had given Wei WuXian barely a response back then, living up to both his reputation of being a gentleman while foiling Wei WuXian's mischief.

Wei WuXian wondered, if he had been made to marry anyone else, if he would have reacted so calmly, if he would have been able to adapt so quickly. But with all the things that had happened after, he knew that despite misreading all of Lan WangJi's attempts to help him, things had only hurt so bad because he wanted his husband to support him, to stand on his side. If it had been someone he didn't care about, their opinion wouldn't have mattered so much. It was only because it was Lan WangJi, that it did.

Lan WangJi leaned forward to kiss Wei WuXian once on his forehead, and then his nose, and when Wei WuXian whined, finally his mouth.

If it had been anyone else, Wei WuXian didn't know if he'd take being put in the position of the bride as well either. Since the circumstances of their first arranged marriage were so particular, he had to marry into the Lan household instead of taking a wife into the Jiang clan. This time around, the circumstances were different, but since Wei WuXian fully intended to stay in the Cloud Recesses with Lan WangJi, for all practical purposes, he was still marrying into the Lan clan.

Thankfully, since Wei WuXian was a man, there were certain concessions given to him.

For example, his wedding clothes. Traditional bridal robes were incredibly ornate, commissioned years in advance sometimes, and the wealthier a clan, the more they were expected to do. Jiang YanLi's bridal robes had been something else to behold, gold and red, so ornate that she could hardly walk beneath all the fabric and embroidery. While Wei WuXian enjoyed beauty as much as any other man—heavens knew the moment he set eyes on Lan WangJi, he'd been caught—he much preferred robes he could move around in, the more comfortable the better. But after they had rescued the Jin family, Madam Jin had insisted on shouldering the cost of commissioning the couple's clothes for the event. There had been one heated debate about the styles they would wear, which Wei WuXian had won. So in the end, he and Lan WangJi would both be dressed in the male fashion, though he was pretty sure they had embellished the designs on his robes since there was far more ornamentation and embroidery and beading than he was pretty sure went on an average groom's robes. Of course, coming from the Jin clan, that could also simply be what the peacocks preferred.

When he'd first been fitted for the robes some weeks ago, he'd decided to bear with the ostentatiousness if it meant he'd look beautiful for Lan WangJi. Now that he was trying to put them on himself, he regretted ever letting the Jin clan design these robes.

"How the hell is this supposed to go on?" Jiang Cheng groaned, waving a piece of fabric at Wei WuXian who was busy trying to tie on a waist-piece correctly.

"Do I look like a clothing expert?" Wei WuXian answered. "Anyway help me with this first— why did you agree to let Jin ZiXuan commission these? You know that dumb peacock has the worst taste in everything except Shijie! This is going to take forever for Lan WangJi to get me out of."

"I hope so," Jiang Cheng muttered, tugging at Wei WuXian's waist to tighten the piece there. "This isn't working, I'm calling A-Jie," he said.

"Wait—"

"A-Jie! Help!" Jiang Cheng called.

"I'm coming."

Jiang YanLi came out from the other side of the dressing divider, trailed by A-Yuan and Lan JingYi whom she'd been dressing on the other side while Wei WuXian was getting ready. Jiang YanLi had already been asleep by the time Wei WuXian returned last night, but she had already been awake and had immediately sent him into a heated bath while she offered to watch the children.

She was, of course, already dressed in ornate golden robes as befitting her station now, and glowed. It had been a few months now since she found out she was with child, and though it was hard to tell beneath all the robes, Wei WuXian was sure he could see the bump of his future nephew.

She was struggling with a heavy lacquered box, and Jiang Cheng let go of Wei WuXian to help her bring it to a table already littered with pieces of clothing.

"A-Xian, come here," Jiang YanLi said once her hands were free.

Wei WuXian pouted and came to her, holding out the pieces of his robes, smiling as she took them from him.

“A-Yuan, A-Yi, come help hold these.” Jiang YanLi handed off different pieces of Wei WuXian’s clothes to the children to hold and began helping him put on one piece at a time. The kids had already been dressed in little red robes, more color than Wei WuXian had ever seen either of them wear, and Lan JingYi had already acquired a stain on one sleeve.

Wei WuXian turned when she directed him, until slowly the outfit was assembled. “Am I done?” He asked once the last of the robes were on and tried to go to the mirror to take a look.

“Not yet. Sit, A-Xian,” Jiang YanLi said, seating him on a chair as she gestured for Jiang Cheng to bring the box.

When she opened it, Wei WuXian’s eyes widened. Inside was an ornate headdress with matching jewelry, made entirely of gold and precious jewels so brilliant the entire thing seemed to cast light in the room when she opened it.

“This—”

“The rest of your gift from the Jin clan,” Jiang YanLi said, smiling as she began running a brush through Wei WuXian’s hair. Her touch was gentle, working out any tangles until the brush glided smoothly.

But while the jewelry was beautiful and clearly expensive, designed to show off wealth and the importance of the one wearing it, Wei WuXian hesitated.

“Shijie, I’m really thankful for this, but...”

“It doesn’t suit your taste?” Jiang YanLi smiled. “I did tell ZiXuan it’s a bit much.”

Wei WuXian began shaking his head and stopped again when he felt the brush tug. “No, it’s just that Lan Zhan gave me this...” He reached for the hairpin Lan WangJi had given him the day before, almost lost on the table beneath all the other things strewn there. “I thought, I thought he’d like to see me wear it.”

Jiang YanLi paused in her brushing to take the pin from him, turning it in her hand. “Second Master Lan gave this to you?” she asked.

Wei WuXian nodded. “He had it made for me. He said it was made by the same artisans who made the one we gave to you.” He glanced up at the lotus-shaped pin in Jiang YanLi’s hair.

“He commissioned this for you?” Jiang YanLi repeated, eyes widening. “His own design?”

Wei WuXian nodded again.

“Oh A-Xian,” Jiang YanLi sighed, a soft smile coming over her face. “Second Master Lan really does treasure you.”

The sudden, blunt statement even said in as gentle a tone as Jiang YanLi made Wei WuXian began to blush, feeling his whole face heat up. "I-It's just a hairpin," he said.

Jiang YanLi held it out in front of him, turning it so he could see the flower there. Wei WuXian could already tell the quality of it when he'd worn it the day before, but now seeing it again up close, Lan WangJi had truly chosen a brilliant craftsman to fashion it so the gentian bloom looked almost real, the jade pieces cut so finely that they were nearly translucent and designed so that no matter which direction it was turned, it caught the light by some angle.

Jiang YanLi smiled. "I know you know the language of flowers, A-Xian," she said gently as she handed it to him and began pinning up his hair. "Didn't you gift Second Master Lan peonies before?"

Wei WuXian could feel the blush spreading across his face as he twirled the pin in his hand, trying to distract himself. "That wasn't—I just—he looks nice, doesn't he? Why can't I admire him?" Educated in the Six Arts, of course Wei WuXian knew peonies were the king of all flowers, bringing good luck, prosperity, and, he remembered, a happy marriage. He'd drawn it for Lan WangJi before, gifted it to him twice, but back then, he could never have predicted actually marrying Lan WangJi. The last time Wei WuXian had given one to him was shortly before Wei WuXian had found Wen Qing, saved Wen Ning, when he'd been surprised Lan WangJi even came up the stairs of that inn to speak to him. That time, the only meaning of the peony that had stuck in his mind was that of a reluctant parting.

The gentian, he'd simply thought of as the flower surrounding that little cottage in the Cloud Recesses. One that Lan WangJi probably associated with sadness—of the last time he'd seen his mother, of the last time he'd left Wei WuXian. But with Jiang YanLi's reminder, the true meaning of this flower came back to him. The gentian symbolized passion and charm, but most importantly...

"Intrinsic worth," Jiang YanLi said, smiling as she bent to twist the gentian into Wei WuXian's hair. "That's what your husband sees in you."

"Shijie..." Wei WuXian felt his throat locking up as he wondered if Lan WangJi had chosen this flower for him knowing exactly what it symbolized, but then, this was Lan Zhan, of course he knew.

Even back then, the first time Lan WangJi had put that flower in his hair, he'd said, "It suits you."

Wei WuXian blinked back the wetness from his eyes, suddenly wanting, more than anything, to see Lan WangJi's face. He wanted to say thank you for seeing him, for caring for him, for loving him through all the circumstances of Wei WuXian's life, that regardless of who Wei WuXian was, even when the world was turning against him, Lan WangJi was willing to protect him, to stand by him, to support him because he saw who Wei WuXian was at his very core.

"He's right, you know," Jiang YanLi said, putting the finishing touches to his hair. She cupped his face and smiled. "You're beautiful, A-Xian," she said, and helped him stand to face the mirror.

Wei WuXian was surprised to see the person he saw staring back at him in the glass. Unlike his first wedding where a bit of rouge was the most ornamentation he'd had, the man looking back at him now truly looked fit to be wed to the prestigious Second Jade of Lan. He was dressed head to toe in rich, red fabric with gold threads patterning the layers. The pieces cinched around his waist accentuated a slender figure, and the folds and lengths of the robes made him look both taller and softer than usual.

The gold embroidery shone with light, making him seem almost to glow. The gentian hairpin, Jiang YanLi had worked into his hair, giving that flash of color in tresses of black, so that despite the rest of his outfit, he still looked like himself—like a better, happier, more content version of himself the way he felt when he was around Lan WangJi.

Despite having technically already been married, the months of engagement now, enough bridal gifts to fill YunmengJiang's storehouses, it wasn't until now that he looked in the mirror, seeing himself dressed for his own wedding, that it fully hit Wei WuXian. By tonight, he would really be married.

"Xian-Gege is so pretty!" A-Yuan shouted, running straight into Wei WuXian's legs.

Wei WuXian smiled, watching his reflection change in the mirror, and then the smile grew to his regular grin as he bent, making sure not to mess up his hair or his clothes as he patted A-Yuan on the head.

"A-Yuan, be gentle with Xian-Gege today," Jiang YanLi said. "You want his wedding robes to look perfect for Lan Er-Gege, don't you?" she said.

"Mm!" A-Yuan nodded enthusiastically but let go of Wei WuXian, looking up at him with a look of awe in his eyes.

Wei WuXian grinned. "A-Yuan, can you fetch my veil?" he asked, gesturing to the piece of red cloth that had been draped on a spare chair.

A-Yuan trotted over and brought it back, and Wei WuXian unfolded it. Although it wasn't nearly the quality of everything else he was wearing that had been specially commissioned by YunmengJiang and GusuLan and LanlingJin, and was just a slightly more expensive piece of cloth, it was one that Lan WangJi had won for him at that ring toss game so many months ago, a gift for him that the young stallkeeper had praised for being a beautiful wedding veil.

As soon as Jiang Cheng saw the cloth, he groaned. "You're not actually a bride, you idiot, are you trying to lose all face for Hanguang-Jun?" he said.

Wei WuXian stuck his tongue out at him. "Weren't you the one who said I am technically the bride?" he pointed out. It had been a particularly stupid debate he'd gotten in with Jiang Cheng some months ago when YunmengJiang and GusuLan delegates had come together to plan the wedding details were originally being settled of exactly what the procedure ought to be for it to ensure a prosperous marriage. Wei WuXian had every intention of staying in the Cloud Recesses with Lan WangJi, but with the GusuLan rules, it had been another hot topic about what the banquet would be like. When Lan QiRen said they would observe all rules, and they would hold the wedding banquet like all their other banquets—quiet and dignified, Wei WuXian had brought up having the banquet at Lotus Pier instead, maybe even sending their wedding night there if they were too drunk to fly up to the Cloud Recesses that night.

Jiang Cheng had been staunchly against that idea and insisted that since Wei WuXian was marrying into the Lan family, he was the bride and therefore the wedding and all festivities had to be held at the Cloud Recesses.

"I give it an hour before Lan Wangji gets too embarrassed to deal with you and kicks you out again," Jiang Cheng said. "You're going to be the first 'bride' to ever get divorced before even making it to the marriage bed."

"Hah, you're underestimating how much Lan Zhan wants to get me in bed," Wei WuXian said proudly. "If not for you—"

"You shut up, Wei WuXian!" Jiang Cheng turned a brilliant shade of red.

Wei WuXian grinned and held out the cloth to Jiang Yanli. "Shijie, can you put it on for me?" he requested.

Jiang Yanli laughed and took the cloth from him, carefully draping it over his head so it hung over his face.

"You know this means you won't get to be unveiled until after the wedding, right? Not at the banquet," Jiang Cheng said.

"It's not a completely traditional wedding anyway," Wei WuXian said. "I'm not actually a bride—"

"You just said—"

"I just want to surprise Lan Zhan, but not even Uncle is going to stop me from having fun at my wedding banquet," Wei WuXian said, and smiled, touching the veil. "He won this for me—when else am I going to wear it for him?"

"You—" Jiang Cheng looked like he wanted to knock the veil off of Wei WuXian but at the last minute, he sighed loudly and rolled his eyes. "You're Lan Wangji's problem now. God knows why he wants you."

Wei WuXian waggled his eyebrows. "I'm great at—"

"You shut up! Don't be disgusting in front of A-Jie!" Jiang Cheng shouted.

"I was just going to say I'm great at cooking," Wei WuXian said with a fake pout.

Jiang Cheng let out an offensively skeptical snort.

While the cloth was actually too thin to be a proper veil, the type that should be made of the finest red silk, draping over a bride's entire head so that no one could see her until her husband on their wedding night, Wei WuXian was not a woman and he really only wanted to wear this veil first, because Lan Wangji had given it to him, and second, to see Lan Wangji's face when he saw Wei WuXian dressed like this. So all things considered, he was quite glad that it was thin enough for him to be able to see through even if it tinted the whole world pink.

"I bet you get banned within a month if you try to cook at the Cloud Recesses kitchens," Jiang Cheng said.

"You're on," Wei WuXian answered. "Lan Zhan won't let them ban me from anything," he said proudly.



"You two disgust me," Jiang Cheng said.

Wei WuXian beamed at him. "And it's all thanks to you, dear shidi," he said. "If it weren't for you, I probably wouldn't have married Lan WangJi for another thirteen years."

"If you're grateful, stop being disgusting and hurry it up. You're going to be late to your own wedding," Jiang Cheng grumbled.

Wei WuXian jolted up, his veil fluttering as he did. "Is he already ready?" he asked, heart speeding up.

"Who? Lan WangJi?" Jiang Cheng asked. "Did you forget when the GusuLan waking time is? He's been ready for awhile now. Do you know how long it took your kids to wake you up? I didn't even have to come up with any gate crashing obstacles for him—you're doing well enough yourself."

Wei WuXian stumbled upright. Traditionally, the groom would pick up the bride at her house though he'd usually encounter a series of obstacles he had to pass before getting to her. In their particular case, Wei WuXian was pretty sure he and Lan WangJi had dealt with more than enough obstacles by now. "You're just scared Lan WangJi will kill you if you try to stand between us."

"I'm scared I'll throw up if I see you two gush all over each other any more than you already do," Jiang Cheng answered. "It figures the only time you'll hurry is for Second Master Lan."

"A-Cheng, be nice," Jiang YanLi said, smiling. "A-Xian is just excited to see his husband."

As Wei WuXian did his best to hurry to the Ancestral Hall without tripping over his long robes, he felt his heart speed up at the thought of seeing Lan WangJi. Soon, he thought. Soon they would be together forever.

As he turned a corner, Wei WuXian could see two figures dressed all in red waiting at the entrance of the Ancestral Hall, and he felt his breath quicken, wishing he could run but too heavy beneath all the robes to move quickly. Even so, as though sensing his presence, one of the men in red robes turned.

With the scent of lotuses from all around Lotus Pier washing over him, Wei WuXian felt his breath stolen away.

This was the first time in his life he had ever seen Lan WangJi wear anything other than his all white outfit, Wei WuXian thought faintly as he stared at him through the gauze of the veil—his husband, waiting for him just outside the Ancestral Hall, blindingly handsome in the same red and gold as Wei WuXian's own robes but arranged so neatly, not a fold out of place, that it made Wei WuXian a bit self-conscious and wondering if he should have taken a few more moments to make sure his own robes were straight.

Lan WangJi's face was, as always, composed. If Wei WuXian had been hoping for more of a reaction, he didn't get one just like the first time they had been married and he'd showed up in rouge.

Lan WangJi held out a hand to him.

When Wei WuXian put his own hand in Lan WangJi's, he felt Lan WangJi's fingers close around his own, firm and secure, like this was where Wei WuXian's hand belonged. His grip, though, was just slightly damp and warmer than usual—beneath that perfect exterior, Lan WangJi was excited and nervous too.

"You're wearing the veil," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian grinned. "Didn't you win it for me to see me in it?"

"Wish I could see your face," Lan WangJi murmured and his grip tightened a little—not exactly the shocked reaction Wei WuXian had hoped for, but a better one, one that was entirely Lan WangJi.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Soon, Lan Er-Gege," he said, squeezing Lan WangJi's fingers.

"Good morning, Young Master Wei," Lan XiChen said, smiling at him from beside Lan WangJi before exchanging the proper greetings with Jiang Cheng and Jiang YanLi.

"You look well, Zewu-Jun," Wei WuXian said.

At least, Lan XiChen looked better than the last time Wei WuXian had seen him several months ago when they'd begun discussing wedding preparations. Lan WangJi had privately told him that the only reason Lan XiChen hadn't gone into seclusion was probably because they were getting married. Wei WuXian knew how close the two brothers were, and he was privately glad that because of them, Lan XiChen could throw himself into something other than dwelling on all the things that had happened at Koi Tower. Though Wei WuXian hadn't seen him often in the past few months, Lan WangJi said that his brother had more or less appointed himself in charge of arranging the wedding banquet, and the work seemed to be helping him.

"A-Li, are you—oh, you're all here." Jin ZiXuan said, coming out from inside the Ancestral Hall. He gave Wei WuXian a disgruntled glance. "A veil? Really?" he said as he crossed over to give Jiang YanLi his arm in support.

"That's what I said," Jiang Cheng said, and gestured them all to go inside. "Come on then, let's get this over with."

As Jiang FengMian and Yu ZiYuan had passed away, the tea ceremony would take place in the Ancestral Hall. The tea itself had already been prepared on a tray set on the ground before the altar of his adoptive parents. As the others took seats by the sides, Wei WuXian knelt beside Lan WangJi who prepared the tea, carefully pouring out two cups with that elegance he always possessed.

Then Lan WangJi approached the altar and put one of the cups before Jiang FengMian's memorial, and the other before Yu ZiYuan's. They had knelt here a few months ago when Lan WangJi had asked for Wei WuXian's hand in marriage properly. And now, as Wei WuXian watched him fulfill his filial duty to his parents, he couldn't help that wave of fondness he felt as he watched.

"Father," Lan WangJi said to Uncle Jiang's tablet. "Mother," he said to Madam Yu's tablet, greeting them properly. If they had still been alive, if they had still been here, Wei WuXian could imagine the gentle smile Uncle Jiang always wore, the way he would pat Lan WangJi on the head though they were adults now, and tell him to quickly get up. He imagined Madam Yu would be relieved to be rid of Wei WuXian,

but how she would approve of Lan WangJi, the perfect example of a young cultivator with such discipline and stature that neither Wei WuXian nor Jiang Cheng possessed, and the imperial nod she would give him.

Thank you, Wei WuXian thought, sending the prayer up to the heavens and hoping they would hear him. Thank you for raising me, for giving me this family, for letting me meet Lan WangJi in this lifetime.

Lan WangJi carefully knelt again and together with Wei WuXian, they bowed to Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu.

After that, Lan WangJi continued the ceremony, serving tea to first Jiang Cheng as both Wei WuXian's brother and sect leader, and then to Jiang YanLi and Jin ZiXuan as Wei WuXian's sister and brother-in-law. This type of ceremony could sometimes take awhile, but as Wei WuXian didn't have much family left, it concluded shortly.

When they rose again, Wei WuXian took one last look around the Ancestral Hall, at the tablets of his parents, and at the rest of Lotus Pier outside. The next time he saw this place, he would be a married man who belonged to the Lan clan.

Lan WangJi offered Wei WuXian his arm again and Wei WuXian took a deep breath, taking it, as Lan WangJi led him outside again and this time toward a red wedding palanquin.

Wei WuXian hadn't been paying attention to exactly when Nie HuaiSang had come in, but as they left the Ancestral Hall, he hurried in front of them, telling the QingheNie cultivators to hurry and prepare.

"This is going to be the longest I've ever flown on a sword," Nie HuaiSang said and then brightened when he saw Jiang YanLi. "Jiang-Jie," he whined. "How big is your sedan? Do you think I could keep you company? It'll be such a long trip there."

Jiang YanLi laughed. "Oh HuaiSang, I'm already taking A-Yuan, A-Yi, and Wen Ning since they can't fly—"

"Then one more won't make a difference," Nie HuaiSang said.

"Did you hear her? I should have ordered a second sedan just for those three—A-Li needs space!" Jin ZiXuan interrupted. "Hurry and go get ready," he said. "If you dare try to get on A-Li's sedan, I'll tell MingJue-Xiong."

"You're heartless," Nie HuaiSang complained. "Then what about Wei-Xiong?" he asked hopefully.

"He can't fly either," Jiang Cheng said as Jiang YanLi called for the children to come with her.

As for the truth about Wei WuXian's golden core, the true reasons he'd turned to demonic cultivation, and this new type of dual cultivation he and Lan WangJi had invented—it had all come out a mundane evening not long after he moved back to Lotus Pier. Wei WuXian had never intended to tell Jiang Cheng the truth, but after he moved back to Lotus Pier, there had been another argument about whether or not Jiang Cheng was going to play ZhanYing for him—Lan WangJi insisted someone had to regularly, whereas Wei WuXian insisted he'd just wait until Lan WangJi visited him on weekends.

He'd won that argument by promising not to cultivate much usually—an argument made more convincing since it meant Lan WangJi had to visit him weekly.

Unfortunately, it had raised enough questions for Jiang Cheng about why he had to listen to this composition. Still, Jiang Cheng might not have figured it out if it hadn't been for Jiang YanLi coming to visit one weekend, both to help him with his wedding planning, and also to announce she was with child.

Wei WuXian had been ecstatic for his sister and eager to share the news with Lan WangJi who would be arriving later that night, and somehow or other the truth had slipped out in between good food and good drink. He'd only said something offhanded about how he'd never have thought a year ago that Lan WangJi would be both the man who saved his life and also the one he fell in love with.

And before he knew it, his siblings were grilling him like he was a war criminal. While Wei WuXian could have withstood Jiang Cheng and probably made enough lewd jokes to send him stomping away like he had all the times before, in the face of Jiang YaLi, he was defenseless. By the time the entire story had come out, Jiang YanLi had gone sheet white and Jiang Cheng kept starting sentences only to end up cursing instead.

"It's really not a big deal," Wei WuXian said quickly. "It all worked out, and thanks to Lan Zhan, I can cultivate—"

His words were cut off when Jiang YanLi stood, trembling, and burst into tears.

"C-Calm down, Shijie, your baby—"

"You—you almost died ," Jiang YanLi sobbed.

Wei WuXian panicked. "Shijie, it's really okay," he said. "Since I had Lan Zhan, he would never let me die. See? Everything worked out. All of that's in the past," he said whatever came to mind, anything to get her to calm down as he hugged her, patted her on the back, and handed her a handkerchief. "Jiang Cheng, help me," he turned to hiss at his brother, only to see Jiang Cheng's entire face scrunched up in the ugliest expression.

"Don't you dare cry too, Jiang Cheng!" Wei WuXian shouted.

"Shut the fuck up, Wei WuXian!" Jiang Cheng cried. "Who asked you to give me your golden core?"

"I told you, it's not a big deal," Wei WuXian said. "If Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu hadn't taken me in, I wouldn't have had a golden core to begin with," he tried to reason. "Remember? I promised your mom I'd protect you."

"Who the hell asked you?" Jiang Cheng sobbed.

More panicked, Wei WuXian tried to steer the conversation away. "It worked out anyway—if you're the one who didn't have a golden core, it's not like you'd fall in love with Lan WangJi and he'd compose you a song."

"I'd compose my own song!" Jiang Cheng cried.

"You hate music!" Wei WuXian said and then sighed, patting Jiang YanLi more on the back. "You're making Shijie upset," he tried.

"You're making A-Jie upset!" Jiang Cheng shouted. "I never asked you—I could have lived without a golden core! I knew that when I let the Wen dogs caught me!"

Wei WuXian froze with Jiang YanLi still in his arms. "'What do you mean when you let the Wen dogs catch you?'"

"Nothing," Jiang Cheng said, his voice stuffed as he snatched the handkerchief from Wei WuXian to wipe his face.

But there was only one time Jiang Cheng's accidental confession made sense. "You let yourself be caught to—what? Distract them?" Wei WuXian asked as he recalled that day when he'd gone out to find something to eat. Jiang Cheng had been all but catatonic since his parents had died, and it was only because Wei WuXian had to protect Jiang Cheng and find Jiang YanLi, that he'd had the willpower to stay calm himself. Still, Wei WuXian was exhausted, and he hadn't noticed the Wen cultivators coming close to him until he was sure they'd seen him—only for a commotion to draw them away. "You let yourself be caught so they wouldn't catch me," he said.

"I didn't," Jiang Cheng said, but he wouldn't meet Wei WuXian's eyes either.

Wei WuXian wasn't sure how to react as the realization sank in.

Only for Jiang YanLi to react first as she reached over and pulled Jiang Cheng in for a hug too. "A-Cheng, A-Xian, I should have protected you both better. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault, Shijie," Wei WuXian said quickly. "I'm the one who's sorry."

"I'm sorry," Jiang Cheng said.

Jiang YanLi lifted her head to smile through her tears, touching Wei WuXian's cheek with one hand, and Jiang Cheng's with the other. "Thank you," she said to each one of them, her thumb stroking gently at Wei WuXian's cheek. "Thank you," she said, "For being my family."

Long story short, when he'd arrived some time later, Lan WangJi had walked in on the three of them all hugging and crying, and been shocked frozen when first Jiang YanLi, and then Jiang Cheng got on their knees to bow to him in thanks.

Thankfully, after that incident, life had gone on. Neither he nor Jiang Cheng brought it up much to both their comfort, except at times like this, apparently.

"Have some shame will you?" Jiang Cheng said to Nie HuaiSang who sighed as he shook his head at Wei WuXian.

"If we weren't friends, Wei-Xiong," he said.

Wei WuXian laughed.

The distance from Lotus Pier to the Cloud Recesses was significant, and a wedding palanquin carried on foot would take days to arrive. Since flying by sword was the fastest way to travel, the Nie clan had provided Wei WuXian a special palanquin, apparently one of their sect treasures that had been fashioned from a very light wood and the same type of metal as spiritual swords. Since Wei WuXian wasn't able to fly on a spiritual sword, this particular gift had been well-received. Draped in ornate, heavy red cloth to keep out the weather, Lan WangJi opened one of the flaps of cloth and then helped Wei WuXian get in, being careful not to jostle his veil as he stepped inside.

"See you soon," Wei WuXian said as he sat down.

Lan WangJi lingered and Wei WuXian grinned, waving a hand at him to hurry. "You better hurry, Lan Zhan. Your uncle won't be pleased if we're late. You'll see me again soon enough."

Lan WangJi grabbed the hand Wei WuXian was waving. He appeared to be thinking about something, and after a moment, he raised Wei WuXian's hand suddenly to his lips and pressed a kiss there.

Wei WuXian was glad he was wearing the veil because his entire face turned hot. He wanted to bury his face because he could not stand looking at Lan WangJi's earnest expression even through the veil. "Lan Zhan, you—give me some face," he whined.

"Rest now," Lan WangJi said. "See you soon, Wei Ying." And with one last squeeze of his hand, he disappeared back behind the curtain again.

Before Wei WuXian had recovered, he felt a small jolt, and the carriage lifted off.

Lan WangJi really had gotten good at reading him, Wei WuXian thought as they began the journey. Despite the excitement of his own wedding, he had been forced up at a far earlier hour than he was used to, and with nothing to entertain him for the long hours spent flying, he dozed off in the sedan. It wasn't until he felt the palanquin jolt that he came awake and quickly touched his face, making sure he hadn't messed up his hair or accidentally drooled.

When he lifted the curtain, ready to step out, Lan WangJi was reaching for it as well, and Wei WuXian beamed at him.

"Did you rest?" Lan WangJi asked, blocking Wei WuXian's way.

"Took a nap," Wei WuXian said cheerfully. "Move over, Lan Zhan, how am I supposed to come down with you—"

He felt the world suddenly tilt, his veil fluttering and forcing him to grab it to keep it from flying off, when Lan WangJi's arms tipped him, one behind his knees and the other around his shoulders. He was being lifted out of the sedan like he weighed nothing at all.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei WuXian hissed. “You—you don’t have to carry me inside.” He was a grown man, after all, and though it was tradition for the groom to carry the bride inside to avoid evil spirits, Wei WuXian was pretty sure he himself was as evil of a spirit as the cultivation world had experienced.

Lan WangJi carried him inside the gates anyway, refusing to put him down until they had crossed the threshold before setting Wei WuXian lightly back down on his feet.

And the first thing he heard was, shockingly, the crackle and snapping bang of thousands of firecrackers going off. Wei WuXian, who had been busy making sure his veil and robes were in place, was so surprised that he backed up a few steps, steadied only by Lan WangJi’s hand on his waist. It was the most noise he had ever heard in even Yunmeng where firecrackers were set off every New Year’s. It was far more noise than the Cloud Recesses had probably experienced ever.

Even more shockingly was the thunderous applause he could hear only after firecrackers died away.

Lan WangJi was there, steadying him, and through the red veil and the haze of smoke from the firecrackers, Wei WuXian could see the Cloud Recesses more full of people than he had ever seen it before. People in GusuLan white, in YunmengJiang purple, in LanlingJin gold, in QingheNie green, of course, but also those dressed in the colors of smaller sects, people who Lan WangJi had helped in the past, people he’d helped, all those who had come to honor them. Each one of them was clapping, smiles on their faces, as they greeted them.

Wei WuXian thought, in a daze, there might even be more people here than at his shijie’s wedding. Could the Cloud Recesses even fit this many people?

A red carpet laid the path sprinkled with red flower petals led toward the Ancestral Hall. He remembered it mostly as the place he’d taken a beating that time he’d pulled Lan WangJi out of the walls with him, and then the place he’d been forced to kneel and reflect the time he’d punched Jin Zixuan.

As Wei WuXian walked, though, it was an entirely different Cloud Recesses greeting him. The Lan residence had always been known to be elegant in its simplicity, decorated minimalistically so that even flowers were rarely seen apart from the Gentian Cottage and the occasional magnolia tree. But now, it was draped in festive red. Red lanterns hung from every building Wei WuXian set eyes on, red ribbons and charms hung from the walls, draped artistically in that elegant way that GusuLan seemed to be known for. The white walkways had been covered in red cloth though Wei WuXian could hear the crunch of pebbles beneath their feet muffled by the cloth.

If Koi Tower had been flamboyant in its decor to celebrate the Jin-Jiang wedding, the Cloud Recesses were tastefully elegant but not one person walking through those gates today would think anyone here looked like they were in mourning.

Wei WuXian wondered vaguely how long it must have taken to decorate the Cloud Recesses this way—to put up this amount of red, and how it was probably giving all the elders strokes to see their home suddenly bleeding with color like this.

And yet as they walked up to the Ancestral Hall, and Lan WangJi guided him inside, Lan QiRen was sitting in one of the seats traditionally to be occupied by Lan WangJi’s father, and he too, was dressed in red.

Wei WuXian stumbled, eyes wide, grateful when Lan WangJi quickly caught him by the elbow and helped him along. He half wished he hadn't worn the veil now to make walking a little bit easier, but it was too late to take it back.

Through it, he could see Lan QiRen's moustache twitch at the sight of him, and he grinned beneath his veil.

As Lan WangJi's parents had also both passed away, in place of their seats sat Lan QiRen and Lan XiChen. And like Lan WangJi had done to Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu's tablets, now, Wei WuXian was the one who served tea to Qingheng-Jun and Madam Lan's memorial tablets, calling them father and mother, and thanking them for Lan WangJi.

He was the best man Wei WuXian told them as he bowed. They would be proud of the man he had become, and Wei WuXian could only work hard to be worthy of him. He would do everything in his power to love him as much as Lan WangJi loved him, to support him as much as Lan WangJi supported him, to make him as happy as Lan WangJi made him.

Then he stood and brought a third cup of tea to serve Lan QiRen.

"Uncle," Wei WuXian called him. He remembered the first time he'd called him this his second day in the Cloud Recesses, and the way Lan QiRen had exploded at the joke.

Now, though, Lan QiRen took the cup from Wei WuXian and gave him a nod. "Nephew," he said to Wei WuXian, and that, of all things, lodged a lump in Wei WuXian's throat so that he could only wring out a "Brother" when he served to tea to Lan XiChen.

He was thankful that the next part of the ceremony also involved serving tea to each one of the elders of the Lan clan, so that by the time it was finished, he had also recovered control over himself.

Then began a second series of bows. Their first had begun in Lotus Pier with bows to heaven and earth, and then to Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu. Now, they continued with bows to Qingheng-Jun and Madam Lan. They bowed to Lan XiChen and Lan QiRen, to Jiang Cheng and Jiang YanLi, and then to the elders of the Lan sect.

And then it was time to bow to one another.

Wei WuXian found himself suddenly nervous as he turned to face Lan WangJi. Lan WangJi got down on his knees first and then held a hand out to Wei WuXian to help him kneel as well. Through this entire morning, he hadn't really faced Lan WangJi as directly as this, and with this final bow, they would, in the eyes of all those watching now, be married.

Wei WuXian bowed, hands to the ground, forehead touching it briefly, and as he straightened up, saw Lan WangJi doing the same—once, twice, three times.

When the last bow was complete, Lan WangJi reached his hand out again to help Wei WuXian stand.



Since he hadn't actually told anyone he planned to wear a veil, no rod had been prepared for them. Instead, Wei WuXian held Lan WangJi's hand up to the veil.

"Take it off, Lan Zhan," he said softly.

Behind him, he thought he heard Lan QiRen sigh, but Lan WangJi was already reaching for him, pulling the veil up and over his head, a flutter of red in his vision. And then he could fully see his husband before him.

Wei WuXian drank in the sight of Lan WangJi after that haze of red, his jade-like appearance, his handsome face, delicate features, feeling like he hadn't seen him clearly in so long. And that was when he noticed it. There, wrapped around Lan WangJi's forehead was...

"Lan Zhan, is that—I gave you that ribbon!" Wei WuXian said, too astonished to be proper. It was the ribbon he had chosen that one afternoon when they'd been drifting on a boat in Caiyi Town, and Lan WangJi had ruined Wei WuXian's bargaining by paying full price for this ribbon. Back then, he'd started speaking a bunch of nonsense to Lan WangJi as he gave it to him that had started as just a way to get Lan WangJi to accept this gift.

But really, having just found out he was going to die, the only thing on his mind back then, was how to take care of Lan WangJi once he was gone.

"I promised to wear it at my real wedding," Lan WangJi answered.

The memories came flooding back—Emperor's Smile turning bitter on his tongue as he'd imagined that wedding for Lan WangJi, handsome in his red robes, beside a bride he loved, wearing this red ribbon...

"You said you wouldn't marry again," Wei WuXian said, reaching up to touch the ribbon. He heard a strangled gasp behind him, but he only had eyes for Lan WangJi.

"You made me promise to marry someone I truly love," Lan WangJi said, his voice low, just for Wei WuXian. "I've kept that promise now." A single tear slid down Lan WangJi's cheek that Wei WuXian brushed away, a crushing weight on his chest as the full realization of what he had made Lan WangJi promise back then crashed over him.

"I love you too," Wei WuXian said, his thumb lingering, brushing at that trail of wetness on Lan WangJi's cheek.

And then the most miraculous thing happened.

"Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian said. "You're smiling."

Because he was.

For the first time in his life, Wei WuXian saw Lan WangJi smile, gentle and joyful and so beautiful he felt like he couldn't breathe. Then to his greater astonishment, Lan WangJi actually gave a quiet, wet laugh, as though he had just realized himself he was smiling, and another tear slid down his cheek, and then another.

"I'm happy," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian couldn't help leaning in then, ignoring their audience, to kiss Lan WangJi gently on the mouth once, and then again, more urgently, when he got that tiny huff of a laugh from him again. "I love you, Lan Zhan," Wei WuXian said in between the wet kisses. "You're so good. You're the best. I love you so much."

"Wei WuXian, you're in public," he heard Jiang Cheng hiss. "The wedding isn't done yet or you can get lost back to your wedding chamber now and skip the whole banquet, less trouble for the rest of us!"

It was only the threat of missing his own wedding banquet that stopped Wei WuXian from dragging Lan WangJi straight to the Jingshi.

Wei WuXian pulled back, looking fondly at Lan WangJi one more time, smoothing away a last tear with his thumb before trailing his hand down to straighten a non-existent wrinkle on his lapel. He smiled one more time for Lan WangJi, and then turned to address everyone else. "We're married!" he declared. "Let's party!"

With the official baitang ceremony over, the banquet began.

The Banquet Hall at the Cloud Recesses had also been decorated in red, and as Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi were ushered to the head table, the cheers and shouts of congratulations were so loud they made Wei WuXian's ears ring. He could see Lan QiRen already seated up front looking like he was just one shout away from making everyone recite rules, but Lan XiChen, next to him was smiling from ear to ear.

As they sat at the head table, Wei WuXian saw the guqin already placed there in place of any food. Like all major cultivation sects, GusuLan had its own set of traditions. LanlingJin had their hunt, and GusuLan, as the sect known for its musical cultivation, its most important tradition was that the groom was to compose a song for his bride to honor her.

Lan WangJi had already composed a song for Wei WuXian—one that had saved his life—so though the hall fell silent as Lan WangJi sat to play, Wei WuXian recognized the opening notes of ZhanYing as soon as he strummed the first note. But ever since Wei WuXian had found out about this custom months ago, he'd been thinking about how to return it. Lan WangJi had done so much for him whereas even now, Wei WuXian's reputation, while no longer as bad as it once was, was still going to take some time to recover. He wanted to honor Lan WangJi as well.

It had taken quite a lot of planning to hint things to A-Yuan exactly right, made more difficult since the child couldn't visit him often. But in the end, he'd convinced A-Yuan to pester the origins of a second song out of Lan WangJi.

Months ago, not long after he'd moved to the Cloud Recesses the first time, Wei WuXian had heard Lan WangJi play this song in the privacy of their room. It had sounded familiar to him, a song he associated with comfort and protection for a reason he couldn't remember. Later, when he'd been the only one who could do anything about that Tiangou in the farmhouse, this was the song that had come to mind to calm it.

That was the first time he and Lan WangJi had ever dueted. This would be the second.

As Lan WangJi played ZhanYing, Wei WuXian raised Chenqing to his lips, and a second melody joined the first, the notes twining together in beautiful synchronicity, neither overpowering the other, but each taking turns to lead. Wei WuXian wondered if Lan WangJi had composed them to play together this way, if he'd hoped that someday Wei WuXian would recall where he'd composed that first song for him, a song that he'd written because Wei WuXian asked him to sing something—anything—while he was burning with fever in the cave of the Xuanwu.

Wei WuXian watched Lan WangJi's eyes widen as he lifted his face to meet Wei WuXian's gaze.

A-Yuan hadn't been able to get the truth out of Lan WangJi. He also hadn't convinced Lan WangJi to teach it to him or even play it for him again. Lan WangJi told him instead, that it was a song meant for Wei WuXian's ears, that he had composed it for Wei WuXian a long time ago, when they were still just youth, before Wei WuXian learned demonic cultivation, before the Sunshot Campaign, before their lives had become so complicated. And the memory had finally come back. The warm, reverberant sound of Lan WangJi's deep voice amongst the echoing drips of water in that dark cave. A sound that, despite all of their circumstances, made Wei WuXian feel safe and at home.

Halfway through the songs, they switched parts—Wei WuXian's flute twisting into ZhanYing's melody, and Lan WangJi's guqin into the other song.

I love you, Wei WuXian poured into every note he played. I vow to love you in front of all of our family, all of our friends, the entire world from the beginning to all of eternity.

When the last note of the songs finally died away, Wei WuXian took a deep breath and put down his flute.

Lan WangJi stilled the last string on his guqin and turned to him.

"What's the name of this song?" Wei WuXian asked, smiling at him, for him, everything he wanted to say already poured into the notes of their duet.

Lan WangJi exhaled and met his eyes. "WangXian."

From there, the afternoon melted into a blur of greetings as Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi were expected to make their rounds, thanking all their guests for coming and accepting their congratulations as the first few light courses were served. As two prominent members of their cultivation sects, it was doubly important that they greet everyone properly.

As was usually the case with them, Wei WuXian did most of the talking. Other than their closer family and friends, he enjoyed chatting with the smaller sect representatives since he got to hear story after story about how Lan WangJi had stepped in to help one clan or another—sometimes it was during the Wen reign, sometimes it was the case of a nighthunt that had gone out of control. With each story, Wei WuXian couldn't help admiring his husband more, even though Lan WangJi looked mostly uncomfortable with the praise.

By the time they made their way back to the head table for the true dining portion of the banquet to begin, Uncle Four, clearly already soused, tottered over to them and shoved three jars of liquor into Wei WuXian's arms. "Never thought I'd see the day the Cloud Recesses allowed alcohol," he said jovially. "Just in case, I've been saving these for months in case they didn't! Made with extra spice." He gave Wei WuXian an exaggerated wink.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Thanks then, Uncle Four!"

Liquor had been allowed inside the Cloud Recesses for this single occasion, and while no one, apart from Uncle Four, had started drinking yet in deference to the happy couple, now, jar after jar of Emperor's Smile was brought to each of the tables lining the hall.

Wei WuXian peeled the seal off one of the jars Uncle Four had handed him, and poured himself and Lan WangJi each a cup.

He gave Lan WangJi a mischievous smile. "Shall we?" he said, picking up one of the small cups.

Out of the corner of his eye, Wei WuXian could see Lan QiRen twitch as though wanting to stop them. Naturally, Wei WuXian had expected full protests when the two families had initially discussed the details of the wedding. Lan QiRen had been highly against the idea, and Wei WuXian was pretty sure it was for this very reason—if Wei WuXian came to the wedding banquet, he would naturally want alcohol served, and that meant everyone would be breaking at least one GusuLan rule.

"I'm a man too, let me be at banquet," Wei WuXian had said. "You guys don't even like alcohol. It's a waste of a good meal."

"I thought you wanted to do this the proper way. What kind of a bride doesn't go straight to the wedding chamber?" Lan QiRen said.

"This is the proper way," Wei WuXian said. "I'm a groom too! Right, Lan Zhan?"

Lan WangJi had, of course, nodded and agreed with Wei WuXian, which left Lan QiRen muttering about migraines and high blood pressure. But in the end, Wei WuXian had gotten his way.

Lan WangJi picked up his cup as well, and looping their wrists around each other, Wei WuXian beamed at Lan WangJi, and they drank.

All around them, applause and cheers broke out, and then they were being toasted as everyone—including Lan QiRen—lifted their cups and drank.

Lan WangJi, of course, immediately fell asleep, leaning heavily on Wei WuXian who laughed and hugged him closer. "Oof, you're heavy, Lan Zhan," he said fondly though he knew he wouldn't hear him. He brushed back a strand of Lan WangJi's hair as he waited for him to wake up and poured himself some more liquor as dishes were finally set on the table.

True to Uncle Four's promise, this fruit liquor he'd brewed "just in case" Wei WuXian didn't win the battle for alcohol, was the spiciest Wei WuXian had ever tasted, beating out even Emperor's Smile. He sighed in contentment and helped himself to the dishes placed out as he waited for Lan WangJi.

He put some of the milder items into Lan WangJi's bowl for when he woke, and stuck to the spicier ones himself. "I can't believe you pretended to like spicy food so long for me," he said to Lan WangJi as he did. "Goodness, with your usual GusuLan food, it's a wonder you survived eating with me."

Lan WangJi made no move at all from his position leaning against Wei WuXian. Wei WuXian smiled, reaching over to touch his face. "Wake up soon, Lan Zhan, I miss you..."

"Alcohol is forbidden!"

Wei WuXian's eyes darted over to where Lan QiRen was sitting—well, standing now. As Lan WangJi's uncle and an elder of the Lan sect, Lan QiRen had naturally been given the table of honor beside Lan XiChen at the very front of the room right next to Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi's own. It meant that everyone in the hall had a perfect view of Lan QiRen when he planted one foot firmly on his table into a plate of food. Face flushed bright red, he shook a fist at Wei WuXian. "Stop drinking!" he shouted.

"Oh my god, your uncle's drunk!" Wei WuXian whispered, shaking Lan WangJi as his eyes widened in astonished delight. "Please let me remember this for the rest of my life," he prayed as he watched Lan QiRen proceed to shout at the top of his lungs at any wedding guest nearby with a cup in their hand. "Please let Uncle remember this for the rest of his life."

"Stop drinking! Alcohol is forbidden!" Lan QiRen yelled, shaking a finger at Lan XiChen next to him.

Which was when Wei WuXian found out was that there truly was good reason that the Lan sect had banned liquor from its grounds. It turned out, Lan WangJi wasn't the only one who couldn't hold his alcohol. In fact, not one Lan in the clan could hold their alcohol. In a moment, pandemonium broke out as some Lans began singing, others started dancing, more than one began shouting and quite a few rude remarks as well. Wei WuXian watched as a disciple he didn't recognize actually leaned full on a LanlingJin girl's table and unabashedly began flirting.

"You're missing everything, Lan Zhan! I take back everything I ever said about GusuLan being boring! This is the best sect," Wei WuXian said, shaking Lan WangJi, though he knew he wouldn't wake just yet. "You guys are literally breaking every rule on that wall!"

Lan XiChen, beaming from ear-to-ear, seemed, so far, the most normal of them all as he poured himself another cup of Emperor's Smile and downed it.

"XiChen, don't think I won't discipline you even if you're the sect leader," Lan QiRen shouted at him. "Write the rules three thousand times!" he ordered before he took a wobbly step off his table and, to Wei WuXian's continued delight, began scolding Jin ZiXuan at the Jin table of honor beside him.

"You! You need to be more lowkey." Lan QiRen wagged a finger at him. "These clothes of yours—who wears so much gold? And has your parents ever disciplined you? Who do you think you are to bring a dog into the Cloud Recesses?" he demanded.

"But I didn't bring any dogs..." Jin ZiXuan looked like he'd been falsely accused.

Jiang YanLi, beside him, was laughing into her sleeve.

"Dogs are loud and noisy! As bad as Wei WuXian's dumb donkey!" Lan QiRen shouted.

A few weeks ago, when they had started moving most of Wei WuXian's things up to the Cloud Recesses, the donkey had been one of them since there wouldn't be a good time to transport it after, and after the farmhouse, Wei WuXian was quite fond of it. Apparently, it had been doing quite well for itself up here.

"Lil Apple is a great donkey," Wei WuXian said. "It's very well behaved, and—"

As though out to prove him wrong, a sudden commotion broke out at the entrance to the banquet hall when a youth came dragging a donkey inside.

Wei WuXian didn't recognize the youth who appeared to be fighting to drag the donkey who was digging in its heels and braying at the top of its lungs in protest.

"Mo XuanYu?" Jin ZiXuan said.

"You know him?" Wei WuXian asked. "Why...why is he trying to steal my donkey?"

"It's my donkey!" the boy named Mo XuanYu said indignantly. "I brought it to Lanling with me but it disappeared. He stole it and I'm taking it home with me!" He was, indeed, dressed in LanlingJin robes, and had a good face though he was just at the beginnings of his growth spurt, too thin and gangly, and definitely losing that fight with the donkey.

"Mo XuanYu, mind your manners," Jin ZiXuan said.

"I didn't steal it, it followed me home," Wei WuXian said, just as indignant. "I tried to get it to leave, but it wouldn't. If you want it back, go ahead."

Lil Apple tried to bite Mo XuanYu who quickly dropped its reins and took a step back, looking like he'd been betrayed. "It's not fair, it's my donkey!" he said when Lil Apple swished its tail and trotted up to Lan QiRen's table where it began helping itself to the food Lan QiRen had stepped all over earlier.

Lan QiRen, seeing a donkey eat from his food, turned around and began shouting at the donkey.

"When I said you could look around the Cloud Recesses, I didn't mean you could drag a donkey in here," Jin ZiXuan ignored Lan QiRen to scold the boy who looked like he wanted to argue but didn't quite dare to. "This is my younger half-brother, Mo XuanYu," he added to Wei WuXian.

Jiang YanLi smiled. "It's all right, ZiXuan," she said. "A-Yu was probably just surprised to see his donkey here, wasn't he?"

Mo XuanYu blinked big eyes at her and nodded like he was the one being bullied. "Sao-Sao, it really is my donkey. My mom gave it to me to ride to Lanling."

"We believe you," Jiang YanLi said gently. "But it doesn't look like Lil Apple likes Lanling very much. If it likes the Cloud Recesses more, won't it be happier here?" she said.

“But—”

“If A-Yu wants a donkey, ZiXuan can give you one we already have at Koi Tower,” Jiang YanLi said, smiling. “Or a puppy,” she suggested. “Didn’t you say you’d rather have a dog?”

“I can have a dog?” Mo XuanYu seemed to forget entirely about Lil Apple as he turned to Jin ZiXuan, eyes shining.

Jin ZiXuan just looked highly relieved that Jiang YanLi had appeased this child. “Little White is going to have pups soon—you can have one if you promise to train it well.”

“I will!” Mo XuanYu said and glared at Lil Apple. “You can keep the stinking donkey.”

“How is Lil Apple stinky?” Wei WuXian demanded, indignant on the donkey’s behalf. “What is wrong with your family that everyone likes dogs?”

Shortly after the events at Koi Tower, Wei WuXian heard that a young half-sibling of Jin ZiXuan’s had showed up at Koi Tower, claiming to be the son of Jin GuangShan. The child had been understandably shocked when he found out that Jin GuangShan had suddenly passed away, but though Madam Jin was originally against it, after all that had happened with Xue Yang and Jin GuangYao, Jin ZiXuan seemed determined to atone for his father’s sins and had taken in Mo XuanYu, adopting the child into the LanlingJin Sect. Shortly after, he’d begun a search together with Jiang YanLi to look for other half-siblings to make sure they were doing well, and bring them into the sect should they desire.

“So the search is going well then,” Wei WuXian said.

“Search?”

Wei WuXian felt an arm encircle his waist, and even without looking, he knew who it was, smiling and leaning back into his arms. “You woke up, Lan Zhan?” he said. “Welcome back.”

“Mm,” Lan WangJi said.

If Wei WuXian hadn’t had experience with him twice before already, it would be difficult for him to tell that Lan WangJi was still entirely drunk. “We were just talking about Jin ZiXuan and my shijie looking for their half-siblings,” he said.

“Mm,” Lan WangJi said.

Jin ZiXuan coughed, looking anywhere but at Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi since it was clear Wei WuXian did not plan to move from his comfortable position. “I’ve already found XuanYu and another half-sister—she couldn’t come this time, though. I’ll introduce you both the next time you come visit A-Li.”

“We should stop by Yantai on our way back,” Jiang YanLi said. “Didn’t you say you found another half-brother there?”

"I'll stop by," Jin ZiXuan said. "You should go back to Koi Tower and take care of the little one." He gave a significant look at her.

Jiang YanLi smiled. "That reminds me, A-Xian—choose a name."

"A name?" Wei WuXian asked.

"For your future nephew," Jin ZiXuan said, his arm around his wife. "A-Li said she wanted you to choose. Apparently she doesn't trust me."

"I never said that," Jiang YanLi said, though Wei WuXian thought she'd really made the right choice.

"Hm," Wei WuXian thought for a moment. "The Jin next generation name is 'Ru' so how about Jin RuLan?" Wei WuXian suggested, looking slyly back at Lan WangJi.

"Why are you naming him Lan?" Jin ZiXuan said. "He belongs to the Jin clan."

Wei WuXian unabashedly beamed at Lan WangJi. "Why can't I? Shijie asked me. You should be thankful if he grows up to be anything like Lan Zhan."

Jin ZiXuan actually rolled his eyes then. "A-Li, Jiang Cheng has a better naming sense, can't we ask him—"

"If you want your future son to be named Fairy, maybe," Wei WuXian said.

Jiang YanLi laughed. "A-Xian chose a good name," she said. "Jin RuLan it is."

Wei WuXian beamed at her. "If I ever had a child, I would ask Shijie to name him too."

"Is our Xian-Xian finally growing up and being filial?" Jiang YanLi asked, reaching forward to stroke his face.

"Wei WuXian is going to have a son?" Lan QiRen stopped scolding Lil Apple at this news and turned to stare at them again.

Wei WuXian wanted to laugh. "No, no, that was just a joke, Uncle—"

"We have a son."

Wei WuXian whirled around to stare at Lan WangJi who had spoken.

Jiang YanLi, Mo XuanYu, Lan QiRen, and more or less everyone else who had heard Lan WangJi speak also turned to stare at him.

"We do?" Wei WuXian echoed.



"Mm." Then Lan WangJi let go of Wei WuXian to pick up A-Yuan who, dressed in festive red robes, beamed at them, looking confused but happy. Wei WuXian hadn't even noticed when A-Yuan had toddled up to the table. "He gave birth," Lan WangJi said, his face as blank as always.

"You—you—" Lan QiRen's eyes rolled up and he fell backwards into Jin ZiXuan who quickly rushed to catch the old man.

Wei WuXian's mouth dropped open as he stared at Lan WangJi. Then he burst out laughing. "Lan Zhan, you really learned well!" he gasped, laughing so hard he had to lean on Lan WangJi so he wouldn't fall over. "I can't believe—your uncle's face —ah, that was even better than when I said that to him!" He beamed up at Lan WangJi. "You're really the best, Lan Zhan. I like you so much."

"Me too!" A-Yuan chimed in, happy to be held by his favorite dad.

"So when are you two going to officially adopt him?" Uncle Four asked loudly from his table. "That'll solve your heir problem, won't it, Old Man Lan?"

Lan QiRen twitched though he was unconscious, sprawled in Jin ZiXuan's arms.

Wei WuXian laughed, leaning into Lan WangJi and raised his eyebrows. "I don't know. What do you think, husband?" he said to Lan WangJi, and then thought better of it. "Actually, let's ask again when he's sober," he said. "Wouldn't it be a surprise to Lan Zhan if he wakes up tomorrow morning and finds we have a son already."

He shot a mischievous look at Jiang YanLi. "Shijie, start thinking of a courtesy name for him," he said. "He'll need one before Jin RuLan does—he can't be A-Yuan forever."

"Jin RuLan? Jin RuLan is a great name!"

When they turned to see who had just shouted, Wei WuXian was shocked to see Lan XiChen beaming from ear-to-ear as he unabashedly eavesdropped.

"Jin RuLan is the best name I've ever heard!" Lan XiChen said cheerfully, and then equally enthusiastically, added, "Who's Jin RuLan?"

"The Lan clan is the best clan," Wei WuXian said. He hoped this wouldn't be a one-time thing. He'd have to find ways to make them drink again. He'd never been so entertained in his entire life.

"Ah, Jin RuLan is your future...what would he be for XiChen-Xiong?" Jin ZiXuan paused. "My wife's brother's husband's brother is...wait, no, my son's older uncle on his mother's side's husband's brother is..."

"The future name of Jin ZiXuan's son," Wei WuXian said, sparing him the mental acrobatics of trying to figure out the right address for the future Jin RuLan.

"Your son? Congratulations, ZiXuan-Xiong!" Lan XiChen shouted brightly. "That's wonderful news! We need to celebrate more! These red decorations are so nice! We should paint everything red to

celebrate! Congratulations, Didi! Congratulations, ZiXuan-Xiong!" he shouted. "Paint! I need to find red paint!"

Saying so, Lan XiChen strode down the hall, politely if loudly asking every random guest where he might find red paint.

"Aren't you going to stop him?" Wei WuXian nudged Lan WangJi. "He might actually do it," he said.

"Wei Ying likes red," Lan WangJi said, half-muffled by Wei WuXian's ear.

"Yes?" Wei WuXian said.

He felt more than saw Lan WangJi nod, stirring his hair. "Then he can paint everything red."

"Lan Zhan, you—it's my fault for trying to reason with a drunk," Wei WuXian said. "I'll stop him myself. Sect Leader Lan—ah, Lan Zhan, let go," he said, but Lan WangJi only tightened his hold around Wei WuXian's waist.

"Mine," he said.

"What's yours?" Wei WuXian said, distracted, as Lan XiChen appeared to pull another equally drunk Lan cultivator into also looking for red paint. "Lan Zhan, if you don't let go, you're really going to regret it when half the Cloud Recesses is painted red."

Lan WangJi didn't say anything, only tightening his hold. "Mine," he repeated, sounding stubborn and a bit petulant. "Don't leave. Mine."

And then Wei WuXian realized what he was talking about and felt his heart melt. "All right, I'm not going anywhere, Lan Zhan. I'm yours." He smiled, putting his hands on top of Lan WangJi's. "All yours."

"Mm." Lan WangJi appeared satisfied with that answer.

Wei WuXian laughed and shook his head. "Don't blame me when you're all scrubbing red paint off next week then," he said.

Thankfully, though, he wasn't the only one who had noticed Lan XiChen.

"Should we stop Er-Ge?" Nie HuaiSang asked Nie MingJue from where they sat at their tables of honor on the other side of the hall. Though they'd both had quite a bit to drink, judging by their red faces, at least they still seemed relatively in the right state of mind still.

"XiChen, come over here and drink this," Nie MingJue sighed and stood, reaching over as Lan XiChen tottered by them and dragged him over to hand him a cup of tea.

"MingJue-Xiong! HuaiSang!" Lan XiChen shouted, waving the cup and splashing it all over Nie HuaiSang's robes.

“These are new, Er-Ge!” Nie HuaiSang looked like he might start crying. “They were so expensive to commission!”

“I’m so happy to see you!” Lan XiChen beamed at him. “Where’s A-Yao? Then we’ll all be together!”

Wei WuXian who had been about to turn his attention back to Lan WangJi looked over at them again at the mention of Jin GuangYao.

“A-Yao? You want to see Jin GuangYao?” Nie MingJue asked.

As a criminal, Jin GuangYao obviously hadn’t been allowed to come to the Lan-Wei wedding. At the trial, everything Jin GuangYao had orchestrated had come to light—from saving Xue Yang, to killing his own son and his wife, to kidnapping Nie MingJue, to trying to take over the LanlingJin Sect. Originally, he should have been given the death sentence but since he was still a member of the head Jin clan, they had, in the end, sentenced him to prison for life instead. And of all people to argue for that sentence, it had been Nie MingJue.

It seemed that when he had given up his freedom and risked his life to save Lan XiChen, Nie MingJue had seen something worth saving in Jin GuangYao. After the sentencing, he had volunteered to take charge of his punishment and rehabilitation. Since the Jin Sect was understandably wary of keeping Jin GuangYao around Koi Tower in case he had any more secret loyal followers, they’d accepted the offer and let Nie MingJue take Jin GuangYao back to the Unclean Realm.

But, in an even more unseen turn of events, after the trial, Lan XiChen refused to visit the Unclean Realm entirely. Jin GuangYao, Wei WuXian heard, was the most heartbroken by this. It seemed that despite his betrayal, he had never imagined that Lan XiChen would refuse to see him.

No one knew if it was Nie MingJue’s attempt to reform Jin GuangYao or if it was his attempt to get Lan XiChen to reconcile, but Nie MingJue had, much to the shock and discouragement by everyone else, allowed Jin GuangYao to begin playing the Sound of Clarity for him again. Wei WuXian knew that it was in part because he did need to calm his spirit, though Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi had made him memorize exactly what the song should sound like before anyone allowed him near Jin GuangYao. But despite this attempt to show Lan XiChen that Jin GuangYao may truly be repentant, Lan XiChen still refused to go anywhere near him.

“I miss A-Yao!” Lan XiChen said and his smile dimmed. “But I can’t see him,” he said sadly. “I’m sorry, MingJue-Xiong!” he shouted right in Nie MingJue’s ear.

Nie MingJue winced. “You can see him if you wish,” he said.

Lan XiChen shook his head. “I can’t,” he said. “It’s my fault,” he said. “I need to tell MingJue-Xiong I’m sorry, and—and...”

Apparently Lan XiChen’s alcohol tolerance had reached its limit and he fell flat on his face onto Nie MingJue’s table, snoring softly.

It was still too fresh, everything that had happened, Wei WuXian thought. Only a few months ago, Lan XiChen had been defending Jin GuangYao, helping him slaughter the innocents he’d accused of attacking

Koi Tower. His defense of Jin GuangYao had almost led to his coup d'état over the LanlingJin Sect and the near-death of Nie MingJue. But as Wei WuXian watched Nie MingJue yell for Nie HuaiSang to help him put Lan XiChen back in his sect leader's seat, he thought that maybe someday, maybe under Nie MingJue's guidance, Jin GuangYao's reformation might be true and real. And on that day, maybe Lan XiChen would be willing to forgive him and to see him again—that Meng Yao who had once saved him.

While Wei WuXian wanted the night never to end, liquor had destroyed that famous Lan discipline, and after Lan WangJi had stopped draping himself on Wei WuXian like a giant human cloak, his hands began wandering. To be fair, it was mostly innocent, just Lan WangJi's hands touching him along his waist, holding his hand and rubbing his thumb, warm, along the pulse point of his wrist. They were both dressed in too many layers for anything truly untoward to happen, unfortunately.

It took some time to extract themselves from the banquet. People kept coming up to the table to toast them, and after the first few toasts sent Lan WangJi immediately back into unconsciousness, Wei WuXian began drinking for the both of them. By the time there was a small gap in greetings, it was already past the usual curfew time—another thing Wei WuXian probably wouldn't get to see again in this lifetime—Lans out partying post-curfew.

"Lan Zhan, hurry," Wei WuXian said, pulling Lan WangJi's arm as he looked around them. Already, he could see another group of guests further down in the hall eyeing their table.

Lan WangJi looked up as Wei WuXian tugged him to his feet. "Wei Ying?" he asked.

"Hurry before they come greet us again," Wei WuXian said. "Didn't they already come too? I'm pretty sure I already drank twice with them."

"You don't want to drink?" Lan WangJi asked.

"I do, I do, but I more want to..." Wei WuXian leaned over to whisper in Lan WangJi's ear. He grinned when that ear turned bright red and the hand he was holding tightened around his.

Suddenly, it was Lan WangJi who was striding so quickly out of the hall that Wei WuXian had to trot a little to keep up.

Wei WuXian broke into laughter as they snuck out of the banquet hall and headed for the Jingshi. Lan XiChen really had thrown himself into the decorations, and though the living quarters of the Cloud Recesses didn't really all need to be decorated, he had been thorough. Even here in the unoccupied parts of the Cloud Recesses right now, Wei WuXian could see red banners fluttering gently with the night breeze as they hurried down quiet corridors like a pair of mischievous young lovers.

Lan WangJi, man of action, flattened Wei WuXian against the Jingshi door as soon as they were inside. Even though Wei WuXian had stolen kisses every time Lan WangJi came to visit Lotus Pier in the past few months, he didn't know how much his husband had been holding back until his mouth was being devoured. He couldn't breathe and when he tried to push Lan WangJi a bit to signal him, Lan WangJi grabbed both his wrists in one hand, pinning them above him. It was a good thing his other hand was still firm around Wei WuXian's waist because the kiss was so intense it made his knees go weak, and when Lan WangJi finally pulled back for a moment, Wei WuXian found himself blinking teary eyes.

“You—let me breath at least, Lan Zhan...”

But this sensation reminded Wei WuXian of one other time he had been kissed so intensely that it had taken him some time to recover even after pulling the blindfold off his eyes and seeing the dappled sunlight of the forest around him. Phoenix Mountain, what felt like ages ago now, was where he’d lost his first kiss to...

“ You’re the strong maiden?” Wei WuXian said, eyes wide.

“What?” Lan WangJi said.

“On Phoenix Mountain where I had my first kiss stolen—I thought it was just an unusually strong, shy girl, but it was you,” Wei WuXian accused him. “You stole my first kiss!”

“You said you’d kissed...a lot...before,” Lan WangJi said, but his ears were bright red, and he hadn’t denied it.

“How embarrassing would it be if I admitted someone just stole my first kiss?” Wei WuXian said, knocking his fist gently on Lan WangJi’s chest now that his grip on his wrists had loosened. “The Yiling Patriarch who just humiliated Jin ZiXuan and cleared the mountain of all good prey had his first kiss stolen.” He glanced at Lan WangJi. “But who knew Hanguang-Jun was so bold to steal a kiss and to kiss like that,” he said, grinning.

“I apologize,” Lan WangJi said stiffly. “I lost control.”

“I was a little disappointed at the time. You know, I was saving that first kiss for my future wife,” he said and grinned. “I guess I did that after all,” he said cheekily. At the time, he hadn’t even considered the possibility that it might have been Lan WangJi who kissed him even though, thinking back now, Lan WangJi had definitely been upset by something to be beating up a bunch of trees when Wei WuXian found him. “And now all of my kisses belong to Hanguang-Jun, but keep kissing me like that and you’ll have to carry me to bed—I don’t think I can stand.”

He laughed, delighted, when Lan WangJi took the hint and swept him up, carrying him further into the Jingshi and to their bedroom.

The first time they were married, the Jingshi had been the only place decorated in the Cloud Recesses, and that had consisted of just that huge eyesore of a bed and the red “Luck” paper stuck to the top of it. Now, though, the JingShi had been tastefully draped in red and the red lanterns inside had already been lit, bathing the entire room in a warm glow. Their ugly bed had also been exchanged for one fitting of the decor here, but hilariously enough, someone had stuck not just one red “Luck” charm onto the bed, but every part of the wooden frame had been stuck full of them.

Wei WuXian burst out laughing at the sight. “They’re really making sure we have a prosperous marriage this time, aren’t they?” he said and then grinned at Lan WangJi. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

Lan WangJi gently put him down on the bed. The blankets and sheets were also all red this time, a beautiful, new set of bedding Wei WuXian intended on thoroughly ruining tonight.

But instead of following him onto the bed, Lan Wangji simply stood and looked at him.

“What is it, Lan Er-Gege?” Wei WuXian asked, raising his eyebrows. “Aren’t you going to undress your husband?” he teased.

Lan Wangji didn’t take the bait, his eyes moving up and down Wei WuXian’s seated form as though trying to memorize this moment. Wei WuXian, looking up at this wonderful man, dressed in this celebratory red, felt suddenly that if this was the moment his entire life added up to, that if all he’d ever accomplished in this lifetime was simply loving this man, it would be a life worth living.

Wei WuXian smile turned gentle and reached out a hand to him, wiggling his fingers until Lan Wangji finally took his hand. Wei WuXian pulled him gently forward until he was standing right in front of him and Wei WuXian had to tilt his head up to look at him.

Then, slowly, he guided Lan Wangji’s hand up to his hair and put it on that gentian hairpin.

He could see the flicker of understanding the moment Lan Wangji touched it, and as they drew it out of his hair together, the coils of his hair falling in loose waves over his shoulders now, Wei WuXian smiled up at him.

“Thank you,” he began.

He was startled when Lan Wangji’s hand stiffened beneath his.

“No need,” Lan Wangji said.

Only then did Wei WuXian realize, from the time they were married the first time, no maybe even before that, Lan Wangji had always said this to him anytime Wei WuXian thanked him or apologized to him. But thinking back, every time, it had almost always been something said before they parted again or got in another fight. The last time he’d said it, Wei WuXian realized now, maybe Lan Wangji had thought he was thanking him that time in the boat, which had caused the worst misunderstanding and nearly ended their relationship.

“Then there’s no need for thank you or sorry between us,” Wei WuXian said. “We can say... we can say ‘I like you’ instead,” he decided and smiled at him. “I like you. I really do, Lan Zhan. I’m so glad I got to meet you.” He reached up to touch his husband’s face, pulling him closer and tilting his head up to kiss him softly once, and then deeper the second time. He felt Lan Wangji’s hand tighten in his hair, and then he was being pushed back on the bed.

Wei WuXian couldn’t help smiling through the kisses, so happy he thought he might burst with it, as he grabbed Lan Wangji’s robe with one hand to dragging him down, and looped his other around Lan Wangji’s neck, laughing into the next kiss. “I like you, I adore you, I treasure you,” he said, trying to bend his knee through the robes so he could nudge against Lan Wangji.

He wasn’t sure which thing it was that ignited Lan Wangji, but a moment later, Lan Wangji was pulling back to tug impatiently at his robes. Wei WuXian laughed as he helped, shedding pieces of his clothes as fast as he could and trying to pull apart Lan Wangji’s as well. As soon as Lan Wangji was down to his under robes, Wei WuXian pushed him down on the bed and straddled him, eyes bright.

“Lan Zhan, don’t move, all right?” Wei WuXian said, and before Lan WangJi could answer, felt his way into his clothes, all the way down his chest, stomach, and right into his pants.

Lan WangJi’s breathing immediately sped up, and Wei WuXian looked up at him through his eyelashes. “Wei Ying, don’t—”

Wei WuXian grinned, mischievous, and took Lan WangJi into his mouth. In truth, while Wei WuXian was pretty sure he knew more than Lan WangJi, he’d really just looked at a handful of spring books a lifetime ago, and all his experience up until now had also been with Lan WangJi. He liked what they’d done the last time, and he really didn’t care about the details so long as he got to spend the rest of his life with his Lan Zhan. But the way Lan WangJi’s breath quickened, the way the muscles of his stomach tightened beneath Wei WuXian’s hand, the way his dick grew even bigger in Wei WuXian’s mouth as he hollowed and sucked—all of it was incredibly hot. As was expected of Second Master Lan, he was big enough that it didn’t take long before Wei WuXian’s jaw began to ache. But despite his own discomfort, Wei WuXian wanted nothing more than to continue watching that expression of barely there self-control on his face. It was a little sloppy, his technique probably wasn’t too good, but Lan WangJi seemed to enjoy it, and anyway, they had the rest of their lives to practice.

“Wei Ying, stop—”

Lan WangJi’s hand in his hair tightened as he tried to pull Wei WuXian back, but Wei WuXian pushed his hand away and sucked hard.

In a moment, it was all he could do to swallow as Lan WangJi came, and he felt quite self-satisfied as he sat back up, wiping his mouth and grinning at him. “I think I did pretty well for my first time,” Wei WuXian said as he looped his arms around his neck and playing with the red ribbon still tied around Lan WangJi’s forehead, loosening it until it came sliding off and into his hand.

Lan WangJi, looking a bit dazed, kissed him, still breathless, and Wei WuXian was happy to let Lan WangJi nip at his lips a few times, hips stuttering as he pulled himself closer to Lan WangJi.

Wei WuXian felt himself being pulled closer into Lan WangJi’s lap, felt Lan WangJi pulling his arms away from his neck, but was so distracted by his mouth, that he didn’t realize what Lan WangJi was doing until his hands were already bound up again with the red ribbon this time.

“Do you really like tying me up that much?” Wei WuXian raised an eyebrow and then yelped when he was pushed onto his back. “Where are you going?”

Lan WangJi backed up from the bed but only went to a side cabinet where he brought back a small bottle.

“What’s this?” Wei WuXian asked as Lan WangJi uncorked it and poured some sort of oil onto his fingers.

“Gift from Maiden Wen,” Lan WangJi answered.

“From Wen Qing? What—” The next moment, Wei WuXian felt Lan Wangji grip his dick to tug once, twice, and then traced down the crease of his thighs to... “Wait—what—” Wei WuXian startled at the touch and automatically tried to scramble back only for Lan Wangji to close a large hand around his ankle and pull him back. “Lan Zhan, what—”

Lan Wangji touched him again down there, and Wei WuXian felt both shocked and a little turned on as Lan Wangji persistently rubbed at his entrance until he could slip a finger inside. Wei WuXian had thought oral service was about as intimate as two men could get, but apparently, he’d thought wrong.

“Lan Zhan—” Wei WuXian arched, wanted to reach for him, but couldn’t with his hands tied.

Lan Wangji seemed to realize what Wei WuXian wanted, though, and leaned down to comfort him with a kiss. “Maiden Wen spoke to me a few weeks ago,” he explained as he continued stretching Wei WuXian with two fingers now. “She gave me a few...manuals,” he said. “And the oil.”

He kissed Wei WuXian softly again. Wei WuXian lost himself to the sensation for a bit until the words registered and he stopped cold to stare at Lan Wangji. “Are you telling me Wen Qing gave you spring books?” he demanded. When Lan Wangji didn’t answer and started to flush, Wei WuXian began to grin. “She did, didn’t she? She actually gave Second Master Lan spring books! Was it the type I showed you before, or longyan?” he asked, full of curiosity now. “Do you still have them? I’ve never seen a longyan before, and—”

Wei WuXian broke off into a moan when Lan Wangji grasped his dick with his other hand, but he fought back the stars threatening to explode inside him. “Wait, don’t try to distract me. I can’t believe Wen Qing gave you—ah—ah—” Wei WuXian yelped when Lan Wangji thrust a third finger inside along with the first two. “Lan Zhan, okay, mercy, Lan Er-Gege, I’ll stop asking about Wen Qing’s longyan books—”

Lan Wangji frowned, that intense look that Wei WuXian had first seen on that moonlit rooftop so many years ago, the most beautiful youth he’d ever seen glaring at him. Back then and now, it made his heart speed up. “I really like the way you look at me, Lan Zhan—”

“Can you stop speaking?” Lan Wangji said.

“But I was born with a mouth so shouldn’t I use it? And anyway, you love me. You love my talking, you—”

Lan Wangji touched a spot inside him that made his protests turn right into a loud moan.

“What—” Wei WuXian panted. “Wait, Lan Zhan—” But having found the spot, Lan Wangji continued pressing against it, his other hand jerking Wei WuXian off until, all too fast, Wei WuXian was spilling into his hand.

Wei WuXian lay there, blinking back the stars in his vision, quietly panting. “Ah, you’ve really defeated the Yiling Patriarch, Lan Zhan,” he said, giving Lan Wangji a dazed sort of smile. “That was amazing. You’re amazing.”

He stopped praising Lan Wangji when he felt those fingers inside him begin to move again. “Ah, wait, wait, Lan Zhan, it’s too much,” Wei WuXian protested, trying to pull Lan Wangji’s hands away.



“Still not tired of talking?” Lan WangJi said.

“You know me, Lan Zhan, I’ll never be tired of talking like I’ll never be tired of you,” Wei WuXian continued his teasing.

Lan WangJi pressed against that spot that made Wei WuXian’s vision spot white. “I’m tired! I’m tired, Lan Er-Gege, have mercy on your Wei Ying.”

He was going to continue more when Lan WangJi’s mouth pressed over his own like he owned Wei WuXian, kissing him until he had stolen all the air from Wei WuXian’s lungs, and he was both hard again and entirely speechless by the time Lan WangJi began pushing himself inside. It felt incredible, too much, too intense, too everything. Even though Lan WangJi looked big, it was nothing compared to how big he felt inside Wei WuXian, and he stiffened up all over, unable to stop himself.

“Wei Ying,” he heard Lan WangJi whisper and felt the gentle touch on his face, opening his eyes to see Lan WangJi kissing away the tears on his face. “Wei Ying, does it hurt?” he asked.

Wei WuXian began to nod and then shook his head. It wasn’t that it hurt—between the oils and the stretching, Lan WangJi had prepared him well enough. It was just that he’d never imagined that he could feel so close to one person as he did now. Since he’d lost his parents so far back he could barely remember them, he’d never found a place he felt like he wholly belonged. But now, with Lan WangJi, with this man he loved with every fiber of his being, he belonged just like this, connected like this, as deeply as two people could be.

“I love you, Lan Zhan,” Wei WuXian said, throat tight and tears pricking at the corners of his eyes. “I like you. I want to be with you forever. I want to sleep with you every day for the rest of my life.”

He didn’t know if he was saying all the things he wanted to say to Lan WangJi, but Lan WangJi seemed to understand anyway.

“Every day,” he said simply, a promise and a blessing.

When Lan WangJi began to move, Wei WuXian felt like he was being remade from the very depths of his soul—the soul that Lan WangJi had saved and sung back to life in him. And when Lan WangJi filled him, every mark on his skin another promise of love and devotion, Wei WuXian let the pleasure rush through him, the vow of life spent with this man he called husband.

Wei WuXian wasn’t sure how long he dozed in bed, but by the time he woke from his sleep, he had been cleaned and dressed and was lying half-on Lan WangJi, using his chest as a pillow. He was enveloped in the refreshing scent of sandalwood, and it was dim in the room, all the lanterns there having been put out now.

He adjusted himself, making himself comfortable on him, and smiled, his entire body feeling light and bonelessly relaxed, and a bit sore as well. He sighed in contentment and leaned up to kiss Lan WangJi on the chin.

Lan WangJi, who had been asleep, opened his eyes when Wei WuXian kissed him again, pulling him a little more securely against himself, and Wei WuXian's smile widened as he pushed himself up on his elbows to kiss Lan WangJi on the lips this time.

That was when he noticed that the ribbon that had been loosened from his wrists had now been tied around just one wrist. "Do you want your ribbon back, Lan Zhan?" he asked, looking down at the ring of red.

"It's yours," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian grinned. "JingYi told me your GusuLan ribbon means self-regulation, and can only be removed by the one you love," he said.

"Lan JingYi told you?" Lan WangJi asked.

Wei WuXian laughed. "Don't sound so skeptical. He's also a Lan, after all," he said and then looked at the ribbon again. "Does that mean you're letting go of all restraint when you're with me?"

Lan WangJi gave him a look and lifted Wei WuXian up to straddle his hips again, touching along his waist and then meaningfully lower.

Wei WuXian laughed even as he grabbed Lan WangJi's hand. "Not again tonight, Lan Er-Gege, where's your forehead ribbon? Maybe you should keep it on. What happened to your self-restraint?"

"You took it," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian yelped, laughing, when Lan WangJi flipped him over again to lie beneath him. "I'll give it back, I'll give it back," he said.

"No need," Lan WangJi said.

Wei WuXian grinned, looking up at him. "I wish this could last forever," he said, reaching to touch Lan WangJi's face. "The banquet, everyone here, being with you—alone, I mean." He supposed, in the end, he'd been looking forward to being with Lan WangJi for so long, and he was so happy with all of his family and friends here, that he simply wasn't ready for it all to be over, for them to settle into life at the Cloud Recesses. For this one day, he and Lan WangJi had just been themselves—two ordinary people getting married, celebrating with all the people they cared about. When the sun rose, they would once again be Hanguang-Jun and the Yiling Patriarch to the cultivation world. Lan QiRen had already begun assigning them responsibilities to teach, to go to alliance meetings, to help grade papers. "Go somewhere people don't know us, night hunt maybe," he thought out loud.

He wanted, he thought, to just be simply Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi for a little longer, to spend some time alone, just the two of them. He thought back to that day so long ago when he'd told Lan WangJi he wished he could just live simply, to go shopping maybe, enjoy good food and drink, live in a cottage somewhere, go night hunting and help people when they heard of cases. But in their positions, retirement wouldn't come for a long time still.

Wei WuXian was still thinking about it when he heard the sound of voices somewhere outside the Jingshi.

“We can’t disturb them now—it’s their wedding night. Do you want to see them doing who knows what?” one person was saying.

“Well we can’t not give them our gift,” another said. “It would be so impolite to show up with it tomorrow. What if Hanguang-Jun gets mad? What if Wei WuXian gets mad?”

“Wouldn’t they be more mad if we interrupted them now?” the first voice pointed out.

Wei WuXian, who had recognized the voices, snuck over to the door, adjusting his under robes to make sure nothing indecent was showing.

Lan WangJi frowned and dropped his outer robe over his shoulders just before Wei WuXian threw open the door.

“We sure would be mad if you interrupted now,” Wei WuXian said, cackling when Liu FengYa let out a loud shriek and Guo Yi clutched at his chest.

“Senior Wei, please—please don’t do that again,” Guo Yi gasped. “I’m too young to have a heart attack.”

Wei WuXian laughed, cooperatively letting Lan WangJi put his arms into his sleeves as he spoke. “You two are so late, you missed the entire banquet,” he said, turning so Lan WangJi could tie his waistpiece on securely.

It was, in fact, late enough that the early tendrils of the pink dawn were visible in the sky now.

“It wasn’t our fault,” Liu FengYa said. “Our boss gave us a delivery job that was supposed to be on the way up here, but who knew that town has a haunted white villa, and our client tried to trick us into staying there. Apparently, it’s haunted by this ghost with a hook—”

“No, it was a ghost who had his tongue cut out with a hook,” Guo Yi said. “By his wife,” he added.

Wei WuXian exchanged a look with Lan WangJi.

“Anyway, there’s no way I was going to stay any longer in that town, but we got lost on our way up here, and—”

“—and I think to make it up to us for missing our wedding banquet, you should take us there,” Wei WuXian said.

“Wait, what?” Liu FengYa said.

“We can’t hear about a town being haunted by this Hook-Hand and not look into it,” Wei WuXian said. “My new sect’s motto is to ‘Be Righteous,’ isn’t it, Lan Zhan?” he said, grinning at him.

“Mm.” Lan WangJi nodded.

“Don’t you have post-wedding stuff to take care of?” Liu FengYa tried. “Don’t you have sect responsibilities?”

Wei WuXian laughed. “There’s nothing more important than helping the common people when there’s a ghost terrorizing them,” he said, clapping him on the shoulder. “We’ll count it as your wedding present to us,” he said cheerfully. “Now where’s that ghost?”

“Near Lanling,” Guo Yi said. “We can take you.”

“Guo Yi!” Liu FengYa said.

“FengYa, didn’t you learn from me yet? If you’re always so scared of ghosts, they’ll follow you around more to feed off that energy,” Wei WuXian said. “You need more training. You definitely need to stay at least one night in that house.”

Lan WangJi, who had quietly gotten dressed while Wei WuXian spoke, finished tying his white forehead ribbon on and unsheathed Bichen as Liu FengYa complained about having to go back to that town.

“Shall we go?” Wei WuXian said, stepping into the circle of Lan WangJi’s arms, feeling himself being picked up and looping his own arms around Lan WangJi’s waist.

The first time they had done this, the moon had been rising. Now, it was the sun.

In time, the news would travel to the common people, and they would debate if the Lan-Wei wedding was a marriage of convenience to control the terrible Yiling Patriarch, or if the Yiling Patriarch had enchanted the righteous Hanguang-Jun. Still more would gossip that it was a marriage of true love—didn’t they just see the two of them exorcise the plague of fierce corpses in the south? Didn’t they see them watching over a group of youthful cultivators on their night hunt, and wasn’t that definitely the Yiling Patriarch crying into Hanguang-Jun’s arms to get away from that spiritual dog his nephew brought?

Even later, the cultivation history books would record their union as a marriage joining two of the top four sects, an important alliance that secured the Yiling Patriarch’s position, and one that changed the face of the cultivation world. That afterwards came the first time sects began using summoning talismans to help them call over prey on their night hunts, that the Yiling Patriarch and his husband became known for inventing more useful talismans and cultivation techniques than had ever been recorded before in history.

But as they flew out of the Cloud Recesses together that bright dawn morning, they were just Wei WuXian and Lan WangJi, Wei Ying and Lan Zhan heading toward the rest of their lives together.

And it all started with a wedding.

Notes:

Thank you everyone for all your support of this fic! Thanks especially to those who have been reading this from the beginning (and are somehow still reading it a year later), to everyone who left comments

and/or kudos, to those who made fanarts or translations (I've linked all the ones I'm aware of so if I missed yours, please let me know), to all those who recced this story to their friends! This has really been a learning experience for me since it's the first time I wrote something this long with this level of plot and action scenes and had to make more complex ocs! I hope that everyone had as much fun reading it as I have writing it! Thank you really all so much!

Since people have been asking, these are two projects I'm tentatively planning to work on next:

- wangxian chinese ver urban fantasy au OR wangxian time travel au (haven't decided which yet so it'll probably just be whichever one I impulse write first)
- original short transmigration murder mystery webnovel <- not sure where I'll post this yet/if i'll post it/let me know if you know a good place haha

All for fun, for practice, to see if I can pull off the different styles/lengths/genres (tbh originally i promised myself i should challenge myself and finally try to write something original if i can finish this fic but i'm still in love with wangxian so i still want to write it lolol)

Anyway please look forward to those upcoming works if you're interested, and thank you all so so much again for the support for this fic!!!